Women, Peace, and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age: Opportunities and risks to advance women's meaningful participation and protect their rights

Research report

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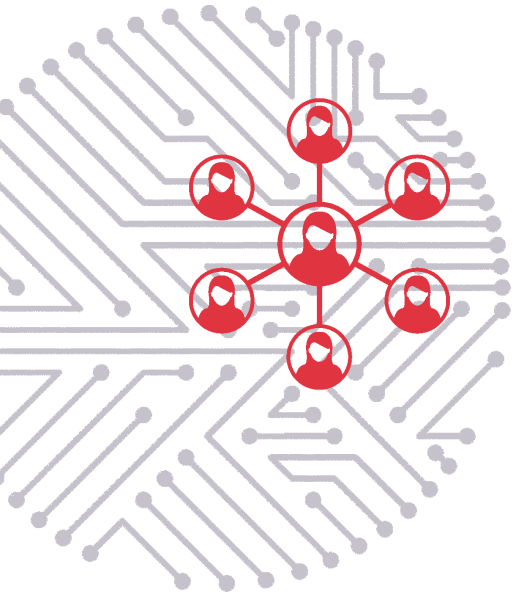

Introduction: Why Digitalization Matters for the Women and Peace and Security agenda

Feminist scholars and activists in the late 20th century regarded advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as holding out a promise for gender equality, sustainable development, and inclusive peace.[1] ICTs have been hailed for their potential to bring education and life-saving information to wide audiences and create more diverse and inclusive spaces for civil society strategizing, activism, and peace negotiations. The potential uses of ICTs in the context of armed conflict and peacemaking have received particular attention from theorists and practitioners in recent years. While, in most contexts, ICTs continue to be perceived primarily as a threat to international peace and security, mediators have increasingly recognized and utilized their potential to facilitate rather than disrupt peace processes. From instant messaging to coordinate between the negotiating parties and monitor ceasefires in Syria to creating bespoke online platforms for broad constituencies to inform the official peace talks in Colombia and Libya, mediators are increasingly employing ICTs to broker and maintain peace.[2] To encourage and amplify such use, the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs created the "Peacemaker" – an online mediation support tool dedicated to peacemaking professionals.

Greater inclusion of historically marginalized groups – such as women – is considered a potential advantage of using ICTs in mediation. Yet, in practice, online spaces often "reproduce, and often amplify, the patriarchal structures, practices, and culture of contemporary life."[3] Women continue to face critical political, financial, technical, and cultural barriers to effectively using ICTs for greater inclusion in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Weak infrastructure and high costs of connection are critical barriers to many women living in conflict-affected areas. These are aggravated by the underfunding of women's activism[4] and the lack of basic and digital literacy among women. As a result, globally, there are 200 million fewer women than men online.[5] Even when women manage to obtain access, funds, and skills to use virtual spaces effectively, patriarchal gender and cultural norms are yet another barrier. Women spend more time than men on unpaid domestic labor,[6] leaving them less time for their activism – and even less to learn how to conduct it online.

Moreover, the sexist violence that is prevalent in offline spaces is replicated and amplified online, creating additional threats to women peacebuilders and human rights defenders.[7] Finally, women's inclusion in peace processes – including through digital platforms – often faces resistance from political elites and conflict parties, since it threatens to disrupt the power dynamic at the

1 Louise Arimatsu, "Silencing Women in the Digital Age", Cambridge International Law Journal 8, no. 2 (December 1, 2019): 187–217, https://doi.org/10.4337/cilj.2019.02.02 .

2 Andreas Hirblinger, "Peaceworks: Digital Inclusion in Mediated Peace Processes. How Technology Can Enhance Participation", United States Institute of Peace, September 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/20200929-pw_168-digital_inclusion_in_mediated_peace_processes_how_technology_can_enhance_participation-pw.pdf.

3 Louise Arimatsu, "Silencing Women in the Digital Age", Cambridge International Law Journal 8, no. 2 (December 1, 2019): 187–217, https://doi.org/10.4337/cilj.2019.02.02.

4 Jen Ross, "Chronically underfunded, women peacebuilders need support more than ever", UN Women, 29 October 2020, https://data.unwomen.org/features/chronically-underfunded-women-peace-builders-need-support-more-ever

5 Louise Arimatsu, "Silencing Women in the Digital Age*," Cambridge International Law Journal 8, no. 2 (December 1, 2019): 187–217, https://doi.org/10.4337/cilj.2019.02.02.

6 Jorge Moreira da Silva, "Why you should care about unpaid care work", Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 18 March 2019, https://oecd-development-matters.org/2019/03/18/why-you-should-care-about-unpaid-care-work/

7 Ioannis Tellidis and Stephanie Kappler, "Information and communication technologies in peacebuilding: Implications, opportunities and challenges", Cooperation and Conflict, 2016;51(1):75-93, doi:10.1177/0010836715603752.

negotiating table.[8] As a result of these challenges, distrust and disillusion with ICTs is now prevalent among women peacebuilders.[9]

However, despite their wariness and the plethora of challenges, women peacebuilders worldwide have leveraged technology to advance their work. They have used social media to amplify protests in Armenia, Egypt, and Sudan. They built global solidarity movements with women of Afghanistan, Belarus, and Poland. They used technologies to remain in touch with peace process negotiators in Syria and the Philippines.[10] The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift of peacebuilding and peacemaking work into digital spaces. It has forced women activists and mediators alike to learn to more effectively use ICTs in their work. The pandemic provided an incentive for women peacebuilders to explore the opportunities offered by digital tools and reach out to groups they had not engaged with before - in particular, young people. At the same time, the increased reliance on online tools during the pandemic has also worsened the exclusion of those without access to the Internet. Moreover, "the shift to the digital world was weaponized by some actors, who have used it to question women's competency and capability to take part in policy-making discussions."[11]

"Anyone who writes about peace, advocates for peace, can be a target. It is so easy to be targeted on social media. You just need to write something healthy and anti-war."

– Woman activist from Armenia

Thus, the need to address the persistent barriers to women's use of ICTs for peacebuilding has never been more urgent. At the same time, much of the existing literature on ICTs and mediation focuses on how ICTs may be helpful to mediators. To complement the existing analyses and resources, the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), in partnership with the ICT4Peace Foundation and with support from the Directorate of International Law of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), developed this report, focused on women activists and peacebuilders. The report explores how women can use ICTs to advance their work and how international organizations, governments, and private companies can support them.

We use the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) lens in our analysis. The WPS agenda recognizes both the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and the role of women as leaders in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. We use its four pillars[12] to better understand the actual and potential uses of ICTs by women and analyze the barriers they face. We recognize that ICTs can open new avenues for **participation** but also risk creating new patterns of exclusion. They can support **conflict prevention** (for example, by strengthening early warning mechanisms) or fuel conflicts[13] and recruitment by armed groups.[14] They can be used as a tool to document women's rights

8 Andreas Hirblinger, "Peaceworks: Digital Inclusion in Mediated Peace Processes. How Technology Can Enhance Participation", United States Institute of Peace, September 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/20200929-pw_168-digital_inclusion_in_mediated_peace_processes_how_technology_can_enhance_participation-pw.pdf.

9 Sanjana Hattotuwa, "Gender, ICT and Peacebuilding", ICT4Peace Foundation, 2006, https://ict4peace.wordpress.com/2006/05/11/gender-ict-and-peacebuilding/.

10 Danielle Robertson and Mena Ayazi, "How Women Are Using Technology to Advance Gender Equality and Peace," United States Institute of Peace, 15 July 2019, https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/07/how-women-are-using-technology-advance-gender-equality-and-peace.

11 Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and New York University School of Professional Studies, "The Pandemic Will Not Stop Us: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Peace Activism in Colombia, the Philippines, South Sudan and Ukraine," March 2021, https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/NYU-Research-Policy-Brief_March-2021.pdf.

12 These are: Participation, Prevention, Protection and Relief and Recovery.

13 Minority Rights Group, "Peoples under Threat 2019: The role of social media in exacerbating violence", June 2019, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/peoples-under-threat-2019-role-social-media-exacerbating-violence

14 Scrivens, Ryan, and Maura Conway. "The roles of 'old' and 'new' media tools and technologies in the facilitation of violent extremism and terrorism." In The Human Factor of Cybercrime. Taylor & Francis, 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336588722_The_

violations, thereby increasing their **protection**, but have also been a source of threats and violence against women. Finally, they could contribute to more inclusive and gender-responsive **relief and recovery**, but can also aggravate the marginalization of some groups in post-conflict reconstruction.

Through our analysis, we highlight how women activists are already using ICTs. We have created a typology of existing uses to better understand what works and what does not work for women peacebuilders. We hope this will lead to more effective use of ICTs for inclusion by peacebuilding practitioners and mediators. At the same time, we recognize and analyze the persistent barriers – not only to women's access to technologies but to the kind of access that would allow them to achieve their peacebuilding goals. Thus, we focus on the concept of women's meaningful inclusion in ICTs for peace. We define "meaningful inclusion" as the kind of inclusion that allows women to influence peacemaking outcomes and attain their objectives. Through our analysis, we provide insights into what **meaningful** inclusion can look like in practice and concrete recommendations to ensure it. In doing so, we recognize that the patterns of engagement with ICTs, and the barriers faced may be very different for women of different ages, backgrounds, and identities.

The WPS agenda provides a valuable framework for this analysis because it sets out clear obligations for the Member States and other actors to ensure women's participation. Over the years, the agenda has also highlighted the importance of meaningful participation, of going beyond simply having women in the (virtual or physical) room. Moreover, despite criticism that it has "securitized" the feminist peace agenda,[15] the WPS agenda has contributed to advancing human security-focunsed approaches to peace. For example, it has increasingly underscored the importance of economic empowerment as a prerequisite of conflict prevention.[16] More recently, it has brought attention to the need for demilitarization and more significant investment in social services.[17] With these transformative elements in mind, women activists worldwide have called for a "redesign" of peace negotiations tables – rather than merely adding women to it. ICTs could be a powerful tool to facilitate such "redesign." This report provides an evidence base to inform actions of policy-makers, ICT, and peacebuilding practitioners to maximize the transformative potential of ICTs.

To provide concrete recommendations, we analyze the existing normative frameworks on women's rights and meaningful participation and how they have adapted to the increasingly digitalized and connected world. We also recognize and consider the ongoing efforts to better understand interlinkages between ICTs and international peace and security, such as the efforts of the UNGA-created Open-ended Working Group and Group of Governmental Experts on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security. We offer recommendations on how they can be made more gender-responsive.[18]

Roles_of_'Old'_and_'New'_Media_Tools_and_Technologies_in_the_Facilitation_of_Violent_Extremism_and_Terrorism

15 See, for example, Dianne Otto, "Women, Peace and Security: A Critical Analysis of the Security Council's Vision," SSRN Scholarly Paper, Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, July 16, 2015, https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2631325.

16 For example, UNSCR 2122 recognized that "women's economic empowerment greatly contributes to the stabilization of societies emerging from conflict", and UNSCR 1889 called for for women's inclusion in decision-making about economic recovery and for creation of income-generating opportunities for women, as part of the WPS agenda's implementation.

17 In his latest report to the UN Security Council on women and peace and security, the UN Secretary General called attention to the the "stark difference between soaring rates of military spending and the strains witnessed in social protection systems". He called for Member States to "reverse the upward trajectory in global military spending with a view to encouraging greater investment in the social infrastructure and services that buttress human security." Source: https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/946.

18 See below Section VI for more analysis.

Based on our analysis, we offer the following recommendations:

- **Significantly increase investment in universal and affordable access to the Internet, in line with target 9.C of the Sustainable Development Goals and take proactive measures to guarantee internet access for women and girls, in particular those living in conflict-affected and rural areas and women and girls refugees and internally displaced persons.**
- **Promote and facilitate inclusive design and development of ICT products and services, including by encouraging and supporting diverse women and girls to pursue careers in the ICT sector and by conducting consultations with diverse groups of end-users of ICT products, including women and girls living in conflict-affected communities.**
- **Strengthen the protection of women's rights in the under-regulated online space, by adopting concrete laws, policies and protocols to ensure their safety, in line with existing legal frameworks to protect women's rights.**
- **Invest in programs to strengthen the capacities of women and youth to access and effectively use online spaces, especially given the online nature of the new normal in the context of COVID-19.**

Detailed recommendations for specific actors are available at the end of the report.

Methodology

GNWP and ICT4Peace conducted in-depth qualitative research to inform this report. The research combined key informant interviews with women peacebuilders and ICT experts, a global consultation, and a review of relevant policies and existing literature.

Key Informant Interviews: The research draws on 79 in-depth interviews with ICT experts, and women peacebuilders, activists, mediators and negotiators, and representatives of regional and international organizations that support peace processes. The research participants included 72 women and seven men. The majority of research participants came from Colombia (21 interviews) and the Philippines (28 interviews), as the two case study countries. Additionally, 30 interviews were conducted with regional and global actors and activists from[18] countries. These are: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Canada, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Kenya, Moldova, Morocco, Northern Ireland, South Sudan, Switzerland, Syria, Tunisia, Ukraine, United States, and Yemen. Examples provided throughout the report aim to provide to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of ICTs that came up systematically across the research, rather than pointing out advantages or disadvantages related to any specific region or country.

Global consultation: To complement the interviews, GNWP and ICT4Peace organized a global online consultation on "Women's Peace and Security in the Digital Age" on 20-21 July 2021. The consultation brought together 50 women peacebuilders and ICT experts to discuss the risks and potential of using technology for inclusive peacebuilding. During the consultation, expert speakers from Canada, Colombia, Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, the Philippines, Switzerland, Tunisia, Ukraine, and the United States shared their experiences and engaged in an interactive discussion.

Review of relevant documentation: GNWP and ICT4Peace reviewed and analyzed existing academic and grey literature, laws, policies, and strategies pertaining to ICTs and human rights. The research team also analyzed examples of existing projects and good practices to identify knowledge gaps and contextualize the findings from the Key Informant Interviews and online consultations.

How women and youth peacebuilders and activists use ICTs

The sample of women who participated in this research is not sufficient to draw definite conclusions about the patterns of ICT use globally. However, the in-depth interviews conducted with women and young women from 20 countries provide unique insights into how women and youth peacebuilders engage with technology. In this section, we analyze and categorize the different modalities of women's use of ICTs. We consider how each of these uses can contribute to the achievement of women's peacebuilding goals, in line with the four pillars of the WPS agenda.

Which platforms do women peacebuilders use?

Women who participated in the research most commonly use email, Facebook, and WhatsApp to support their daily work and access peace processes. Zoom has also rapidly gained popularity following the COVID-19 pandemic. Research participants shared that they began to use the platform more often, even if they previously used Skype or MS Teams for online conferencing.

The pandemic also had a more profound impact on women peacebuilders' relationship to ICTs. Before the pandemic, some women were reluctant to use technologies, seeing it as a less secure and less "human" way of engagement. However, several research participants shared that in the face of COVID-19, the use of ICTs became the only avenue for them to pursue their work, forcing them to embrace it. As a research participant from Colombia noted, "if you are not online, you do not exist." As a result of this new reality, women began to explore new platforms and ways of using ICTs. Several of the interviewees have integrated training on the use of ICTs and cyber-security for conflict-affected women into their peacebuilding work.

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>
> – Woman activist from Armenia

The interviews revealed that women peacebuilders are increasingly conscious of digital safety when using ICTs. Women are creating "safe spaces" online – for example, by having invitation-only, password-protected calls. Several of the interviewees noted that they have begun to use Signal for instant messaging to improve their security and minimize the risk of surveillance. Some interviewees also mentioned a reluctance towards Zoom due to perceived security concerns.

The interviewees pointed to substantial differences in how women from diverse backgrounds engage with ICTs. For example, research participants noted that young women tend to use Instagram and TikTok more often than older activists. Research participants from Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine noted that Russian-owned social media, such as Odnoklassniki, are used by those living in and near conflict-affected areas. At the same time, they highlighted that these platforms are less secure, with more harassment, trolls, and risk of surveillance. Finally, some platforms were identified as more accessible to rural and remote populations, primarily due to their lower bandwidth requirements, easy access, and popularity. These included: Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, and Signal. A research participant from the Philippines noted that Zoom and

Facebook are "the most popular, if not the only, platforms used by indigenous people in Barangay Saniag Ampatuan, Maguindanao." Several interviewees also emphasized the usefulness of the voice messaging option in online messengers to increase their accessibility to illiterate women and men.

Most interviewees highlighted the importance of balancing digital and non-digital media. They emphasized the relevance of cell phones in their work. None of the interviewees mentioned more advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) or big data mining, which are gaining popularity among mediators and international peace practitioners.[19] Instead, women peacebuilders rely on technologies that require minimal equipment and internet access, such as text messaging, WhatsApp, and social media. They use these technologies in creative and innovative ways. For example, women in Colombia and Venezuela have adapted training methodologies to deliver them through WhatsApp. The Our Lady for Peace foundation, based in South Africa, organizes weekly WhatsApp discussions on issues related to peacebuilding, which reach rural and grassroots women activists from across the country. This pattern of use, and reliance on both digital and non-digital ICTs, is important in designing effective ICT tools and strategies for women.

Similarly, none of the interviewees referred to the use of bespoke platforms created for consultations ahead of peace negotiations – for example, the Mesa de Conversation platform in Colombia. While it can be due to a limited sample of women interviewed in this research, it also points to the need for better d issemination of o pportunities f or o nline p articipation. M oreover, it highlights a gap in how ICTs are perceived and used by mediators and women peacebuilders. To maximize the effectiveness of ICTs in making peace negotiations more inclusive, it is necessary to further explore how women peacebuilders use them in their everyday work.

How do women peacebuilders use ICTs?

The interviews conducted as part of this research provided a wealth of insights into the diverse ways in which women peacebuilders use ICTs to prevent conflict, promote peace in their communities, and access official peace processes. These can be divided into three broad categories.

Firstly, women peacebuilders use ICTs to **widen the reach of their communications.** For example, they use them to access more (and more diverse) decision-makers, spread peacebuilding messages in communities, and coordinate and build solidarity among themselves.

Secondly, women peacebuilders use ICTs to gain **access and analyze data and information.** This includes monitoring trends in violence to inform early warning and prepare appropriate responses and documenting and reporting individual violations to ensure accountability.

Finally, women peacebuilders use ICTs to **carry out their day-to-day work,** deliver life-saving services (such as psychosocial support) and ensure their survival through innovative fundraising strategies.

19 See, for example: Daanish Masood and Martin Waehlish, "AI & Global Governance: Robots Will Not Only Wage Future Wars but also Future Peace", 23 April 2019, UN University Center for Policy Research, https://cpr.unu.edu/publications/articles/robots-will-not-only-wage-future-wars-but-also-future-peace.html

Table 1: Typology of uses of ICTs by women peacebuilders

ICT use category	ICT use type	Examples of use
WIDENING REACH OF COMMUNICATION	Advocacy (communicating with decision-makers) **WPS pillar: Participation**	► Participating in global and regional policy forums (e.g., UN Security Council) ► Consultations for policy drafting ► Increasing visibility of women's issues ► Direct access to peace negotiators ► Advocacy for peace agreement implementation
	Outreach and buy-in (communicating with communities) **WPS pillar: Prevention**	► Peace education and disseminating peace messages ► Raising awareness about peace agreement to ensure broad-based ownership ► Building empathy and social cohesion between conflicting communities
	Movement-building (communicating with other women and civil society organizations) **WPS pillar: All (supporting women peacebuilders)**	► Building and strengthening networks ► Global/regional/national coordination ► Expressing solidarity
IMPROVING INFORMATION ACCESS AND MANAGEMENT	Understanding needs and roots of violence (information about trends) **WPS pillar: Prevention and Relief & Recovery**	► Data collection and needs assessment in communities ► Collecting and analyzing data about conflict trends (early warning)
	Monitoring violations (information about individual cases) **WPS pillar: Prevention and Protection**	► Documenting cases of police brutality ► Reporting gender-based violence cases (including domestic violence) ► Monitoring ceasefire violations
STRENGTHENING PEACEBUILDING PROGRAMMING	Organizational strengthening **WPS pillar: All (supporting women peacebuilders)**	► Day-to-day management, communications within teams ► Raising funds
	Delivering programs and services **WPS pillar: All (supporting women peacebuilders)**	► Providing online educational opportunities ► Support to women entrepreneurs (expanding customer base) ► Psychosocial support and legal services online

WIDENING REACH OF COMMUNICATION

Advocacy

Reaching more actors with their key advocacy messages was one of the most significant advantages of ICTs noted by nearly all women interviewed in this research. ICTs grant women peacebuilders and activists new ways to access decision-making forums, peace processes, and political meetings at national, regional, and global levels. This can contribute to increased **participation** of women at all levels of decision-making and in peace processes.

As ICTs remove many physical and logistical barriers to participation, local experts can share their insights with decision-makers beyond their immediate geographic vicinity. For example, research participants from Northern Ireland noted that the shift to digital meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated diverse women's involvement in "London-centric" policy processes. Before, attending meetings in London would mean having to pay for travel and accommodation, as well as arranging childcare and taking leave from work – something many grassroots women could not afford. ICTs have therefore made important policy discussions more accessible. In a similar vein, Fairlie Chappuis, an independent researcher, suggested that as virtual participation becomes increasingly normalized, ICTs have the potential to increase women peacebuilders' access to New York-based global policy processes such as the yearly October meetings of the UNGA 1st Committee on Disarmament and International Security. The possibility of virtual participation has also – in theory – removed some barriers from women civil society briefers' participation in the meetings of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and other UN entities. However, the increased ease of participation did not necessarily translate into more women briefers. In fact, the number of women civil society briefers at UNSC meetings between January and July 2020 was 38.9 per cent lower compared to the same period in the previous year.[20] This indicates that technological solutions alone are not sufficient to ensure women's meaningful participation in global discussions. Sustained political will and concrete assurances to guarantee the protection of women who brief international bodies are needed to make sure that ICTs can be effectively used to promote women's participation at both global and national levels.

Beyond direct participation, ICTs can act as avenues for women peacebuilders and activists to inform policy processes through workshops and consultations. Research participants from Colombia, the Philippines, Syria, and Ukraine shared various ways ICTs have been used to create or maintain women's participation. In Syria, the Center for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD) is organizing online dialogues to inform the development of the country's constitution. In Ukraine, the use of ICTs allowed for a far larger and more diverse group of civil society organizations to participate in the development of the country's second National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS. In the Philippines, online consultations have been used across several post-conflict reconstruction processes. The Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao (IPDM) office facilitated consultations with women to inform policy and programming affecting them. In the conflict-affected Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), parliamentarians used ICTs such as Zoom and Facebook to obtain inputs on the development of the electoral code, as well as the Moro Welfare

20 Caitilin McMillan, Anna Tonelli and Kristina Mader, "'Do our voices matter?' An analysis of women civil society representatives' meaningful participation at the UN Security Council", 17 December 2020.

and Development Code of Cotabato. In this context, ICTs have been especially helpful in engaging different groups, including women, youth, and religious leaders. Meg Villanueva, a consultant working with the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) in the Philippines, discussed the role of ICTs in reaching out to diverse groups of youth in developing the National Action Plan on Youth, Peace, and Security. However, such consultations are only effective if they are accompanied by a strong political will to ensure that their outcomes are actually integrated into relevant policies. Setting clear expectations and channels for integrating consultation outputs into policy documents and including women and civil society participants in the actual drafting processes are good practices to ensure that.

ICTs also contribute to women's advocacy by increasing the visibility of their movements and bringing it to the attention of senior decision-makers and influential global figures. A participant from South Sudan shared that – thanks to the increased visibility granted to her work by using ICTs – she received an email from the Pope's office asking how to engage with women peacebuilders in the country. Another participant from Colombia highlighted the role of ICTs in garnering attention from the international community in the context of the 2021 national strike. In this way, ICTs can contribute to making women's participation more meaningful. As their priority issues gain more visibility, women activists and peacebuilders can exert more pressure on authorities and decision-makers to ensure their voices are actually listened to. From social media to emails and podcasts, ICTs amplify the voices and demands of women and serve as a means to amplify lobbying and advocacy campaigns.

All three of the above modalities – using ICTs for direct participation, indirect participation through consultations, and increasing visibility of women's demands – have also been useful to women peacebuilders in their advocacy around peace negotiations. In Georgia, the meetings of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), which address violent incidents along the Administrative Border Line with the breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions, are now conducted online. This allows for greater direct participation of civil society, including women peacebuilders. In Colombia and the Philippines, women used WhatsApp and infographics to share information about the progress of the negotiations and the peace agreements with their communities as well as to provide the information needed to effectively engage in consultations. In South Sudan, women peacebuilders campaigned on Facebook to call on the government to uphold its commitments under the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCISS), including the 35 per cent quota for women in all elected and appointed positions. The heightened visibility of this issue through the use of social media helped advance women's advocacy. Susan Nyuon Sebit, a woman activist and lawyer from South Sudan, shared, "As of now, women make up a larger proportion of some governmental levels – that was a big victory for us. We could not do it without the online spaces. That's the power of the Internet." ICTs served a similar purpose in Colombia, where WhatsApp was used to create the *Defendamos de la Paz* group, where many high-level stakeholders connected and mobilized to call for the implementation of the peace agreement. The role of ICTs in peace processes is discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

Outreach and creating awareness and ownership

Women peacebuilders and activists also use ICTs as a tool for outreach to their communities, to build broad-based support for peace processes, and promote a culture of peace. This can contribute to more effective **conflict prevention** since communities understand the benefits of peace and are less likely to engage in violent behaviors.

Women interviewed in this research noted that ICTs serve as a tool for dissemination of knowledge, as well as positive peace-oriented messaging and education. For example, the Asia Foundation's "PeaceConnect" project used social and traditional media to promote peace messaging in the Philippines. The Facebook-funded "Team Pakigsandurot" initiative has also used positive messaging on social media in a similar manner to address violent extremism and Islamophobia online. According to Sajida Abdulvahabova from the Women's Problems Research Union in Azerbaijan, using ICTs in this manner creates the potential for the Internet to be used "as a site of resistance to violence." Several participants noted that ICTs, particularly social media, are a more accessible platform for awareness-raising. For instance, ICTs are more economically accessible than conventional media and public advertisements and can reach a wider audience at a smaller cost. The reach of social media campaigns and ICT-based awareness-raising is further increased when led by persons with social influence. For example, a popular TV actress led the "Red Lipstick" campaign to address the government of the Philippines' "red-tagging" and targeting of individuals and organizations critical of its policies.

By using ICTs for awareness-raising, women peacebuilders can gather more buy-in for peace agreements from their communities. For example, in the case of the BARMM, social media was used to encourage youth to register to vote in time for the upcoming election and to gather public support for the extension of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority. Women peacebuilders and activists also use ICTs to increase the transparency of peacebuilding processes, which in turn builds and maintains communities' confidence in them. For example, research participants from the Philippines shared that there is a Facebook live feed of parliamentary sessions, and that Members of Parliament use Facebook to post updates and reports to the public.

Women peacebuilders and activists also use ICTs to build empathy and trust between conflicting communities, and create greater social cohesion. Research participants from Armenia and Azerbaijan shared that ICTs allow them to connect to each other in a context where offline meetings are not possible or carry security risks. A participant from Moldova shared similar sentiments on using ICTs to connect women from different regions in the country. The use of ICTs for this purpose is not a new phenomenon; women in Northern Ireland used a similar approach with ICTs available in the 1960s and 1970s to communicate across peace lines. Research participants also noted the key role of youth in facilitating the use of ICTs to create social cohesion, as they help older generations adapt to new digital platforms.

Overall, when communicating with their communities, women strive to innovate to ensure safety and accessibility. A research participant from the Philippines shared that during the pandemic lockdown, their organization created comics on COVID-19 prevention that were shared on social media and used as a script for radio broadcasting. Another participant from Cameroon discussed using voice notes on WhatsApp to communicate with women who cannot read and

write. ICTs can also provide a relatively safe means of accessing information. Participants shared that they use ICTs to reach a diverse audience. This includes youth, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons, women combatants, and others, who are able to access information and services while remaining anonymous, thus avoiding potential risks. Investing in solutions that increase security and accessibility is thus key to amplifying this use of ICTs in women's peacebuilding work. This could include, for example, improving speech-to-text technologies or strengthening safety protocols of ICT platforms.

Movement-building

Women peacebuilders and activists have used ICTs to improve communication among themselves and build stronger and wider-reaching networks and movements. This is critical to the implementation of all four pillars of the WPS agenda. It can ensure more diverse **participation**, thereby amplifying marginalized women's voices. It contributes to **protection** by creating safe spaces and support networks. It multiplies the impacts of women's conflict **prevention** work, and contributes to more effective **relief and recovery.**

"We meet more sisters online; I cannot explain how much support I've received from strangers online"

– Sally Mboumien, Executive Director of the Common Action for Gender Development (COMAGEND), Cameroon

Research participants from Armenia, Cameroon, Georgia, the Philippines, and Ukraine highlighted network-building as one of the most important uses of ICTs in their work. By removing the financial and logistical constraints of in-person meetings, the advancement of ICTs creates new opportunities for strategizing, information exchange, and movement-building for women. As Susan Nyuon Sebit, a woman activist and lawyer from South Sudan, noted, the increased use of online meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic "has given women peacebuilders an opportunity to interact with other women from around the world." A research participant from the Philippines shared a similar sentiment, noting that ICTs have become "an avenue, where different sectors and genders bargain and express themselves." In the Philippines, interviewees explained that they use ICTs for strategizing and developing action plans to continue peacebuilding work in the face of push-back. Several interviewees shared that ICTs enabled the participation of groups that have traditionally been excluded from offline meetings, such as young women, thus making women-led peace movements and networks more inclusive.

