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# Peacebuilding during a Pandemic: Keeping the Focus on Women's Inclusion

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## Executive Summary

This year was expected to be an opportunity to assess the past twenty years of progress on the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda. Instead, it has been upended by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has dominated the international community's attention and put recent gains for WPS at risk. One of the areas most at risk is the participation of women in peacebuilding efforts and peace processes, which is already a part of the WPS agenda where progress has been limited. Five key factors could help the UN and its member states keep the focus on women peacebuilders during the pandemic:

1. **State leadership on WPS in multilateral fora:** In the face of the pandemic, it is critical for UN member states to defend recent gains made in implementing the WPS agenda in multilateral fora. Stronger, more cohesive leadership is especially needed in the UN Security Council, which has had a slow, uncoordinated response to the pandemic. The Security Council should also increase the number of briefings by women peacebuilders.
2. **Women's participation in formal peace processes:** The pandemic has made it even more difficult for many women peacebuilders to participate in formal peace processes in places like Afghanistan and Yemen. However, the normalization of virtual convenings could be an opportunity to bring more women to the table, provided they are brought in from the beginning and given access to the required technology.
3. **Protection and security of women peacebuilders:** The pandemic has exacerbated the threats faced by women peacebuilders in many places. The UN and member states have a role to play in providing these peacebuilders both physical protection and international legitimacy and recognition.
4. **Financing for women peacebuilders:** Funding was already one of the biggest challenges confronting women peacebuilders, and the pandemic has made funding all the harder to come by. Women peacebuilders play an essential role in the pandemic response and recovery—something donors should recognize when deciding how to allocate funding.
5. **Ensuring data-driven responses:** Collecting sex-disaggregated data is essential to ensure that the COVID-19 response reflects an understanding of how the pandemic affects women. At the same time, the pandemic has made data collection more difficult. This calls for a coordinated, risk-sensitive approach to data collection, especially when it comes to sexual and gender-based violence.

## Introduction

The women, peace, and security (WPS) community has identified 2020 as an important moment for taking stock of gender equality. It marks the twentieth anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. These anniversaries were meant to be an opportunity to assess the last twenty years of efforts to achieve gender equality and to commit to addressing the gaps and challenges still facing the WPS agenda globally. However, this commemorative year has been upended by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has not only shifted the international community's attention away from gender but has also put at risk the limited gains made on gender equality over the past few years.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic has disproportionately affected women in both developed and developing countries, especially those living in conflict-affected areas.<sup>2</sup> Globally, women account for more than 70 percent of healthcare workers and are thus at the forefront of the response.<sup>3</sup> Under government-imposed lockdowns, women have also faced increased sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>4</sup>

One area of the WPS agenda that has been particularly impacted by the pandemic has been women's participation in peacebuilding efforts and peace processes. This participation is a core element of Resolution 1325 and the other nine resolutions that make up the WPS agenda. These resolutions recognize the different impacts of conflict on

women and girls and acknowledge their central role in resolving and preventing conflict and achieving sustainable peace.<sup>5</sup> Yet while research demonstrates that peace processes that substantively include women tend to result in a more durable and sustainable peace, women's exclusion remains the norm.<sup>6</sup> The logistical challenges posed by the pandemic have exacerbated this exclusion. The emergency response strategies of some states are also threatening the work of individuals and organizations advocating for women's rights.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic comes on top of existing challenges facing the implementation of the WPS agenda, including a global pushback against multilateral cooperation. But at the same time, the pandemic has demonstrated the prescience of this agenda, revealing the importance of gender analysis and gender-sensitive responses and the value of women's leadership, including that of local women peacebuilders, in times of crisis.<sup>7</sup>

This paper looks at what actions states and the UN can take to ensure women's participation in peacebuilding and peace processes during the pandemic. It draws on two virtual meetings—one at the ministerial level and one at the ambassadorial level—which included representatives from UN member states, the UN, and civil society.<sup>8</sup> It considers several factors that lie at the intersection between the pandemic and the WPS agenda, particularly for women building peace: (1) state leadership on WPS in multilateral fora; (2) women's participation in formal peace processes; (3) the protection and security of women peacebuilders; (4) financing for women peacebuilders;

The pandemic has not only shifted the international community's attention away from gender but has also put at risk the limited gains made on gender equality over the past few years.

1 Discussions of gender too often equate "gender" with "women" rather than acknowledging the broad spectrum of gender identity, which includes men. This issue brief deliberately focuses on issues facing women, but the authors acknowledges that this discussion is part of a broader conversation about gender.

2 United Nations, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women," April 2020.

3 International Labour Organization, "Women Health Workers: Working Relentlessly in Hospitals and at Home," April 2020.

4 UN Women, "COVID-19 and Ending Violence against Women and Girls," 2020.

5 The ten Security Council resolution that make up the WPS agenda include Resolutions 1325 (2000); 1820 (2009); 1888 (2009); 1889 (2010); 1960 (2011); 2106 (2013); 2122 (2013); 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019), and 2493 (2019).

6 Marie O'Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz, "Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes," International Peace Institute, June 2015.

7 Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, "Women Peace and Security in the Time of Corona," Centre for Women, Peace and Security, March 25, 2020.

8 These meetings were convened by the International Peace Institute in partnership with the government of Sweden. See: IPI, "Women's Participation in Peacebuilding during and after a Pandemic," May 27, 2020, available at <https://www.ipinst.org/2020/05/womens-participation-in-peacebuilding-during-and-after-a-pandemic>.

and (5) data-driven responses. The paper draws on the peace processes in Yemen and Afghanistan as case studies that highlight these factors. It concludes with recommendations on actions governments and the UN can take to support women's participation in peacebuilding during this global crisis.

## State Leadership on WPS in Multilateral Fora during a Global Pandemic

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical for UN member states to defend recent gains made in implementing the WPS agenda in multilateral fora. As of June 2020, eighty-four UN member states have adopted national action plans for the implementation of the WPS agenda. At the regional level, institutions like the African Union and European Union have adopted regional action plans, which have led governments and civil society organizations to share lessons learned and best practices.<sup>9</sup> Five regional networks of women mediators have also been established to increase women's meaningful participation in peace processes.<sup>10</sup>

But in some areas, there have already been reversals. At the UN Security Council, more women civil society representatives were invited to speak in 2019 than ever before: the number grew from two women in 2016 to twenty-six women in 2019. However, this increase in participation has been disrupted since the COVID-19 pandemic began and the council moved to virtual meetings. In the first six months of 2020, the council held fifty-three formal meetings and sixty-four open video teleconferences. During this time, twenty-one civil society briefers delivered statements, of whom only eleven were women—a 38.9 percent decrease from 2019.<sup>11</sup> Working remotely and holding virtual meetings has limited the participation of civil society not only because of technical challenges but also because of a lack of political will

to follow through on commitments to increase women's participation in peace and security efforts.

To protect these gains and accelerate action, there is a need for strong leadership from governments and multilateral organizations to prioritize implementation of the WPS agenda. As one civil society representative stated, “[The international community is] lacking leadership.... The world is looking for moral leadership” to support women's rights and the meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding efforts.<sup>12</sup> State leadership on WPS entails fighting for women's rights and supporting their participation in peace processes, with particular attention to the rights and inclusion of women marginalized on the basis of their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographic location, or status as refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs).

At the global level, there are numerous multilateral opportunities for states to support women peacebuilders. The Generation Equality Forum, a civil society-focused, multi-stakeholder gathering for gender equality, aims to take stock of progress made, and engage with every sector of society to foster global conversation for urgent action and accountability for gender equality.<sup>13</sup> However, this forum has been postponed until 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, women peacebuilders who would have benefited from its programming, networking opportunities, and platform will have to wait another year.

