The adoption of United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in 2000 was an extraordinary achievement by women peace activists from around the world. The 20th anniversary of the Resolution is an opportunity to critically reflect on the achievements of the WPS agenda and galvanize action on implementation. As South African woman activist Tintswalo Makhubele shared in her briefing to the Peacebuilding Commission in April 2020, “The year 2020 is an opportunity to reflect on what works and what does not work in peacebuilding, and how local women and their perspectives can be better included.”

To explore the grassroots implementation of the intersecting provisions of the WPS and Sustaining Peace agendas1 on women’s leadership and participation in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding, the Government of Ireland commissioned the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) and UN Women to conduct a series of consultations with women from civil society in Colombia, Northern Ireland, South Africa and Uganda. We selected these four contexts to provide diversity in terms of both geography and their position on the peace and conflict continuum. The women who generously participated were diverse and included young women, indigenous and rural women, women of different ethnicities and women with disabilities. Despite this diversity, many of the key findings and recommendations – summarized below – resonate strongly across all four contexts.

**Lack of gender-sensitive global and local coordination in WPS implementation and pandemic response**

First, there is a clear lack of coordination between global, regional, national and local actors, exacerbated by limited knowledge of the global, regional and national policy frameworks at the local level. Women interviewees observed that even when policies that promote women’s rights and gender equality exist – such as National Action Plans on WPS – they are typically not translated into local languages and are therefore not known at the local level.

Moreover, there is a lack of knowledge of women’s rights among local populations, and a lack of capacity and understanding of gender...
equality in local institutions. This leads to delays in the implementation of WPS and existing peace agreements. The national-local disconnect has been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in responses that are neither gender-responsive nor conflict-sensitive.

New and persisting constraints to women’s meaningful participation

COVID-19 has “put the brakes” on both women’s political participation and their engagement in peace processes, especially at the local level. The pandemic highlights and exacerbates the challenges to women’s meaningful participation. The increased care burden imposed by the pandemic – including additional childcare and homeschooling – has limited women’s capacity to participate in trainings, consultations and advocacy across all four country contexts. As a participant from Colombia observed, women are now working three jobs: as caregivers for their loved ones, educators for their children, and peacebuilders in their communities.

COVID-19 also illuminates the multiple layers of discrimination affecting women. For example, women with disabilities face increased communications difficulties, because not all online platforms and materials are accessible to them. Indigenous women and women living in remote areas face exclusion due to lack of access to the internet and communication devices.

Women activists are “under threat like never before”

Women leaders, peacebuilders and human rights defenders are under attack everywhere. Interviewees in Northern Ireland flagged that women leaders, peacebuilders and human rights defenders worldwide are “under threat like never before”. In Colombia, the number of attacks against women human rights defenders had already reached historical levels before COVID-19, and further increased during the pandemic, due to mobility and travel restrictions, which made it easier for the activists to be identified and tracked by attackers. In Uganda, women activists are referred to derogatorily as “men”, “impossible women” or “home-breakers”. As a result, they are often shunned by their families or exposed to further verbal or physical violence. Across all four contexts, participants identified these threats – along with the restrictions imposed on civil society by governments – as a principal barrier to peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

Toxic masculinity within security services worsens exclusion and pandemic impacts for women

A key barrier to growing the number and influence of women uniformed personnel is patriarchal culture and toxic masculinity rampant in security services. The heavily militarized culture also led to overly securitized responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. As Parcella Makelani from Bana Ba Ba Khany Centre in South Africa put it, “The police officers failed us. There was a lot of police brutality, which fuels conflict.” Thus, women in Colombia emphasized that it is not enough to include women in the security sector – there is a need to change the culture within it. They highlighted that women in armed forces often face harassment and abuse, and lack appropriate channels to report it.

The care economy lacks recognition and support

COVID-19 aggravates inequality, particularly economic inequality, and breeds conflict. To create more resilient and peaceful societies, the care economy must be recognized as an important component of post-pandemic recovery, and supported politically and financially. Across all contexts, women peacebuilders underscored that austerity measures and financial crises – such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic – disproportionately affect women. This inequality is due to their overrepresentation in education, hospitality and services industries as well as the informal sector – especially as domestic workers.
is due to their overrepresentation in education, hospitality and services industries as well as the informal sector – especially as domestic workers. In Uganda, participants testified that many women lost their small businesses, because they could not keep up with loan repayment. At the same time, economic recovery measures are not gender-responsive and do not take into account the disproportionate amount of care work carried by women. Instead, they tend to focus on big businesses, without addressing the needs of small entrepreneurs and those working in the informal sector – most of whom are women.

**Peacebuilding and WPS implementation are under serious threat**

Finally, women peacebuilders are concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to deprioritization and defunding of peacebuilding work and the implementation of WPS. Due to the pandemic, women’s rights and peacebuilding organizations have seen funding cuts and delays, which make it more difficult to carry out their work. In Colombia, women expressed concern that the pandemic is being used as an excuse to cut funding for institutions dedicated to the implementation of the peace agreement, including transitional justice mechanisms.

**What works for peace? Cultural change and the meaningful participation of women**

The recommendations identified by women peacebuilders to address these urgent challenges echo many of those already put forth, including in the UN Secretary-General’s reports on WPS. At the same time, the women with whom we spoke also identified innovative and nuanced examples of good practices and locally driven solutions that need to be recognized, amplified and replicated. They told us about how inclusion of women in local COVID-19 task forces in Uganda led to more gender-sensitive responses. In Colombia, women also shared how meaningful consultations with women peacebuilders helped effectively address impacts of sexual violence through their country’s disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes. Perhaps most importantly, interviewees emphasized that to ensure full and effective implementation of the WPS resolutions, there is a need for deep, structural changes, which will create a culture more conducive to peace, and to women’s meaningful participation.

“To us, peace means having an equal seat at the table, and a choice over our own lives,” the women peacebuilders from Northern Ireland stated. In 2020, there should be no place for peace processes that do not include women. Women peacebuilders must be able to carry out their work without fear. Yet, these are all realities that women peacebuilders across the world face on a daily basis. Women’s movements and networks have played key roles in ensuring their meaningful participation in the peace processes of Colombia and Northern Ireland, and in the localization of the WPS agenda in South Africa and Uganda. Therefore, to accelerate the implementation of the WPS agenda and achieve its ambitious goals, it is necessary to recognize and support the work of women peacebuilders at local, national, regional and international levels.