In addition to providing a space for coordination and network-building, ICTs have enabled expressions of transnational solidarity between women peacebuilders and civil society. Sally Mboumien, Executive Director of the Common Action for Gender Development (COMAGEND) in Cameroon, explained that expressions of solidarity from women from other countries helped her deal with the psychological pressure created by her peacebuilding work. She stated: "We meet more sisters online. I cannot explain how much support I've received from strangers online."

However, women peacebuilders interviewed for this research were aware of the limitations of network-building and movement-building online. As discussed in more detail below, barriers to accessing and using ICTs restrict who is able to benefit from online exchanges, networks, and solidarity. Some of the research participants shared their efforts to overcome these barriers. This can include using platforms that are more easily accessible and do not require a high-bandwidth Internet connection (such as Facebook and WhatsApp). Additionally, in some contexts, young women have also been teaching older activists how to use online tools.

IMPROVING INFORMATION ACCESS AND MANAGEMENT

Understanding community and women's needs

Collecting and analyzing information about patterns of violence and their impacts is at the core of women's peacebuilding work. It contributes to more effective **conflict prevention** and **relief and recovery** after conflict. For example, women peacebuilders' profound knowledge of their communities and their needs was one of the reasons why they were able to be first responders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ICTs facilitates data collection, making it easier for women peacebuilders to plan and inform their work. For example, Julia Kharashvili from the IDP Women's Association "Consent" noted that "during the [Nagorno Karabakh conflict that erupted in September 2020], it was vital to be online to understand the needs of Armenian and Azerbaijani women." Using online data collection, her organization was able to map the needs of women in each country and provide appropriate support, such as psychosocial and legal assistance. In the Philippines, women peacebuilders are using ICTs to gather information about the child, early and forced marriage in indigenous communities. This information then guides the development of appropriate programs to prevent this practice and increase communities' resilience.

Monitoring and documenting violations

In addition to using ICTs to better understand trends and patterns of violence, women peacebuilders also use technology to document and report individual cases of violence. This can contribute to increased **protection**, as well as ensure accountability and justice to women during post-conflict **recovery.**

An excellent example of this is the Ushahidi platform, which allows for data collection and generation of reports of violent incidents from multiple sources – including text messages (SMS), emails, and Twitter. The platform has been used in over 160 countries to inform the planning and design of interventions and to document and report cases of human rights violations and abuses. For example, activists have used the platform to document instances of police brutality during the Black Lives Matter Protests in Portland.21 Similarly, research participants from Colombia have shared that ICTs were an important tool in documenting police brutality and attacks on women activists during the recent wave of protests. The documentation will enable activists to pursue accountability for the attacks, in contrast to the 1978 National Strike, during which abuses of powers and police brutality against the protesters went unpunished.

Outside of a protest context, the Center for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD) in Syria shared that the organization conducted online interviews with detainees to document human rights violations. Based on this documentation, CCSD is currently providing legal and psychosocial support online to those who need it. Some government security forces have also increased the use of ICTs to facilitate reporting of violations of women's rights. For example, in Georgia and the Philippines, the police have begun to use ICTs to enable easier reporting of domestic violence. Reports can now be submitted easily and directly through online messenger or text messages.

Even when there are no official channels available to women peacebuilders to report the violations they document, social media can be used to raise awareness

21 For more information, please see: https://www.ushahidi.com/features

about violations of women's rights. For example, women in the Philippines posted online about the harassment and abuse that they experienced during the siege of Marawi in 2017.

Documentation of abuses and violations is not only necessary to provide appropriate responses. In conflict-affected countries, it can also become a foundation for future reconciliation and transitional justice processes. When using ICTs for this purpose, women peacebuilders most often rely on a combination of digital ICTs (emails, online messengers, and social media) and non-digital ones (mobile phones and SMS). This guarantees a broader reach and greater inclusivity of the documentation processes.

STRENGTHENING PEACEBUILDING PROGRAMMING

Organizational strengthening

Women peacebuilders have also been able to leverage technologies to support their day-to-day work, as well as to manage and strengthen their organizational capacities. The survival and strengthening of women-led peacebuilding organizations are critical to the implementation of all pillars of the WPS agenda.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, ICTs have become an important tool for women-led peacebuilding organizations. For example, participants from Georgia and the Philippines shared that access to ICTs enabled them to continue their work during COVID-19 lockdowns by facilitating internal communications and allowing staff to work from home. Women peacebuilders transferred the experience of remote working and collaboration during COVID-19 to address other barriers they face. For example, some women were able to increase the use of ICTs to help them continue their peacebuilding work at times, when they face increased care work burdens – for example, after giving birth.

"When my baby was only two months old, I was able to continue my work thanks to ICTs. I could not imagine having to attend work physically due to childcare responsibilities. Thanks to remote work, I was able to continue my peacebuilding work online and interact with women from different parts of the world."

– Woman peace activist from South Sudan

Participants from the Philippines also used ICTs – including mobile phones – to collect monitoring and evaluation data from different areas to ensure they remained on track during the pandemic.

Crucially, research participants highlighted the importance of ICTs in raising funds for women's peacebuilding work. While absent from most discussions of how ICTs can facilitate more inclusive peace processes, this element is a critical prerequisite of women's meaningful participation. Women's peacebuilding work is severely underfunded. The percentage of bilateral aid targeting fragile countries that goes directly to women's organizations has stagnated at 0.2 per cent for the past decade.[22] Being able to access fundraising opportunities is necessary for women to be able to continue their peacebuilding work and to access and influence peace negotiations and other peace processes. Research participants shared a few ways in which ICTs can help women peacebuilders access funds. Firstly, they facilitate access to information about funding opportunities – for example, through newsletters. Secondly, research participants from Colombia and the Philippines shared that they were able to use crowdfunding to support their peacebuilding work and projects. Thirdly, the increased visibility of women peacebuilders' work through the use of ICTs can also attract new funding. A participant from Cameroon shared that she was able to expand her donor base thanks to the increased visibility of her work online.

22 Jen Ross, "Chronically underfunded, women peacebuilders need support more than ever", UN Women, 29 October 2020, https://data.unwomen.org/features/chronically-underfunded-women-peace-builders-need-support-more-ever

The increasing reliance on the Internet to apply for funding opportunities means that access to the Internet and the ability to navigate online platforms is a matter of survival for grassroots organizations. This underscores the importance of addressing the persistent access barriers discussed in the next chapter.

Delivering programs and services

In addition to engaging with peace negotiations and peace processes, women peacebuilders have used ICTs to deliver programs and services that bridge the gender gap in access to information and financial inclusion, and address root causes of conflict.

For example, in Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Colombia, the Philippines and Venezuela, women peacebuilders have provided educational opportunities and educational materials for other women online to improve their access to knowledge and information. In the Philippines, the Alternative Learning Systems (ALS) have been used in particular to provide educational opportunities to women and men who are former combatants to support their demobilization. This is critical, because lack of such opportunities can often be a root of dissention and return to violence. ICT platforms with a wide reach – in particular Facebook and Whatsapp – are also used to disseminate educational materials on different issues, as well as reliable information, for example, about COVID-19. As one participant from Colombia noted, thanks to these technologies, "women can have more information and knowledge to make autonomous decisions rather than depend on others."

Research participants from Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Philippines, and Uganda also highlighted the use of ICTs to promote women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment. For example, in Colombia, rural women have used online platforms to sell their produce. Similarly, internally displaced women in the Philippines have used the Internet to reach more consumers and share their handicrafts. In DRC, members of GNWP's Young Women Leaders for Peace program have participated in online entrepreneurship training, acquiring the skills to start their own small businesses and use the Internet for marketing and selling their products.

Finally, women in Colombia, Georgia, Syria, and Uganda have used online spaces to provide psychosocial aid and legal services, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ICTs and peace processes: the case studies of Colombia and the Philippines

The opportunities and challenges created for women peacebuilders by the advancement of ICTs take on additional significance in the context of official peace negotiations.

On the one hand, the challenges discussed below – such as the lack of secure and private access to the Internet and the difficulty of building relationships online – are amplified when it comes to peace negotiations. Due to their sensitive and confidential nature, peace processes have been predominantly conducted offline. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many events were forcibly moved online, the mediation communityremained

"ICTs cannot be seen as a replacement for human interaction in particular when it comes to peacebuilding work, consultations, or advocacy."

– Woman peacebuilder from Colombia

reluctant to make this change[23]. As discussed in more detail below, the lack of direct contact between the stakeholders when using ICTs makes it more difficult to develop trust – a crucial component of peace processes.

Yet, despite challenges, mediators increasingly turn to digital tools during peace processes, often using them in parallel with offline tools.[24]

The use of ICTs has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of travel limitations, lockdowns and other restrictions, negotiators and mediators have used ICTs to remain in touch and to communicate the latest developments between the conflict parties and to the public.

ICTs are considered useful tools to make peace processes more inclusive. Nevertheless, to date, they have rarely been used in such a way.[25] Historically, peace negotiations have been heavily dominated by men: between 1992 and 2018, women constituted only 13 per cent of negotiators, 3 per cent of mediators, and 4 per cent of signatories in major peace processes.[26] During the peace talks between the Government of Colombia and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), only 3 out of 17 negotiators were women.[27]

Despite the multi-layered challenges they face, women peacebuilders have been successful in leveraging technologies to amplify their messages and influence peace processes. Thus, ICTs have the potential to become a tool to increase women's meaningful participation in peace processes and – consequently – make them more effective.