The 2020 Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture also provides an opportunity for member states to reemphasize the role of women peacebuilders, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The high-level consultation on the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding, held in April 2020 in the context of the review, examined the negative impact of the pandemic on the WPS agenda, including on conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Member states called on the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) to strengthen its role as a

9 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, “National-Level Implementation,” August 2020, available at <https://www.peacewomen.org/member-states>.

10 See: the Global Alliance of Regional Women Mediator Networks, available at <https://globalwomenmediators.org>.

11 Kaavya Asoka, “Support Civil Society at the UN Security Council,” NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, July 1, 2020.

12 IPI virtual ministerial discussion, May 27, 2020.

13 See: the Generation Equality Forum, available at <https://forum.generationequality.org>.

### Box 1. Women peacebuilders in Yemen

The Yemeni people are living in what the UN has deemed the worst humanitarian crisis in the world right now. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens catastrophic consequences for a country that is already dealing with deadly conflict, military escalation, and forced displacement. More than 75 percent of the population is dependent on humanitarian assistance for basic survival, yet there is a \$1 billion gap in humanitarian funding for 2020.<sup>14</sup> The war has damaged or destroyed healthcare, water, and sanitation systems. In addition, the ongoing cholera epidemic is a testament to how quickly disease can spread under these conditions. Twenty-five percent of the confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Yemen have resulted in death, and the number of cases and deaths is likely much higher than officially reported.<sup>15</sup>

In response to this critical situation, Yemeni women peacebuilders were among the first to support the secretary-general's call for a global cease-fire to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid and medical supplies. However, women peacebuilders have seldom been included at the negotiating table during formal peace processes. The exception was Yemen's 2013–2014 National Dialogue Conference, where women made up 27 percent of the 565 delegates. Since then, the warring parties have included almost no women at the negotiating table.<sup>16</sup> The UN special envoy has included women peacebuilders in negotiations through advisory roles and created a technical women's advisory group for the 2018 Stockholm peace talks between the Yemeni government and Houthi insurgents. However, many women in the advisory group felt that their input was not reflected in the final agreement.<sup>17</sup> Fourteen women attended the signing of the 2019 Riyadh Agreement between the government and southern separatists, but they were invited at the last minute and were often excluded from photo opportunities.<sup>18</sup> The UN is pushing to resume peace talks among Yemen's combatants, but the inclusion of women has not been voiced as a priority, and it does not seem that quotas will be implemented to ensure their participation.<sup>19</sup>

The inclusion of women peacebuilders in all levels of peace negotiations in Yemen is essential because they have been at the forefront of efforts to address the threats arising from both the war and the pandemic. Women peacebuilders have negotiated with the conflict parties to reopen roads and release prisoners.<sup>20</sup> They are providing medical, legal, and humanitarian support to local communities and displaced persons at a time when the international community is pulling back. Yemeni women peacebuilders are also preemptively training medics to provide care in places without healthcare systems to deal with outbreaks. They are sharing information with their communities on COVID-19 and preventive care using accessible formats. Moreover, Yemeni women are providing aid to, and calling for the protection of, Yemen's most marginalized populations, including the Muhamasheen and migrants trapped in the country.<sup>21</sup>

14 Laura Martineau Searle, Michelle Spearing, and Noha Yeyha, "Women Leaders COVID-19 Response from the Grassroots to the Government: Perspectives from Yemen," Centre for Women, Peace and Security, June 2, 2020.

15 "Yemen: Millions of Children Facing Deadly Hunger amidst Aid Shortages and COVID-19," UN News, June 26, 2020.

16 Council on Foreign Relations, "Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Yemen," January 30, 2019, available at <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/yemen>.

17 Afrah Nasser, "Yemen: Women, War & Political Marginalization," Atlantic Council, January 25, 2019; International Crisis Group, "Rethinking Peace in Yemen," July 2020, p. 30.

