



Transformative Approaches in a Time of Pandemic: State Support to Promote Women's Participation in Peacebuilding

Wednesday, May 27, 2020, at 1:00 pm GMT/3:00pm CET/9:00am EDT

Meeting Note

The world is confronting a global crisis in the COVID-19 pandemic. As women, peace, and security (WPS) stakeholders have known for decades, crises almost invariably push gender considerations to the background. This current crisis is no different, and as it continues to unfold, experts have been highlighting crucial gender considerations that have been missing thus far.

There has been a significant gap in analysis regarding how both the crisis and the global response will impact women's engagement in peace efforts. Peace processes that are currently underway face logistical challenges that further exclude key constituencies, including women. In particular, civil society actors, especially those advocating for women's human rights, face the threat that the emergency response strategies of state actors might suppress their work. Additionally, based on what has happened in past pandemics and crises, WPS-related work could lose funding, further constraining the resources available for these already underfunded activities.

On Wednesday, May 27, 2020, the government of Sweden and the International Peace Institute (IPI) convened a high-level virtual discussion on the actions governments can take to support women's participation in peacebuilding during this global crisis. Participants included ministers from France, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, and Tunisia, as well as a former minister from Yemen, the UN deputy secretary-general, and representatives from civil society. Both this discussion and a follow-up ambassadorial-level meeting in June will feed into the annual Women, Peace, and Leadership Symposium. This public event will be organized by IPI and the government of Sweden in September 2020 to coincide with the start of the seventy-fifth session of the UN General Assembly.

Participants were asked to address the following four questions:

1. What are states doing to support a transformative approach to WPS and the COVID-19 crisis and to ensure that a "return to normalcy" does not mean a return to exclusion?
2. How can the UN Security Council link its deliberations on COVID-19 to the WPS agenda, particularly regarding specific country situations?
3. What steps can states take to ensure that resources—both political and financial—are being used to support women building peace?
4. How can states leverage upcoming policy decisions and anniversaries—including the twentieth anniversary of Resolution 1325 (2000)—to make peace efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic more inclusive?

The meeting identified substantive and political components underlying the intersection between the pandemic and WPS, particularly for women building peace.

Women have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. They account for more than 70 percent of healthcare workers and are thus carrying the burden of being at the forefront of COVID-19 relief efforts. The crisis has also increased gender-based violence and restricted access to sexual and reproductive health services. Additionally, the pandemic has had a greater impact on refugees and marginalized women who do not have access to relevant information and services, especially in conflict-affected settings.

The impact of the pandemic on women is especially poignant because 2020 was set to be a milestone for gender equality. It was a year to commemorate and take stock of the last twenty years since the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 and to create a path forward. However, this commemorative year has been put on pause in the midst of this global health crisis. COVID-19 has not only shifted attention away from gender but also put at risk the limited gains on gender equality over the past few years. Although this pandemic has changed our ways of working, it does not change the importance of the WPS agenda. It remains necessary to hear the voices of women peacebuilders, take their insights into account, and act upon their recommendations.

Participants raised a number of factors that are essential to building transformative peace in a time of global crisis. These include: (1) state leadership; (2) data driven responses; (3) protection and security; (4) financing; and (5) participation.

First, there is a need for strong leadership from governments on WPS. State leadership on WPS entails fighting for women's rights and their ability to participate in peace processes, and in particular fighting for the rights and inclusion of marginalized women. Participants noted that states should be examples in this regard by including women in their own institutions and delegations and by working in partnership. States also need to support innovative ways to include women in ongoing peace processes.

There are numerous multilateral opportunities for states to support women peacebuilders. The Generation Equality Forum, although rescheduled, will provide opportunities to mobilize technology and innovation for gender equality, including by eliciting faster responses to violations of women's rights. Within the framework of the G7, a feminist fund for women's organizations was established.

The UN Security Council plays a key role in ensuring that peacekeeping mandates reflect WPS priorities and that missions follow through on these obligations. The Security Council should thus increase opportunities to hear from women and civil society. However, these efforts will not be sufficient if international actors continue to consult with women and then ignore them in decision-making processes. For example, the Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security, established in 2015, has produced over a dozen papers on the role of women in peacebuilding, reconstruction, and conflict prevention, but international actors have not made use of this work.

At this moment, there is an opportunity for those working on achieving the WPS agenda to support the UN secretary-general's call for a global cease-fire and the African Union's Silencing the Guns initiative. The UN Security Council still has not responded to the secretary-general's call for a global cease-fire. Without silencing the guns, advances in women's equality will be pushed back many years. State support for this cease-fire is important, and participants urged the Security Council to adopt a resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire globally and prioritizing peace over securitized and militarized approaches.

Second, participants called for a data-driven responses to the COVID-19 crisis. These efforts should also aim to achieve concrete and reachable goals that are supported by a meaningful set of indicators

to follow up on the progress. These should include indicators on gender-based violence and the implementation of risk-management measures to help generate more data on the risks facing women during the pandemic.

Third, participants raised protection and security as concerns. Threats and violence against women peacebuilders and human rights defenders have gotten worse during the COVID-19 crisis. This is a human rights and a democratic problem that undermines efforts for peace. It is therefore important that efforts to monitor the pandemic do not undermine or jeopardize the safety of peacebuilders and human rights defenders. In addition, monitoring efforts should use a vulnerability lens, as women and girls, as well as poor and displaced persons, are most affected by this crisis, and their needs need to be factored into the response.

Fourth, participants raised economic and financial considerations. The crisis is exacerbating longstanding financial constraints on women peacebuilders and the precarious situation of women working in the informal sector. Donors need to engage women peacebuilders at the strategic level and provide them long-term and predictable funding that allows them to adapt to the pandemic and other crises. For example, they can contribute to the Women, Peace, and Humanitarian Fund, a multi-stakeholder initiative to support local women peacebuilders. Member states should also guarantee that the UN's budget sets it up to deliver on what is expected, despite the UN's financial situation and the constraints that COVID-19 has imposed.

Finally, participants discussed the ongoing need to focus on the participation of women in peacebuilding processes, particularly as peacebuilding work is put on hold due to the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, the participation of women in all levels of decision making was one of the areas of the WPS agenda where achievements have been most inconsistent. This exclusion of women from decision-making processes is being exacerbated by the pandemic. Participants called for focusing on women's participation in conflict prevention, mediation, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding as part of the same continuum. This means committing to working for women's inclusion from the very start of peace initiatives, as it is more difficult to bring in women later on.

One way to increase the participation of women is to train women in conflict resolution skills and national reconstruction strategies at the national and regional levels. Advice, training, and strategies for post-conflict reconstruction must address how to ensure the political empowerment and participation of women. In particular, participants encouraged women in post-conflict settings to insist on political parties putting forward women candidates. Countries emerging from conflict such as Libya, South Sudan, Sudan, and Yemen should also funnel resources toward women's organizations involved with political campaigns to help them secure a place in the political management of their country. Participants also suggested that post COVID-19 economic recovery strategies include a gender lens. Many countries are talking about the impact of the economic crisis, but few are devising strategies to ensure that support measures protect women's economic roles, including in micro industries and small businesses.

Ultimately, participants emphasized that we should not lose sight of the gender agenda that was planned for 2020. Furthermore, given the interruption of the pandemic, participants suggested focusing 2021 on gender as well. Foreign ministers could insist on this at the UN General Assembly session in September. Although COVID-19 has affected this anniversary of Resolution 1325, it is still just as important to remain committed to supporting the WPS agenda, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction.