Challenging gender inequality: in conversation with UN Women Asia and the Pacific

by Anna-Karin Jatfors and Melissa Alvarado

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Gender inequality and violence against women are major development challenges facing the Asia-Pacific region. In a wide-ranging conversation hosted by UN Women National Committee Australia and the United Nations Association of Australia (UNAA) in Canberra, Anna-Karin Jatfors and Melissa Alvarado of the UN Women Asia and the Pacific regional office discussed some of their organisation's work. You can listen to the podcast here; for an abridged version of their conversation, read on.

The discussion kicked off with a question about the most pressing challenges facing women in the Asia-Pacific:

Anna-Karin: This is a very complex and diverse region that covers more than half the world's population. But when you look at the main challenges related to gender inequalities across the region, there are three broad areas that I would highlight: safety, choice, and voice.

So safety first, violence against women. It's absolutely pervasive, [there are] extraordinarily high levels of violence across the region with up to two-thirds of women in some countries, particularly in the Pacific, having experienced violence at some point in their life. And even though there has been quite a lot of progress on the policy and the legal side, we're not seeing those policies effectively implemented.

Secondly, with regard to choice – it's about economic access and building economic independence. Our region is an interesting one because, compared to global averages, economic growth is quite high. But that is coupled with inequalities between and within countries that are growing very fast. So many women are not able to take advantage of opportunities to benefit from this economic growth.

And the last point I want to highlight is women's voice, leadership and participation. Around 19 percent of parliamentarians in Asia, and 16 percent in the Pacific, are women. We do know it's necessary to have women in parliament, but it's not enough. When women are not there to influence policymaking, that means that women's concerns and voices are not being reflected.

Melissa: This afternoon, we talked with Our Watch, an NGO supporting behavioral change and prevention of violence across Australia. They've done a global scan of the evidence to look at the consistent trends, patterns, risk factors, and drivers of violence. And the message is the same across countries: it's about gender inequality.

It's such a basic thing. The evidence is there: we know that we have to address this issue of gender inequality and how we view women and girls, boys and men, in relationship to each other and then in how they experience education, how they experience work, how they experience healthcare. In any dimension of society, we have to be asking the question, "How does this impact men and women differently?"

For example, the Indonesian Ministry of Planning and Development decided that they were going to try to recruit more women. How did they do that? They made policies within their Ministry so that there's good maternity leave for women who are working in the Ministry. On every floor of the Ministry of Infrastructure, they now have breastfeeding rooms. This is a real innovation, you know?

This is where we need to be going. When women are able to work, and companies and businesses support women to work – to fulfill their role as mothers and to come back to work – enables women to have power.

Anna-Karin: At UN Women we have been fairly strong, I think, in supporting countries to establish the right legal frameworks to empower and to protect women.

Where some of the innovation is happening is finding creative ways to make sure that those laws are implemented. So we're working, for example, with the police. Most police officers are men. A lot of those men have not had any gender sensitivity training. They may not know how to speak to a woman who has experienced violence. And so what we've been doing in several countries is working with the police force and police cadets, the ones who are still studying, to train them on how to interact with survivors of gender-based violence.

We're also supporting enabling environments; for example in the Pacific around safe cities, safe markets. 89 percent of market vendors are women. We're helping these women to open bank accounts so they're at reduced risk of being robbed. Setting up a police desk in the markets to report crimes. Supporting transportation,

so that women can get to work safely.

What we're trying to do is support a lot of different innovations, and to document what works. We know that something that works in one country may not produce the same results in another country. We have to contextualise. We have to research. We have to evaluate.

Melissa: One of the problems that we face very regularly in the countries where we're working is that there's not a consistent understanding among the people who need to be responding to survivors of violence about what the right approach is.

Some health workers, for example, might say "That's not really my problem. Violence against women is not a health issue." Often the response that many women get if they try to take their case to a police officer is, A: "What did you do wrong?" and B: "Please go home and talk to your husband and make sure you don't make that mistake again."

So UN Women has been working with several other UN agencies and experts from around the world to develop a set of standards that would apply to every country to say, "Okay, if violence happens – whether it's sexual violence, if it's domestic violence, whatever the issue – what is a basic set of responses that [the survivor] would need?"

If she's in a domestic violence situation, she's in danger, she might need access to a shelter. If she might need to call somebody to get some counseling or get some help, she might need a hotline. From the health clinic, she's going to need to know that quite possibly she could take medication to prevent pregnancy or to prevent HIV, [help] to document her case, to document maybe the wounds or at least what happened. From the police, she should have a basic kind of response which respects her story and protects her confidentiality.

So we have developed a set of guidelines, we're calling them the Essential Services Guidelines. And we are working now to roll this out in three countries in the Asia-Pacific region; it will be piloted in Cambodia, and in the Pacific, in Kiribati and Solomon Islands.

Part of the reason why we chose those two Pacific countries is because they're small, they've got legislation, and they've done national prevalence research to know what the rates of violence against women are – and they are extraordinarily high. In those two countries it's two out of every three women that experience physical and sexual violence in their lifetime. Two out of every three. That's extreme.

And lastly, regarding the prevention of violence, an interesting aspect of the programs that we have found worked is that they're really talking about power. Sometimes there's a bit of a resistance when we talk about 'gender'. Because 'gender' is equated with 'women', and some people are not keen to work on women's rights. Sometimes there's a backlash against the feminist language or discussions about gender.

We're engaging in a phased approach. Prevention takes a long time, we know that. We have to invest long-term. So this is what we're doing.

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