18 Marta Colburn and Reem Abdullah, "USAID/Yemen Gender Analysis," January 2020, p. 31.

19 Aziz El Yaakoubi and Stephen Kalin, "As Coronavirus Spreads, U.N. Seeks Yemen Urgent Peace Talks Resumption," Reuters, April 2, 2020; Kira Walker, "On the Frontline of War, Yemeni Women Are Building Peace," *Equal Times*, April 27, 2020.

20 International Crisis Group, "Rethinking Peace in Yemen," p. 35.

21 Jackie Abramian, "How Food4Humanity Is Yemen's Lifeline amidst War and COVID-19 Pandemic," *Forbes*, May 26, 2020.



platform for women peacebuilders to share experience and seek international support, including funding.<sup>22</sup>

Member states in the UN Security Council also need to exert stronger, more cohesive leadership in supporting women's inclusion in peacebuilding and implementing gender analysis in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past twenty years, the council's approach to WPS has been subject to individual efforts by certain member states, making it inconsistent and ad hoc.<sup>23</sup> Some members of the council have also tended to instrumentalize women's experiences in specific conflict situations to justify certain actions instead of meaningfully promoting women's rights and protection.<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, the Security Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been uncoordinated and slow. On March 23, 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres publicly appealed for a global cease-fire during the pandemic, but the council took over three months to adopt a resolution backing this appeal.<sup>25</sup> This frustrated many peacebuilding and humanitarian civil society organizations and leaders seeking to provide lifesaving support in conflict-affected settings.<sup>26</sup> The council still has not adopted a resolution on COVID-19 aside from this resolution on the global cease-fire.

In this resolution, member states acknowledge the important role of women in the COVID-19 response and the pandemic's disproportionate impact on women, girls, refugees, IDPs, persons with disabilities, and older persons. They call for concrete action to ensure the "full and meaningful participation of women... in the development and implementation of an adequate response to the pandemic."<sup>27</sup> This could provide an opportunity for those working on WPS to support the resolution. It could also serve as an impetus for the Security Council to learn from women peacebuilders and

collaborate with them both on the implementation of the WPS agenda and on the COVID-19 response.

Leadership on the council should not be limited to the permanent members; nonpermanent members can also push for inclusivity and gender equality. For example, Indonesia promoted the role of women in peacekeeping and peacebuilding during its second presidency of the Security Council in 2020. It initiated the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2538, which calls for "collective efforts to promote the full, effective, and meaningful participation of uniformed and civilian women in peacekeeping operations at all levels and in all positions, including in senior leadership positions."<sup>28</sup> This indicates that nonpermanent member states can also push for the inclusion of women in peace efforts at the Security Council.

## Women's Participation in Peace Processes during COVID-19

Women play a critical role in conflict prevention, mediation, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding, which, as mentioned by many participants in IPI's virtual ministerial meeting, are all part of the same continuum.<sup>29</sup> At the local level, women peacebuilders are doing transformative work in countries such as Afghanistan, Colombia, Syria, and Yemen. Although they usually have less access to resources and political decision-making fora, they often lead efforts to protect their communities, end violence, and promote equality and pluralism. In doing so, many face threats themselves.

Despite their important work at the grassroots level, women are often excluded from formal political and peace processes. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, women's participation in all

22 Peacebuilding Commission, "Chair's Summary—Consultation on the 2020 Review: Full, Equal and Meaningful Participation of Women in Peacebuilding," April 2020.

23 NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, "Mapping Women, Peace and Security in the UN Security Council: 2018," 2019.

24 NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, "2020 Civil Society Roadmap on Women, Peace and Security."

25 UN Security Council Resolution 2352 (July 1, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2352, July 1, 2020.

26 Madeleine Rees, "COVID-19: The United Nations Security Council Is Doing What Exactly?" Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, April 16, 2020.

27 UN Security Council Resolution 2352 (July 1, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2352, para. 7.

28 UN Security Council Resolution 2538 (August 28, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2538.

29 IPI virtual ministerial meeting, May 27, 2020.

levels of decision making was one of the areas of the WPS agenda with the most inconsistent achievements. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, most peacebuilding efforts and peace processes are on hold or have slowed down, including in Afghanistan, eastern Ukraine, and Yemen (see Boxes 1 and 2 on Yemen and Afghanistan).