ICTs have the potential to increase women's meaningful participation throughout all stages of a peace process: from negotiations to signing and adopting the peace agreement to its implementation. This chapter analyzes how women peacebuilders, negotiators, and mediators in peace processes in Colombia and the Philippines have used ICTs. It builds on the above analysis to highlight the specific opportunities and challenges that ICTs create in the context of peace negotiations.

While geographically and culturally diverse, Colombia and the Philippines share many similarities when it comes to the dynamics of conflict and the peace processes in both countries. Importantly, both countries have been praised for the inclusion of strong gender provisions in the peace agreements between the FARC and the Colombian Government (2016), and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine Government (2014), respectively.[28] The critical contribution of women

23 Andreas Hirblinger, "Peaceworks: Digital Inclusion in Mediated Peace Processes. How Technology Can Enhance Participation", United States Institute of Peace, September 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/20200929-pw_168-digital_inclusion_in_mediated_peace_processes_how_technology_can_enhance_participation-pw.pdf.

24 Andreas Hirblinger, "Peaceworks: Digital Inclusion in Mediated Peace Processes. How Technology Can Enhance Participation", United States Institute of Peace, September 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/20200929-pw_168-digital_inclusion_in_mediated_peace_processes_how_technology_can_enhance_participation-pw.pdf.

25 Andreas Hirblinger, "Peaceworks: Digital Inclusion in Mediated Peace Processes. How Technology Can Enhance Participation", United States Institute of Peace, September 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/20200929-pw_168-digital_inclusion_in_mediated_peace_processes_how_technology_can_enhance_participation-pw.pdf.

26 Women's Participation in Peace Processes", Council on Foreign Relations, 2020, https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/

27 José Alvarado Cóbar, Emma Bjertén-Günther, and Yeonju Jung, "Assessing Gender Perspective in Peace Processes with Application to the Cases of Colombia and Mindanao", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, November 2018. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/sipriinsight1806.pdf

28 José Alvarado Cóbar, Emma Bjertén-Günther, and Yeonju Jung, "Assessing Gender Perspective in Peace Processes with Application to the Cases of Colombia and Mindanao", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, November 2018. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/sipriinsight1806.pdf

peacebuilders to the peace negotiations in both countries has been widely discussed and analyzed,[29] but the role of ICTs in facilitating or hindering women's participation has not been studied sufficiently. Drawing on country-specific case studies, this chapter provides concrete examples of how ICTs can support women's safe and meaningful participation in peace negotiations and the implementation of peace agreements.

Prior to peace negotiations: Using radio to spread messages of peace in Colombia and the Philippines

In both Colombia and the Philippines, women used ICTs prior to the start of the peace negotiations between the government and MILF, to foster a culture of peace and tolerance.[30] Different organizations, including those led by women and indigenous peoples, used radio, mailing lists, and websites to disseminate peaceful messages across communities.

In both countries, the practice of using community radios in conflict-affected communities dates back decades, to the beginnings of the conflict. Radios are relatively cheap and accessible even in rural areas with no internet or phone connection.

In Colombia, there are currently about 450 recognized community radios across the country, many of them launched by women's organizations.[31] During the peace negotiation between the government and the FARC, women have used these traditional platforms in conjunction with social media to disseminate messages of peace and build broad-based support for a peaceful dialogue.

In the Philippines, the first community radios were already established in the 1990s. Today, women peacebuilders combine traditional radio broadcasts with messaging on online platforms and through cellphones.[32] Prior to the peace process, women and youth in the Philippines used these communication channels to advocate for an end to violence and promote the values of peace and non-violent conflict resolution. For example, the youth-led United Voices for Peace Network (UVPN) used radio shows combined with offline communications means such as pamphlets and printed materials to call for the end to violence.

> "In every society, rules of behavior are established for different occasions, and we must establish rules of behavior when using ICTs."
>
> – Woman peacebuilder from Colombia

Intersectional Gap in Peace Processes

Women in Colombia [and the Philippines] stated that women's intersecting identities amplify the gender digital divide, as they experience multiple forms of inequality and discrimination. The gender digital gap is compounded by generational, economic, location/territory, and knowledge gaps. This challenge takes on additional significance in the context of peace negotiations.

29 See Virginnia Bouvier, "Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia's Peace Process", UN Women Background Paper, 2016. https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/2/gender-and-the-role-of-women-in-colombias-peace-process; or Makiko Kubota and Nami Takashi, "Women's Participation and Leadership in Peacebuilding. Case Study on Mindanao, The Philippines" Japan International Cooperation Agency and Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2016. https://www.jica.go.jp/jica-ri/publication/booksandreports/l75nbg00000697z9-att/JICA_MindanaoLO.pdf

30 Olga Paz Martinez, "The role of ICTs in the Colombian peace process", GISWatch, 2016. https://giswatch.org/en/country-report/economic-social-and-cultural-rights-escrs/colombia

31 "Colombia's rural radio stations are a key to peace", Vision of Humanity, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/colombias-rural-radio-stations-key-peace/

32 Ian Pringle, "Community Radio Broadcasters Gathered in the Philippines", UNESCO.int, 24 January 2005. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/member-states/single-view/news/community_radio_broadcasters_gathered_in_the_philippines/

Mediators increasingly use online platforms in an attempt to bring diverse voices into the negotiation – for example, in the recent Libyan Political Dialogue. However, women at the intersection of various kinds of discrimination – for example, rural, indigenous, illiterate, or elderly women – remain excluded from these consultations, because they lack access to ICTs. Therefore, combining digital platforms with traditional media – as women peacebuilders do in Colombia and the Philippines – is a useful strategy to ensure broader reach and inclusion.

During a peace negotiation: Dedicated platform for broad-based inclusion in Colombia and beyond

In both Colombia and the Philippines, the sensitive nature of the negotiations and the poor infrastructure and connectivity limited the use of ICTs for the effective inclusion of women in the peace negotiations. Nevertheless, research participants from Colombia and the Philippines shared that mediators did use ICTs – including phones, online messengers, and emails – throughout the negotiations, to communicate with conflict parties as well as with other relevant stakeholders, such as women peacebuilders.

In Colombia, mediators used various platforms and tools, including Moodle, to connect women to the peace process and inform them of the progress. Due to women's limited access to computers, simpler solutions such as WhatsApp groups proved to be most effective. Women created WhatsApp groups with diverse stakeholders to support coalition-building, information sharing, and warning about immediate threats. Women also shared documents online to quickly disseminate letters and calls to be signed by activists and civil society representatives.

The use of ICTs to share reliable information about the Colombian peace process was particularly important, as the mainstream media did not cover the official negotiation that took place in Havana. The government's website on the peace talks was not updated frequently enough and thus did not fully realize its potential.[33] The information vacuum was consequently filled with manipulated news that hindered the public's understanding of events. Due to the limitations of the mainstream media, women relied on social media (mainly Facebook and Twitter) to keep themselves informed. However, the information shared on social media was not always reliable. According to one female interviewee from Colombia, political parties opposing the peace agreement spread misinformation targeting specific groups with the aim to further divide them. Moreover, many women did not voice their positions on social media due to security concerns. A Colombian woman peacebuilder interviewed stated that women were afraid to be exposed online and receive death threats. This meant that women's perspectives on the peace process were largely absent from these platforms. When the government did release more information, women used WhatsApp to share updates and infographics explaining the process and progress of negotiations.

33 "Digital Technologies and Mediation in Armed Conflict", United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, March 2019, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/DigitalToolkitReport.pdf

To go beyond information-sharing, government negotiators created a dedicated website with an application, Mesa de conversaciones, to allow the public to submit their priorities for the peace process. While the website theoretically opened up the peace process to a wide variety of actors, the concern of **meaningful** participation remained. In total, the public made 17,000 submissions; however, many of the submissions were spam and fake messages.[34] There was also no clarity on how the messages would be transmitted to the negotiators, and no transparency on if and how they were ultimately included in the peace agreement. Finally, as stated earlier in this report, none of the research participants from Colombia mentioned the Mesa de conversaciones platform during their interviews. This suggests that better outreach and dissemination could be done, targeting women peacebuilders in particular.

Despite these challenges, the use of open online platforms to allow broad-based participation in peace negotiations is an increasingly popular strategy. Similar initiatives were seen in Libya,[35] where a website also collects information via online surveys, and in the Donbas region in Ukraine. In Ukraine, the online tool was combined with offline inclusive community meetings on the topics selected through online participation.[36] The tool is primarily used to facilitate the communication between people from separatist and government-controlled areas. Similarly, GNWP's partner, IDP Women Association Consent in Georgia, has used Zoom to inform women from conflict-affected areas about the progress of the peace process and to allow them to make concrete recommendations to the peace negotiators during the Covid-19 pandemic. The examples of Georgia and Ukraine suggest that ICTs' potential to decentralize communication and enhance the inclusivity of peace processes is maximized when online platforms are complemented with direct, targeted engagements – both online and offline.

However, women's inclusion through online and/or offline consultations is not sufficient to ensure meaningful participation. More analysis is needed to understand how ICTs can support – or hinder – women's direct participation as part of negotiating teams. Our research suggests that currently, the digitalization of peace processes can have negative impacts on women's meaningful participation. GNWP's research has shown that the shift to the digital spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic was "weaponized by some actors, who have used it to question women's competency and capability to take part in policy-making discussions."[37] Questioning women's competencies has often been a strategy used to exclude them from peace negotiations. There is a risk that increased reliance on ICTs in peace processes will provide another opportunity to fuel exclusion unless they are designed in an inclusive manner. As Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, the chief negotiator in the peace process between MILF and the Philippine government noted, moving peace negotiations online

34 Andreas T. Hirblinger, "Digital Inclusion in Peacemaking: A Strategic Perspective", The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding, 2020, https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/sites/internet/files/2020-07/Digital%20Inclusion%20in%20Peacemaking%20A%20Strategic%20Perspective_Andreas%20Hirblinger.pdf

35 See https://alhiwar.ly/

36 "Digital Technologies and Mediation in Armed Conflict", United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, March 2019, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/DigitalToolkitReport.pdf

37 Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and New York University School of Professional Studies, "The Pandemic Will Not Stop Us: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Peace Activism in Colombia, the Philippines, South Sudan and Ukraine," March 2021, https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/NYU-Research-Policy-Brief_March-2021.pdf.

can also have an exclusionary effect. With online meetings, the possibility of being "around the room" and influence the discussion for those not invited to sit at the table is much more limited.

A key barrier to women's participation in peace processes using ICTs is their security. Research participants indicated that women who are part of official processes often lack knowledge about encrypted platforms and safe technological solutions. Consequently, they are targeted, harassed, and threatened in online spaces. For example, as chief negotiator, Miriam Coronel-Ferrer experienced online abuse, including rape and death threats. Women peacebuilders and peace activists from the Philippines also received threats via text messages.

After a peace negotiation: Women using ICTs to advance the implementation of the peace agreement in the Philippines

Research participants from the Philippines noted that, despite the signing of the peace agreement between the government and the MILF in 2014, violence continues in the country. The fact that the government's response to dissent is heavily militarized and focuses on counter-insurgency rather than on peacebuilding further fuels violence. Even in this volatile context, women civil society continues to use ICTs to promote a culture of sharing, civilian engagement, and transparency. They also use ICTs to monitor the situation and inform community members about potential risks. Research participants highlighted that including peace education in formal educational institutions and making peace education resources available on the Internet can build a foundation for the implementation of the peace agreement.

In addition to building a culture of peace, women and youth peacebuilders are using ICTs to support the implementation of the peace agreement across the country. Ahead of the 2019 plebiscite for the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), which essentially turned the peace agreement into law, a group of young women trained by GNWP organized massive social media campaign to encourage young people to come out and vote. The campaign also highlighted the benefits of peace and explained the significance of the BOL to young people.

ICTs also have practical applications in the context of peace agreement implementation. For example, the Department of Social Welfare and Development in the Philippines uses digital IDs to identify ex-combatants as a part of the decommissioning and mainstreaming initiative for ex-combatants returning to society. Thanks to digitalization, the data is easier to store and access, which has increased the efficiency of the process. Moreover, as previously discussed, ICTs have also been useful in providing education opportunities to former combatants through online learning.

In addition, ICTs can be useful to ensure diverse participation during the transition from rebellion to peaceful governance. According to an interviewee from the Philippines, ICTs were used to engage diverse audiences during the post-conflict transition in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), created as a result of the peace agreement. For example, in the Cotabato province, women

used ICT platforms like Zoom and Facebook to ensure the participation of women, youth, and religious leaders in the drafting of the Moro Welfare and Development Code. This was important, since the Welfare and Development Codes are critical instruments of self-governance within the newly-autonomous BARMM region. Nevertheless, the attempts to use ICTs for greater inclusion in the transition process were rather irregular. As a result, research participants felt that the BARMM government did not use ICTs to their full potential, and that the people in the autonomous regions did not benefit from its use. More systematic approaches to support the integration of ICTs in the implementation of peace agreements are needed.

Red-tagging in the Philippines

Red-tagging is a process wherein pro-government forces single out certain individuals and accuse them of supporting the armed wing of the Communist party. The practice has been used to target human rights defenders, activists, and journalists who have been critical of the government. In the context of an already shrinking civic space, women peacebuilders fear being red-tagged because, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights warned, "red-tagging ha[s] proven extremely dangerous," particularly for human rights defenders and journalists.[38] For example, eight male and one female activist, previously red-tagged, were murdered in March 2021. This makes women peacebuilders wary of engaging in online spaces, and therefore limits the ICTs' potential to increase their participation in peace agreement implementation.

Women peacebuilders and mediators in both Colombia and the Philippines have demonstrated extraordinary efforts to adapt to technological advances and include them in their work. Combining the use of in-person meetings, social media campaigns, community radios, and WhatsApp messages has shown positive results for inclusion in both Colombia and the Philippines. Nevertheless, persistent structural barriers remain in place. Safety and confidentiality – the key aspects of a successful peace process – remain important challenges that hinder women's willingness to use ICTs.[39] Concerns about privacy and security as well as a lack of skills or confidence in online tools can result in women's self-exclusion or self-censorship in online spaces. Moreover, as discussed in more detail below, the lack of appropriate infrastructure, high costs, and patriarchal norms prevent many women from accessing the Internet.

Despite these challenges, with the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witnessing an exponential growth of the use of ICTs in peace processes. An increasing number of initiatives and platforms to support women's participation in peace processes online can be expected. Such processes

38 UN News, "Philippines: UN rights office appalled over simultaneous killings of 'red-tagged' activists", 9 March 2021, https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086782.

39 Andreas Hirblinger, "Peaceworks: Digital Inclusion in Mediated Peace Processes. How Technology Can Enhance Participation", United States Institute of Peace, September 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/20200929-pw_168-digital_inclusion_in_mediated_peace_processes_how_technology_can_enhance_participation-pw.pdf.

must be designed with the gender digital divide in mind and in consultation with women peacebuilders and peace activists. Additionally, online consultations must not be used to replace women's meaningful participation as part of negotiating teams. In order for a peace process to be truly inclusive, women must have a seat at the negotiating table and be fully included in all aspects and stages of a peace process, both online and offline.

Challenges and risks of ICTs to advance inclusive peacebuilding and women's human rights

Women face multiple barriers to effectively using ICTs, mirroring the patterns of exclusion and structural inequalities they encounter in their everyday lives. The barriers hinder both women's access to ICTs, as well as their ability to effectively use them to achieve their peacebuilding goals.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Globally, women are 13 per cent less likely than men to use the Internet and 20 per cent less likely to use mobile Internet. In low-income countries, women are 34 per cent less likely to have access to any form of Internet[40] The limited access of women to ICTs stems from financial, infrastructural, and cultural barriers.

Firstly, research participants emphasized that the **lack of basic ICT infrastructure**, especially in conflict-affected areas, is a major impediment to access. They referred to the lack of internet networks, mobile signals, as well as electricity cuts and shortages as factors that hinder their connectivity. This barrier is often more pronounced in conflict-affected and rural communities. For example, in the Philippines, 43 per cent of the national population has access to the Internet.[41] However, this number drops to 20 per cent in the conflict-affected Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao.[42] This is in line with the findings of our research, wherein participants from the Philippines identified the lack of technological infrastructure in conflict-affected parts of the country as a key challenge. One interviewee pointed out that this critical infrastructure – such as cell sites and internet towers – can be destroyed by conflict or disasters, further aggravating exclusion. For example, mobile signal towers in Marawi that were destroyed in 2017 have still not been rebuilt. Research participants from Colombia made similar observations, noting that internet connectivity in some rural areas is "non-existent at all" and that most rural women prefer to use traditional cellphones rather than smartphones since they have a better signal. This deepens the rural-urban divide when it comes to meaningful participation in peace processes and advocacy opportunities, as discussed above. Thus, building and maintaining the necessary infrastructure in rural and marginalized communities, including refugee camps and informal settlements, is key to supporting the meaningful inclusion of diverse women.

40 International Telecommunications Union, "The State of Broadband: Tackling digital inequalities. A decade for action", 2020, https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/opb/pol/S-POL-BROADBAND.21-2020-PDF-E.pdf

41 World Bank, "Individuals using the internet (% of population)", not dated, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?contextual=default

42 Asian Development Bank, "Satellite Internet Offers a Quick Solution to Bridge Connectivity Gap in Mindanao", 29 July 2021, https://seads.adb.org/news/satellite-internet-offers-quick-solution-bridge-connectivity-gap-mindanao#:~:text=According%20to%20the%202020%20statistics,Muslim%20Mindanao%20has%20internet%20access

Secondly, even where the needed technological infrastructure exists, ICTs may still be inaccessible to women due to **poverty and their lack of financial independence**, coupled with **prohibitive costs** of the Internet. In many conflict-affected countries, especially in Africa, the cost of access to ICTs is extremely high. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1GB of mobile data costs over 20 per cent of the average monthly national income.[43] Government policies often inflate costs and impose undue taxing of internet access. In Uganda, activists have criticized a government-imposed tax on social media.[44] Women peacebuilders have warned that inflating costs of internet connectivity has been an intimidation tactic to stifle free speech – this was the case, for example, in Uganda during the 2016 presidential elections. The high costs of the Internet are likely to affect women more since they often have limited control over financial resources, and their peacebuilding work is chronically underfunded[45] Research participants from Armenia, Colombia, Georgia, and Syria noted that women often do not own their own mobile phones or computers but have to use those of their husbands or children. This makes their access to the Internet more precarious and perpetuates the cycle of dependency. Moreover, even when women do have the resources to purchase equipment and data to use the Internet, they may lack the funds to do it safely. A research participant from Syria shared that it is too expensive for human rights defenders and local peacebuilding organizations to access security software to protect themselves and their work online. As a result, they are exposed to risks that threaten their security and the sustainability of their work. This was also validated by a research participant from Colombia who stated that sometimes women "know that there are some platforms safer than others, but that requires a specific payment, and most of the time they are not able to afford it."

"If we continue to allow digital spaces to be exclusionary and expensive, we will exclude a huge number of women from the conversation; this will only worsen gender inequality"

– Sally Mboumien, Cameroon

Thirdly, **high illiteracy rates and the lack of ICT training** among women and girls, especially in conflict-affected contexts, is a persistent barrier to women's access to digital spaces. Research participants from Armenia, Colombia, Georgia, Moldova, the Philippines, South Sudan, and Ukraine all highlighted that women often do not know how to use the Internet and online tools. Some research participants stressed that even when women do know how to access the Internet, they do not know how to use it safely, which leads to distrust and self-exclusion. As a research participant from Ukraine noted, "women are scared they would do something wrong" and therefore prefer not to engage online. For many women, the lack of basic literacy is also a barrier. Several research participants noted that women who do not know how to read and write are often excluded from online spaces. As outlined above, women peacebuilders have used innovative approaches – such as the use of voice messages – to overcome this barrier. Furthermore, women from ethnic minorities, who do not speak the majority language, are also often marginalized in online discussions. For example, a research participant from the Philippines noted that online events are not translated into minority languages and only take place in Filipino.

Finally, **patriarchal social norms** limit both women's access to ICTs, and their ability to utilize technology as an empowerment tool.[46] Across many developing and conflict-affected countries surveyed in this research, women and girls continue to have a secondary role in society as followers and supporters, and

43 Alliance for Affordable Internet, "Mobile Broadband Pricing. Data for 2020", https://a4ai.org/extra/baskets/A4AI/2020/mobile_broadband_pricing_gni

44 Alliance for Affordable Internet, "Mobile Broadband Pricing. Data for 2020", https://a4ai.org/extra/baskets/A4AI/2020/mobile_broadband_pricing_gni

"There is a need to improve women's digital security literacy by leveraging existing opportunities. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) is still a very male-dominated area of expertise. It is important to include more women in STEM trainings. This would amplify women's participation in the digital design cycle of ICT solutions"

– Imen Ghedhioui, Behavioral Insight Advisor, Behavioral Science Design Lab, Tunisia

their leadership is not recognized or supported. This belief applies not just in the home, where men are the authority figures, but also in public life, where men are leaders and decision-makers. These discriminatory assumptions and stereotypes result in men having greater access to technology. As noted above, women often do not own mobile phones or computers. Even if they could afford them, they often fear they might not be able to control them. A research participant from Cameroon shared: "When my organization offered to buy a phone for a rural woman who participated in one of our trainings, she refused, claiming her husband would take it from her anyway."

Furthermore, due to their roles as primary caretakers, women often do not have the space or the time to safely access ICTs. The disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and care labor leaves women little time to engage in online activism and consultations, which are often very time-consuming and operate outside of the regular working hours.[47] Moreover, several research participants noted that women did not have access to a safe space to join online discussions at home, especially if they live with large families or – worse – with an abusive partner. As a result, women would often "auto-censor" in virtual meetings and discussions, limiting their impact. Research participants have also shared that women can be shunned or punished by their families for engaging in online advocacy. As a participant from South Sudan noted, "If you're a married woman posting about peacebuilding, gender equality, and the failures of the government, you will be told that that it can create a bad reputation for your family and your husband's family." She recalled that her in-laws have asked her to stop posting on Facebook because they felt her online activity could be a risk to her husband.

Recognizing the role of patriarchal norms and structures in hindering women's access to ICTs, research participants have called for a gender-responsive design of online tools and spaces. For example, governments should consult with diverse women – including women peacebuilders – when drafting their national broadband plans and other relevant policies. ICT companies and software designers should include more women in their design processes – both through broad-based consultations and by proactively reaching out to and hiring women engineers.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE USE AND "MEANINGFUL" ACCESS

Critically, even when women have the connectivity, resources, skills, time, and space to access ICTs, they face further barriers to effectively using them to achieve their peacebuilding goals. These barriers are important because they bar women's meaningful inclusion and participation through the online spaces.

Firstly, women face **multiple forms of targeted, gender-based violence** when using online platforms. Nearly all of the women interviewed have shared they or their colleagues experienced violence and threats online. These range from "trolling" – receiving comments and messages with abusive language and content – to death threats directed at the women or their families. Participants from Armenia, Colombia, Georgia, Northern Ireland, and South Sudan noted that online spaces favor a radicalization of discourse and language. People are bolder online, and it is easier to perpetuate hateful language and narrative behind the veneer of anonymity. This amplifies hate speech and abuse experienced by women. A participant from Cameroon shared that "online

47 Jorge Moreira da Silva, "Why you should care about unpaid care work", Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 18 March 2019, https://oecd-development-matters.org/2019/03/18/why-you-should-care-about-unpaid-care-work/

spaces are toxic," adding that women are "scared for [their] security in such negative spaces." Moreover, women activists and peacebuilders are often subject to targeted threats and abuse. One participant shared an instance of a woman peacebuilder who was attacked on social media for her work to build bridges between conflicting communities. Fake news and false information about her personal life were shared, and pictures of her children were posted online, using patriarchal tropes to question her qualities as a mother, thus undermining her credibility. Other women peacebuilders responded with a deluge of positive posts highlighting her accomplishments, in a targeted activism effort to counter the hateful narratives. However, such self-protection mechanisms and initiatives are not sufficient to ensure women's safety online.

Multiple research participants have pointed out that there are **no adequate reporting and accountability mechanisms** for violence against women online. Interviewees from Colombia noted that while the government provides protection to women activists who face physical threats (through the National Protection Unit), similar measures are not extended to those facing digital threats. Similarly, participants from Armenia and Ukraine noted that there are insufficient legal frameworks for the protection of women online. In Armenia, a law against the spread of hate speech and misinformation online was adopted, but there is no clarity on the implementation and channels to report perpetrators. Furthermore, research participants have shared that their complaints of sexist abuse have been ignored by social media platforms, such as Facebook. This is in line with the findings of the report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women on online abuse. The report called to "apply a gender perspective to all online forms of violence, which are usually criminalized in a gender-neutral manner."[48]

Secondly, women fear **surveillance and retaliation for their peacebuilding work** from their own governments. Multiple interviewees noted that the shift of advocacy to online spaces has created new avenues for government interference – for example, by cutting off electricity or Internet during important moments, such as around protests or elections. Interviewed women also noted that women peacebuilders are often censored, and their accounts may be blocked if they are too critical of the government. Some interviewees also expressed concern that online surveillance may translate into physical harm. They cited examples of activists whose profiles were surveilled by the government, which resulted in warnings, threats, or being placed on government blacklists (for example, in the case of the "red-tagging" practice in the Philippines).

The above examples demonstrate that a **stronger legal and regulatory framework** is needed to enable women's full and meaningful participation online. Such a framework should provide clear reporting and accountability measures for perpetrators of gender-based violence online. Moreover, it should curb governments' surveillance powers and increase the transparency of their use of online tools. Some research participants suggested the adoption of global or regional policy frameworks, building on existing documents (such as the Maputo Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa). Such transnational tools could become a foundation for stronger national legislation.

Finally, many of the research participants felt that the **digital spaces and forums are not adequate** to carry out peacebuilding work. They acknowledged that

48 Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, "38th session of the Human Rights Council, Statement by Ms. Ms. Dubravka Šimonović, Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences", 21 June 2018. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23235&LangID=E

transitioning some components of social justice advocacy and peacebuilding to virtual spaces can have benefits in terms of inclusion and access. However, they pointed out that there are elements of in-person interactions and human connection that are lost in virtual forms of communication. Participants from Colombia noted that the shift to virtual spaces has led to a loss of the personal connection needed to build trust and peaceful dialogue. This, in turn led to a reluctance of many women peacebuilders to move their work online. Similarly, women from Georgia, Moldova, and Northern Ireland highlighted that some sensitive topics related to conflict and reconciliation cannot be easily discussed online. They emphasized the shorter duration of online meetings (due to a "Zoom fatigue") and the less direct contact as key reasons for that. A participant from Armenia also noted that the radicalization of discourse online makes it more difficult to discuss sensitive issues in a constructive manner.

Women have also highlighted that the impact of their advocacy is often more limited online. Some patterns of exclusion present in offline peace processes and negotiations are translated into virtual space, leaving women on the margins. For example, in peace processes, women are primarily given the passive role of observers, with active roles reserved for combatants and key political actors. However, offline spaces offer women an opportunity to influence the official parties outside of the room. This possibility is reduced, if not eliminated when peace processes are digitalized. A participant from Georgia stated that it is easier for authorities to ignore women during online meetings. Similarly, a research participant from Ukraine shared that during online meetings, "high-level [government] representatives have the power to include you when they want, but they can switch you off anytime," – something that is not possible in offline spaces.

Finally, perhaps the most significant challenge to peacebuilding work in digital spaces is the **invisibilization of those who are not online.** As discussed above, some groups – such as indigenous women, women living in rural communities, women with disabilities, or refugee women – are excluded from online spaces due to access barriers such as the lack of infrastructure, poverty, the lack of language and digital skills, and illiteracy. Shifting peace processes and peacebuilding work online creates a risk that they will be forgotten and even further marginalized. Katherine Ronderos, a Colombian woman activist and researcher, noted that due to the shift towards digital spaces as a result of COVID-19, "if women peacebuilders are not connected through ICTs, it means they don't exist." On the one hand, the increasing necessity of using ICTs and digital tools in peacebuilding renders the efforts to ensure universal and gender-equal access all the more urgent. On the other hand, it is critical to ensure that the increased reliance on ICTs does not lead to a devaluing of offline spaces and of those who exist and work in them.

While ICTs provide many benefits (along with notable harms) for peacebuilders and advocates, they cannot fully replace offline interactions, particularly in the context of peacebuilding. In this context, the research participants highlighted the importance of "hybrid" solutions and of digital intermediaries or enablers, who can combine and connect online and offline spaces by working closely with digitally disadvantaged communities and increasing digital literacy for advocates and peacebuilders. Participants further noted that in assessing the usefulness of ICTs as a tool to advance inclusive peace, their potential effects in the specific local context should be considered and analyzed.

International legal and normative framework of ICTs in peace and security

In response to the new threats and opportunities created by advances in ICT, legal and normative frameworks have emerged.

