



Gender-Responsiveness Key to Leaving No One Behind in COVID-19 Pandemic

(Bangkok/Kuala Lumpur, 21 April 2020) – The lack of a gender-responsive approach to COVID-19 pandemic responses will risk exacerbating pre-existing inequality and vulnerabilities among the most marginalised groups in Southeast Asia, experts said in a webinar organised by the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) today.

Joined by speakers from the World Health Organisation (WHO), civil society, ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) and the Mission of Canada to ASEAN, the webinar 'A Feminist Assessment of the ASEAN Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic' addressed how the pandemic is disproportionately impacting women, LGBTIQ community, the poor and the most vulnerable groups who are often excluded from the access to healthcare, social protection, and relief schemes in the pandemic response.

"For many women and girls, access to key sexual and reproductive health services and supplies such as contraception, safe abortion, maternal health and reproductive cancer screening have been postponed or made inaccessible due to travel restriction and the disruption of supply chains. Responses that are not gender-inclusive might reinforce gender stereotypes and stigma," said Sivananthi Thanenthiran, Executive Director of ARROW.

The pandemic has seen a rapid surge in violence against women and girls across the globe, and Asia is not an exception. A recent research by the Jakarta Feminist Association indicates that the number of reported domestic violence cases against women has tripled in Indonesia since the start of the pandemic.

Being a public health challenge, the pandemic also adversely impacts the social-economic and psychological aspects of day to day life for the most marginalised, including the LGBTIQ community. "Unrecognised by mainstream society, the LGBTI community engaged in the informal sector is expected to be hit the most. They also face mental health issues when they find themselves separated from their support group due to the quarantine," said Yen Nguyen, Programme Manager of the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus.

Arrests and attacks against human rights defenders and the general public are also on the rise, as emergency decrees have been misused to target dissenting voices under the guise of a COVID-19 response. In the Philippines, militarist policies are undermining the fundamental freedom of its ordinary citizens, including women who speak up about the Government's lack of response to the health crisis.

"There is an urgent need for countries to uphold gender transformative principles in addressing the pandemic," said Diah Satyani Saminarsih, Advisor on Gender and Youth of the WHO. "We need to consider how different segments of the population are affected, ensure that any response must be needs-based, gender-responsive, and to ensure that human rights are respected," said H. E. Diedrah Kelly, Ambassador of Canada to ASEAN.

ACWC, as the regional inter-governmental body mandated to protect the rights of women and children, are expected to convene a meeting at the end of April 2020. "The collection of data during the pandemic, particularly on women in the labour force, is important. The data is crucial to inform policy making processes on financial support and training schemes for these marginalised and underserved groups," said Sri Danti Anwar, Indonesia Representative on Women Rights to ACWC.

Participants of the webinar called for ACWC to collaborate with different ASEAN mechanisms to create a holistic COVID-19 response where the safety, rights and dignity of women, girls and the LGBTIQ community are protected. It is imperative for ASEAN Governments to prioritise the most vulnerable, and incorporate civic participation in the decision-making processes of the pandemic response in order for States to be held accountable.

This webinar was the third of a six-part webinar series¹ which aims to analyse the human rights dimensions of the COVID-19 response in ASEAN countries. The webinar provides a platform to discuss the implications of COVID-19 responses towards human rights and fundamental freedoms in Southeast Asia, and to strategise gender-sensitive approaches in ASEAN Member States' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For an overview of the webinar series, please visit: <http://l.forum-asia.org/COVID19WebinarSeries>

About the Organisers:

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a regional network of 81 member organisations across 21 Asian countries, with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity-development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. Its regional secretariat is in Bangkok, and it has sub-regional offices in Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

The Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Center for Women (ARROW) is a regional non-profit women's NGO based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Since it was established in 1993, it has been working to advance women's health, affirmative sexuality and rights, and empower women through information and knowledge, engagement, advocacy and mobilisation. <https://arrow.org.my/>

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¹ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=31430>