Nonetheless, states can find innovative ways to include women in peace processes during the pandemic, including through virtual meetings and consultations. For this inclusion to be meaningful, governments need to include more women in their own institutions and delegations and work in partnership with women peacebuilders and other stakeholders from the very beginning of these processes.

As one participant in IPI's virtual ministerial meeting stated, "We cannot invite women when all the agenda and delegation [are] already set."<sup>30</sup> Moreover, women's participation in peace processes is not solely about bringing them to the table—an approach sometimes called "add women and stir." Rather, it is about giving women at the table a genuine stake in decision making and giving those not at the table a chance to have their voices heard.

States can find innovative ways to include women in peace processes during the pandemic, including through virtual meetings and consultations.

against women peacebuilders and activists have increased.<sup>32</sup> Many governments have implemented emergency laws and decrees to control the public health crisis, which have sometimes reduced the democratic and judicial oversight that may protect women peacebuilders and human rights defenders.<sup>33</sup> In some cases, women peacebuilders are also being threatened by the authoritarian policies governments are using to consolidate power under the guise of "protecting their citizens during the pandemic."<sup>34</sup> Many of these peacebuilders are shifting their work online but worry about government monitoring. Moreover, weak government responses to the pandemic and the redirection of public resources to fighting COVID-19 have left vacuums that are sometimes being

filled by extremist groups and criminal gangs, some of which are seeking to instill a culture of misogyny and violence against women.<sup>35</sup>

Failing to protect the people fighting for peace and human rights undermines any effort to

build peace. It is therefore important that efforts to respond to the pandemic do not undermine or jeopardize the safety of peacebuilders and human rights defenders. This requires UN member states to hold to account governments that regularly target human rights advocates. As one woman peacebuilder who has been receiving threats of violence stated, "We live and we work every day to protect peace, but no one is protecting us. We give it all but receive very little."<sup>36</sup> Recognizing this challenge, the governments of Norway and the UK are prioritizing the protection of women peacebuilders in the Security Council.<sup>37</sup> The issue was also raised in the Peacebuilding Commission in the context of the 2020 review of the peacebuilding architecture.<sup>38</sup>

## Protecting Women Peacebuilders

The work of women peacebuilders often challenges existing power structures. As a result, even before the pandemic, women peacebuilders faced threats to their security and were calling for the international community to better protect them.<sup>31</sup> Since the outbreak of the pandemic, threats and violence

30 Ibid.

31 International Civil Society Action Network, "In Berlin: Women Peacebuilders Raise the Need for Protection," July 2, 2019.

32 Morgan Mitchell, "The Impact of Recognition and Security on Women Peacebuilders and Their Work," International Civil Society Action Network, July 29, 2020.

33 Christine Bell, "COVID-19 and Violent Conflict: Responding to Predictable Unpredictability," Just Security, March 24, 2020.

34 Jennifer Bradshaw and Daniel Orth, "Building Peace amidst COVID19: Voices from Our Peacemakers from around the World," Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, April 8, 2020.

35 Ibid.; Stacey Schamber, "How Women Peacebuilders Are Balancing Work on COVID-19 and Violent Extremism," International Civil Society Action Network, June 11, 2020.

36 Quoted in Mitchell, "The Impact of Recognition and Security on Women Peacebuilders and Their Work."

37 IPI virtual ambassadorial meeting, July 7, 2020.

38 Peacebuilding Commission, "Chair's Summary—Consultation on the 2020 Review: Full, Equal and Meaningful Participation of Women in Peacebuilding," April 2020.

