



## THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S EQUALITY TO REGIONAL SECURITY

*Indhia Duncan*

**Key customer:** *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade  
(Pacific Division; Human Rights Branch)*

**Australia prides itself on its international reputation for upholding human rights, recently solidifying this through election to the United Nations Human Rights Council. However, the figures of gender-based violence within the Asia Pacific region represent the worst levels in the world. Women within the region are suffering rampant abuse including forced and child marriage, genital mutilation and trafficking.**

**Australia must ensure a greater presence of women's voices in developing policies and implementing programs, and utilise the expertise of NGO's and grassroots organisations in providing targeted educational programming and on the ground assistance.**

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S EQUALITY ON REGIONAL SECURITY

To truly create a strong and prosperous region that reaches its economic and social potential, gains strong international standing and ensures equal protection for all its citizens, it is essential for Australia's strategic future that achieving equality for women is not merely considered as a women's issue, but an issue for all. Although regional stability is viewed as relationships between countries, economic issues, military power and border disputes, underlying issues of inequality and injustice can equally pose a threat to regional security. Gender inequality and sexual violence against women within the Asia Pacific region represents the highest rates in the world. Women are subjected at alarming rates to a variety of violent and oppressive acts throughout the region. The vast array of inequalities experienced by women within the Asia Pacific region yields economic and societal implications, as well as reputational damage for both Australia and the region. As a result, countries suffering from these issues can affect the security of the region, including through lost productivity and dysfunctional societal structures, and soft power implications for the State such as diplomatic ramifications for failing to uphold human rights obligations.

## WOMEN AND VIOLENCE IN THE REGION

The abuse of women has been described as the most [pervasive human rights violation](#) on earth. It can take many forms, including sexual violence, forced or child marriage, trafficking, female genital mutilation and [domestic violence](#). 40 per cent of women in South East Asia and 60 per cent in the Western Pacific have experienced gender-based [violence](#). These figures represent the worst levels of gender-based violence in the world. The prevalence of sexual violence in certain countries in the region further highlights this issue, with 55 per cent of women in both Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and 44 per cent of women in Vanuatu encountering instances of sexual [violence](#). And the actual number of victims is likely to be much higher. Due to the nature of sexual and domestic violence, it is widely underreported.

The United Nations reports that [80 per cent](#) of men within the Asia Pacific have admitted to performing physical or sexual violence against women within their lifetime. Furthermore, [73 per cent of](#) women within the Solomon Islands believe a man is within his rights to physically abuse his wife. And gender-based violence is not a purely female concern. Indeed, it is also a serious and largely overlooked issue for men and boys, both in the region and worldwide. However, these statistics demonstrate the widespread tolerance

and acceptance of violence committed against women and the impunity with which it is regarded, both within the community and by the State as a whole.

Violence against women in the region is not limited to domestic or sexual violence through rape or sexual assault. The rates of female genital mutilation in certain countries have continued to rise despite increasing international attention and legal protection. UNICEF reports that around half of all girls aged under 12 in Indonesia have undergone female genital mutilation. Combined with that of just two other countries, namely Egypt and Ethiopia, these numbers make up over half of the [200 million victims](#) worldwide. This practice is frequently used as a form of oppression for women. It can also lead to sexual and reproductive health issues, including complications during childbirth, increased risk of HIV transmission and [psychological impacts](#). Further, UNICEF reports that South Asia accounts for [42 per cent](#) of child brides in the world. The consequences of child marriage include lower levels of education, lower access to healthcare particularly during pregnancy and vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy at a young age. The prevalence of these actions in the Asia Pacific indicates both the region's inability to effectively uphold global standards, and its entrenched and largely overlooked gender inequality.

## IMPACT ON REGIONAL SECURITY

Australia places great importance on its strong international reputation for involvement and commitment to upholding human rights. Indeed, one of the pillars under which Australia campaigned for their seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was gender equality. Australia stated that it is already a leader in this field in the [Indo-Pacific](#). Australia has also publicly committed to working with other countries in the region to [improve gender equality](#) and reduce violence against women, and to [enhance policy dialogue](#) regionally and globally. These obligations will lead to a closer international scrutiny of human rights protection within Australia and the region. Further, Australia has ratified numerous international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (1966). Breaches of treaty obligations can constitute violations of international human rights law, which can lead to legal ramifications.

However, despite all these assurances and commitments, there are still rampant issues of inequality throughout the region, putting Australia at risk of making empty promises. The reputational damage to the region in the face of

clear violations of human rights occurring on such a grand scale is particularly important. A positive international reputation is a potent soft power mechanism that can lead to increased diplomatic influence and inclusion among country alliances and international forums. This consideration is even more vital due to Australia's recent election to the UNHRC.

Furthermore, the wide-ranging impacts on the region as a whole presents a significant threat to stability. The role of women in much of the region as caregiver and child raiser means that when a woman suffers violence, it not only negatively affects her but those around her, including her children, siblings and parents. It is not surprising therefore that the widespread inequality experienced by women within the region results in far-reaching impacts, including economic costs and societal implications, and reputational and soft power impacts. Countries in the region experience a large financial loss from violence against women. UN Women estimates that the direct and indirect impacts of violence against women in Vietnam equates to [1.8 per cent](#) of GDP. Fiji spends 7 per cent of its GDP to address sexual and gender-based violence.

Gender based violence affects not only the victim, but the region as a whole. Violence against women, coupled with their subordinate role in many societies and lack of access to remedy [restricts women](#) from participating as productive

and effective members of society. In turn, the region is suffering from lost economic and social potential and through the reputational cost and subsequent loss of diplomatic soft power.

The international commitments that Australia has made cannot be hollow, nor can they be approached apathetically. Failure would not only be embarrassing, but would undermine international confidence in the effectiveness of Australia's policies and in the reliability of commitments made by Australia in the future. Conversely, these commitments provide Australia with the opportunity to become an international leader and set a strong example, and for policymakers to create initiatives that achieve real, measurable improvements. Ensuring the rights of women are upheld within the region is essential to demonstrate that respect and equality will exist regardless of which State you live in, and not dependent upon ones' nationality.

#### THE WAY FORWARD

Despite the continuing inequality, there are progressive initiatives aimed at improving the plight of women within Australia and within the region.

The financial expertise and grassroots approach of microfinancing institutions, combined with the funding and institutional support of the Australian government has the potential to allow women in

the Pacific Islands the reach the same success and increased empowerment as seen in other areas where microfinancing programs have been implemented. Microfinancing forums have proven to be an effective way to simultaneously provide women with increased skills and earning potential while reforming their societal perception from a primarily domestic role to an individual with earning potential. The [Grameen Bank](#) was first developed in Bangladesh and provides micro-finance loans allowing individuals to start their own small business. Around 97 per cent of borrowers are female. And as the concept has continued to spread around the world, it has aided in the economic and social empowerment of women. [Grameen Australia](#) already operates in Cambodia, the Philippines and Bangladesh, so a policy partnership could draw on the experience already gained and extend this forum through the Pacific island countries. Australia has already made a commitment to increasing gender equality in the Indo-Pacific, including the [Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy](#) which includes a focus on women's economic empowerment, and a commitment that [80 per cent of investments](#) will effectively address gender issues through their implementation. Based on this strategy, the Australian government should open up dialogue with Grameen Australia with the aim of developing programs and policies that cater for the specific societal landscape of each country concerned.

Australian government support and sponsorship of organisations that specialise in delivering grass roots educational programs targeted at addressing the cultural and traditional nuances of each country could ensure maximum effectiveness in addressing some of the key issues of inequality. Many international organisations and non-governmental organisations are specifically focused on dealing with domestic and sexual violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation on a community-based level throughout the region. These organisations help improve women's access to health services and education and reshape community perspectives on the roles and rights of women. Cooperation could prove an effective means to better implement such programs, and ensure Australia's involvement in achieving an outcome. Australia hosted its first [NGO Forum on Human Rights](#) in 2018 as part of its role on the UNHRC. The forum aims to support civil society participation in the UN.

The Australian [NGO Gender Action Platform \(GAP\)](#) began implementation in 2017, providing grants through a competitive process to NGOs focused on promoting gender equality in the Indo-Pacific. These initiatives already provide a strong basis for furthering support and implementation of NGO programs with expertise and cultural understanding to address issue areas. However, the current GAP project areas have not covered the Pacific island countries. Ensuring even one of

the 2018 funding projects is operational in one or all of these countries will be a strong start in improving women's equality in this region.

Ensuring continued involvement of women in addressing issues of inequality and creating solutions will allow for effective and innovative outcomes and increase women's voices in securing their future. One strong example is the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325, which specifically regards the impact of conflict upon women and women's ability to contribute to resolution and sustainable peace. There have been several additional UNSC resolutions passed regarding the role of women in decision making, peacekeeping and peace operations. This has led to further positive action, including the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security within Australia which has sought a whole of government approach to increasing involvement, protection and representation of women within peace building and security efforts. This involvement should also extend to the development of future policies, ensuring the participation and input of women relaying their own experiences and knowledge to provide effective and targeted solutions.