**Box 2. Afghanistan's peace process**

Afghanistan remains one of the deadliest places in the world for civilians and has the world's second largest refugee population (nearly 2.5 million).<sup>39</sup> Decades of conflict have led to insecurity, political instability, and lack of access to basic services. The pandemic has further strained these services, including the already weak healthcare infrastructure, and exacerbated economic difficulties. More than sixteen million Afghans are in serious need of humanitarian aid, and four million have lost their source of income due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>40</sup>

In the last two decades, multiple peace efforts have sought to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan, and in February 2020, an agreement between the US and the Taliban brought Afghan peace talks closer than ever. However, the Afghan government was not present at the talks between the US and the Taliban and was only occasionally consulted. The talks also did not include Afghan women, who suffered disproportionately under the Taliban regime before 2001. Many Afghans believe that this so-called "peace process" amounts to little more than a withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, and they are concerned that the gains made for women's rights in the past two decades could be lost in a rushed attempt to make peace with the Taliban.<sup>41</sup> Despite the agreement and the UN secretary-general's call for a global cease-fire, violent conflict has continued to take place throughout the country. The pandemic slowed down the Afghan peace process, and major disagreements over the release of Taliban prisoners delayed the start of intra-Afghan talks for a period of six months.

Afghan women were struggling to be included in the Afghan peace process even before the pandemic. Now, with meetings going virtual, they have fewer opportunities to participate, even as the intra-Afghan peace talks get underway. For many Afghan women, especially local peacebuilders, it is a challenge to access the digital platforms necessary to participate in virtual meetings. Only 14.4 percent of Afghans—and only 5.6 percent of Afghan women—use the Internet as their main source of news and information.<sup>42</sup> Outside the capital, the rates are even lower, meaning going virtual could particularly affect the participation of grassroots-level peacebuilders.

Despite these challenges, Afghan women have continued to voice their concerns and push for inclusion in the peace process. Recently, the Afghan government appointed a twenty-one-person delegation for the intra-Afghan talks; this team included five women negotiators.<sup>43</sup> The intra-Afghan talks began on September 12, 2020, but with only three women participants, not five as decided before. This is indicative of the lack of political will on the part of the Afghan government and its international backers to respect and recognize the value of women peacebuilders to Afghanistan's future.

39 UN Refugee Agency, "Afghanistan," available at <https://www.unhcr.org/afghanistan.html>.

40 "16 Million Afghans in Need of Humanitarian Aid: WFP," *Heart of Asia*, August 20, 2020.

41 Mariam Safi and Muqaddesa Yourish, "What Is Wrong with Afghanistan's Peace Process," *New York Times*, February 20, 2019.

42 Asia Foundation "A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2019," 2019, p. 184.

43 Shahira Mohseni, "The Missing Role of Women in the Afghan Peace Process," *Khaama Press*, August 10, 2020.

But protecting women peacebuilders goes beyond ensuring their physical security. They also deserve recognition and support, both during and after the pandemic, to motivate them and lessen the psychological burden of this work.<sup>44</sup> By recognizing and including women peacebuilders in all stages of peace processes, international actors have the power to provide them legitimacy and protection.

## Financing Women Peacebuilders

Mobilizing funding was one of the central challenges for implementing the WPS agenda even before the pandemic. According to the 2015 global study on the implementation of Resolution 1325 by UN Women, “Failure to allocate sufficient resources and funds has been perhaps the most serious and unrelenting obstacle to implementation of women, peace and security commitments over the past 15 years.”<sup>45</sup> The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated this longstanding financial constraint on local peacebuilders, including women’s organizations, many of which report that they are under threat of closure due to lack of funding.<sup>46</sup> This is driven by a shift in donor priorities away from peacebuilding toward humanitarian efforts and domestic responses to COVID-19.

Supporting women peacebuilders and activists is essential not just because they are disproportionately harmed by the pandemic but also because their work makes the pandemic response more effective.

However, the pandemic does not invalidate existing commitments by the UN and bilateral development agencies to funding efforts to increase gender equality. Moreover, supporting women peacebuilders and activists is essential not just because they are disproportionately harmed by the pandemic but also because their work makes the pandemic response more effective. As one member-state representative said, “Our experience

has taught [us] that women peacebuilders are good partners.”<sup>47</sup> Donors need to consult with women peacebuilders to understand their needs and to provide flexible, long-term funding that allows them to adapt their work to the current reality. For example, they can contribute to the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund, a multi-stakeholder initiative to support local women peacebuilders, or to the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women. They can also contribute to civil society-led multi-donor funds like the Innovative Peace Fund that provide direct access to local, women-led peacebuilding organizations and explore funding partnerships with the private sector.<sup>48</sup>

## Ensuring Data-Driven Responses

Collecting sex-disaggregated data is essential to ensure that policies responding to COVID-19 reflect an understanding of how women are affected by the public health crisis and how to ensure their well-being. For example, emerging data shows that violence against women has increased during the pandemic. In many countries, lockdown measures taken to suppress the spread of the virus limit mobility outside of the home, restricting access to healthcare, emergency services, and psychosocial support. The widespread loss of livelihood and income has also exacerbated economic insecurity and tensions in the home. The combination of these factors has increased violence against women while simultaneously limiting their ability to leave abusive situations.<sup>49</sup>

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more difficult to collect the data needed to under-

44 Meredith Forsyth, “Lessons from African Feminists Mobilizing against COVID-19,” Earth Institute, April 3, 2020.

45 UN Women, “Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325,” 2015, p. 16.

46 Sabine Freizer, “COVID-19 And Women’s Leadership: From an Effective Response to Building Back Better,” UN Women, 2020.

47 IPI virtual ministerial discussion, May 27, 2020.

48 Ibid.

49 UN Women, “Violence against Women and Girls: Data Collection during COVID-19,” April 2020.



stand and respond to the needs of women. This is especially true for data on violence against women, which is usually gathered by trained professionals using face-to-face data collection methods that involve interviewing one woman at a time in private. While service-based data can substitute for face-to-face data collection, it may be less accurate because many women have difficulty accessing services, especially during the pandemic, leaving out those who are most marginalized or living in conflict. Nonetheless, service-based data collection may be safer during the pandemic, because asking women who are forced to quarantine with their abusers to provide information could further jeopardize their safety.<sup>50</sup> Beyond face-to-face and service-based data collection, providing women with appropriately encrypted technology can allow them to self-report what they need. Community-based data collection can also be useful, especially as local mobility restrictions ease up but international researchers still cannot travel overseas.<sup>51</sup>

Data is also needed to understand the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by some women to ensure that the pandemic response addresses their unique challenges and needs and avoids causing them harm. Women who are refugees or internally displaced often cannot access health services or humanitarian aid meant to prevent the spread of the virus.<sup>52</sup> The pandemic is also exacerbating existing racial or ethnic disparities in access to healthcare or economic resources.<sup>53</sup> Gender minorities such as transgender, intersex, and non-binary individuals have reported increased harassment from authorities and legal barriers because of government policies in response to the pandemic that are based on binary notions of biological sex or gender.<sup>54</sup>

However, this data must be collected without putting these women further at risk. Forcing individuals to openly identify themselves as a gender minority or an immigrant, for example, could increase the likelihood of them being harmed. Data should therefore only be gathered with individuals'

informed consent. Careful consideration should also be made about which actors have access to this data to ensure that governments cannot use identifying information on vulnerable minorities to target them.

Finally, it is important to understand what data already exists to avoid duplicating efforts. Civil society actors in many countries have already been collecting data on issues such as sexual and gender-based violence and disparities in healthcare. However, much of the data collection has been done by governments and international humanitarian actors. Sharing this data with women peacebuilders can help ensure that local peacebuilding efforts are driven by data, while including these peacebuilders in data-generation efforts can help national and international stakeholders better understand the gendered needs of local populations.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Although COVID-19 has taken attention away from the anniversary of Resolution 1325, it is just as important to remain committed to the WPS agenda, and in particular to women's participation in peacebuilding and peace processes. Sustainable peace and durable recovery are impossible without women's participation. Ensuring this participation requires the conscious leadership of all stakeholders at the local, national, and international levels. The following are steps that governments and the UN could take to demonstrate their ongoing commitment to WPS:

1. **Prioritize the WPS agenda during the pandemic:** Governments should recommit to the WPS agenda and recognize its value and prescience by appointing a high-level representative to advance the agenda in their foreign policy. The UN Security Council should increase opportunities to hear from women and

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50 Devex event, "How Unconventional Data Can Inform Gender-Based Violence Responses," May 19, 2020.

51 UN Women, "COVID-19 and Violence Against Women and Girls: Addressing the Shadow Pandemic," 2020.

52 Devex event, "Using Data to Support Women Migrants and Refugees during COVID-19," June 23, 2020.

53 US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups," July 24, 2020.

54 Genevieve Glatsky, "How COVID-19 Responses Are Endangering Trans People in Latin America," *New Humanitarian*, May 19, 2020.

civil society briefers, who raise issues related to WPS more often than other briefers. This could help expand policymakers' understanding of the role of women's organizations in mediating and resolving conflicts.<sup>55</sup> However, these efforts will not be sufficient if member states continue to informally consult with women then ignore their input in formal decision-making processes. In their effort to implement the WPS agenda and respond to COVID-19, governments should also partner with more women's organizations that are providing essential support to their communities. Moreover, member states should use the 2020 review of the UN peacebuilding architecture to reaffirm the role of the Peacebuilding Commission as a platform for women peacebuilders to share their experiences and mobilize political and financial support.

2. **Push for the meaningful inclusion of more women in formal peace processes:** The normalization of virtual convenings brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to bring more women "to the table." This requires constantly engaging women peacebuilders to ensure their meaningful inclusion and access to the required technology. The Peacebuilding Commission's 2020 review provides an opportunity for member states to further advocate for the systematic inclusion of women peacebuilders and representatives of women's organizations in its meetings. More broadly, governments and the UN should unite in their demand for the inclusion of independent women peacebuilders in all peace talks they sponsor, facilitate, or mediate and set an example by ensuring gender parity in their own teams. If warring parties are resistant to including women peacebuilders, their commitment to peace should be questioned. The UN and governments involved in peace processes should also invite more women peacebuilders to share their perspectives of the reality on the ground prior to any round of negotiations. Moreover, they should verify that women peacebuilders support the substance of agree-

ments before agreeing to fund their implementation.

3. **Ensure that individual women peacebuilders feel safe and supported:** The UN and its member states should provide physical protection for women peacebuilders and work with governments to ensure that women peacebuilders are able to conduct their work safely. They should also provide women peacebuilders the international legitimacy and recognition they need, especially when this is lacking at the national level, by establishing official channels of communication and consultations with designated groups.
4. **Fund women's organizations as part of the pandemic response:** The pandemic should not be an excuse for the UN and governments to forego their commitments to fund efforts to promote women's equality. Instead, the pandemic provides an opportunity for donors to avoid duplicating funding, implement the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, and strengthen their gender analysis. Because of their access to communities on the ground, women's organizations can make the pandemic response more effective. Donors should provide them with sustainable and flexible funding that allows them to adapt their work to the current reality, including through multi-year commitments and core institutional support in areas such as human resources. Donors should require the major international organizations they fund to report on gender-related metrics to hold them accountable to gender-sensitive responses. They should also require these organizations to support and strengthen local women's organizations; share resources equitably and transparently with these local partners; and involve them in the analysis, design, and implementation of their projects.
5. **Collect sex-disaggregated data and ensure that all relief, recovery, and peacebuilding efforts are gender-responsive:** Governments, the UN,

<sup>55</sup> Asoka, "Support Civil Society at the UN Security Council."

and civil society organizations should develop a coordinated approach to collecting gender-disaggregated data to better understand the risks women face during the pandemic. This

should include developing guidance for collecting and analyzing data on sexual and gender-based violence in a way that does not put women at risk.

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