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) has been active in trying to clarify the application of international legal frameworks to cyberspace. In 2004, it created the UN Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security (UN GGE). During its third meeting in 2013, the UN GGE agreed that international law – including the human rights framework – is applicable to State behavior in cyberspace. In 2018, the UNGA also created an Open-Ended Working Group on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security (OEWG). In 2021, both the UN GGE (76/135 (2021), and the OEWG (A/AC.290/2021/CRP.2) issued reports that explicitly recognized the importance of narrowing the gender "digital divide" and ensuring gender non-discrimination in cyberspace. However, while the UN GGE published four consensus reports in 2010, 2013, 2015 and 2021, only the last one made any mention of gender in relation to responsible State behavior in cyberspace.

In addition, the UNGA has adopted a number of resolutions on the Impact of technologies on sustainable development (70/184 (2015), 73/218 (2019)), the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets (73/17 (2018)), and on the right to privacy (68/167 (2013), 69/166 (2015), 71/199 (2016) and 73/179 (2018)). While the early UNGA resolutions on technology are gender-blind and do not mention women, the resolutions adopted after 2016 recognize the importance of technology in advancing gender equality, and its potential adverse Impact on women. Resolution 73/218, in particular, takes note of the gender digital divide as a critical barrier to the effective use of ICTs to advance sustainable development.

Similarly, the Human Rights Council (HRC) has adopted a number of resolutions on the Impact of technologies on human rights.[49] More recent resolutions incorporate a strong gender lens, recognizing the risks of gender-based violence and abuses of women's rights online, and calling on States to address the gender digital divide. For example, resolution 32/12 stresses the importance of enhancing women's "access to information and communications technology, promoting digital literacy and the participation of women and girls in education and training on information and communications technology, and encouraging women and girls to embark on careers in the sciences and information and communications technology."

The UN Security Council has been slower to embrace the gendered aspects of ICTs in its work. Recognizing the importance of ICTs to international peace and security, the UN Security Council held Arria Formula meetings on "Cybersecurity and International Peace and Security" in November 2016, March 2017, and in August 2020. It also held its first official UN Security Council open debate on maintaining international peace and security in cyberspace in June 2021, hosted

49 These include: HRC resolutions 28/16 (2015), and 34/7 (2017) and 37/2 (2018) on the right to privacy in the digital age, resolution 38/7 on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet (2018), resolutions 20/8 (2012), 26/13 (2014), and 32/13 (2016) on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet, and resolution 12/16 on freedom of opinion and expression (2009).

y Estonia.[50] Once again, discussions of ICTs in this context were not commonly gender-responsive, with discussions largely lacking a gender lens. Similarly, considerations of the intersection between digitalization, gender, and security are absent from UNSC documents. UNSC Resolution 2331 (2016) on human trafficking notes the potential of the misuse of ICTs to facilitate the trafficking of persons,[51] but lacks a gender-responsive analysis of this phenomenon. The 10 UNSC resolutions on WPS do not make direct reference to ICTs or emerging technologies. However, the 2019 and 2020 UN Secretary-General reports to the UNSC on WPS,[52] and the 2021 UN Secretary-General report to the UNSC on Conflict-related sexual violence (2021)[53] discuss the gendered digital divide in conflict-affected settings. All three reports emphasize the importance of ICTs as a tool to improve meaningful participation of women in peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. Importantly, the reports also recognize the challenges and limitations of the use of ICTs in the context of WPS. The 2020 report emphasizes that, despite the potential benefits of ICTs, digital consultations cannot serve as a replacement for direct participation. It calls for "targeted efforts to address gender gaps and other gaps in access to power, as well as access to digital technology."[54] The 2021 report makes explicit reference to barriers women peacebuilders face in accessing ICTs.

Other UN actors have also produced outputs that recognize and capture the gendered impacts of the use of ICTs. The Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women produced a dedicated report on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective (2018).[55] Furthermore, the Special Rapporteur's reports on Violence against women, its causes and consequences (2019, 2020),[56] on Childbirth and obstetric violence (2019),[57] and on Combatting violence against women journalists (2020)[58] make references to ICTs. In addition, the report of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the Impact of new technologies on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of assemblies, including peaceful protests (2020) discusses online and offline harms posed to women by emerging technologies, with explicit reference to women human rights defenders.[59] OHCHR also includes references to gender and online violence against women and LGBTI persons in its Scoping Paper for its "B-Tech" project, which endeavors to apply the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) to the technology space.

Despite the emergence of some references to gender in legal and human rights framework related to ICTs, a substantial portion of discussions on ICTs are gender-blind. The Secretary-General Strategy on New Technologies makes only one reference to women and is largely not gender-responsive.[60] The OHCHR report on The right to privacy in the digital age (2018) also does not consider gender in its discussion of ICTs.[61]

50 An unofficial account of discussions can be found online here: https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14563.doc.htm
51 S/RES/2331, https://undocs.org/S/RES/2331(2016).
52 S/2020/946, https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/946; S/2019/800, https://undocs.org/en/S/2019/800.
53 S/2021/312, https://undocs.org/S/2021/312.
54 S/2020/946. https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/946.
55 A/HRC/38/47, https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/38/47.
56 A/HRC/41/42, https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/42; A/75/144, https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/144.
57 A/74/137, https://undocs.org/A/74/137.
58 A/HRC/44/52, https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/44/52.
59 A/HRC/44/2, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3876054?ln=fr.
60 UN Secretary General's Strategy on New Technologies (United Nations publication, 2018).
61 A/HRC/39/29, https://undocs.org/A/HRC/39/29.

At the national level, both the State Party reports to the Committee on the Elimination on Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Committee's Concluding Observations increasingly consider the Impact of ICTs on women's rights and discrimination. Of 949 CEDAW country reports and concluding observations submitted between 1982 and 2021, 381 make some reference to ICTs. The database of Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of human rights includes over 270 recommendations referencing ICTs, of which less than 10 are gender-responsive.62 Moreover, 28 of 89 National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS that were in force as of July 2020 make reference to ICTs.

Across these documents, when gender-responsive provisions are included, they are largely focused on emerging vulnerabilities and risks posed to women and girls. Common themes include new and increasing forms of direct and indirect violence against women in the digital space and facilitated by ICTs, online sexual exploitation of women and children, as well as digital barriers to education, services, and justice in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. References to barriers to access and use are not consistently addressed, although more recent documents do consider the "digital divide" as well as the lack of adequate infrastructure, particularly in rural or remote areas. Examples of positive and productive uses of ICTs by women are far less common. The NAPs on WPS are a notable exception, exploring the use of ICTs as a tool for data collection and reporting, for economic empowerment, as well as the broader promotion of WPS agendas. Some CEDAW committee reports do also reference the increased presence of women in the ICT sector and tech-focused higher education, as well as positive uses of ICTs by women in advocacy, outreach, and economic empowerment. However, overall, it is key to note that within relevant normative and legal bodies, considerations of gender as related to ICTs lack both consistency and depth.

Discussions, laws and policies on ICTs provide unique opportunities to bridge the gender digital gap, promote women's rights, and build more inclusive and lasting peace. Policy-makers must ensure that a gender lens is strongly integrated into all discussions, laws, and policies related to ICTs, in particular those that pertain to its relationship to peacebuilding. This requires including diverse women in discussions about the impact of ICTs on peace and security.

62 UPR Info, UPR Database. Available at https://upr-info-database.uwazi.io/en/ (accessed on 3 September 2021).

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research, GNWP and ICT4Peace propose the following recommendations:

Significantly increase investment in universal and affordable access to the Internet, in line with target 9.C of the Sustainable Development Goals, and take proactive measures to guarantee internet access for women and girls, in particular women and girls refugees, internally displaced persons, and those living in conflict-affected and rural areas.

1. **Member States** should ensure affordable rates for Internet and mobile use by (1) negotiating favorable rates with mobile operators and ICT companies; (2) removing high taxes imposed on internet accessibility; and (3) ensure access to the Internet for the most excluded and vulnerable groups, including those affected by conflicts, as well as refugees and internally displaced persons, for example by subsidizing internet fees.
2. **Member States** should include ICT financing for women peacebuilders and activists in their budgets and policies.
3. **Member States** should also address underlying gender norms that prevent women's meaningful access and use of the ICTs, such as the unequal burden of unpaid care work and exclusion of young women from education. This should be done through adoption and implementation of gender-responsive legal and policy frameworks.
4. **Member States, ICT companies and donors** should pro-actively reach out to and work with local leaders, indigenous communities, grassroots women and youth peacebuilders, and other groups that have been marginalized or excluded from access to the Internet to identify and implement the appropriate solution for their inclusion.
5. **ICT companies** should provide free phone and internet access for women peacebuilders, mediators, advocates, and people affected by conflicts, recognizing their critical roles in society.
6. **ICT companies** should make access to knowledge-sharing platforms and software free of charge for civil society organizations and activists.
7. **Civil society** should continue and expand their advocacy for the provision of accessible internet, and innovative initiatives to provide internet access to diverse women, such as running women-only internet cafés, to give equal opportunities to those without mobile phones.
8. **Donors, including the UN, Member States, regional organizations, and international NGOs,** should increase their investment in the use of ICTs in humanitarian and peace processes – including by providing dedicated budget lines for purchase of necessary equipment, phone and mobile credit, the establishment of safe spaces for internet use, such as internet cafés dedicated for women, etc.

Promote and facilitate inclusive design and development of ICT products and services, including by encouraging and supporting diverse women and girls to pursue careers in the ICT sector and by conducting consultations with diverse groups of end-users of ICT products, including women and girls living in conflict-affected communities.

1. **ICT companies** should implement proactive measures to attract and employ more diverse women and ensure their inclusion in the design, creation and testing of products and tools. They should also collect gender-disaggregated data about the use of their products, their accessibility, and risks they may create.
2. **Universities and educational institutions** should implement proactive measures to promote the recruitment of women in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics departments, and provide female students with support to enter the ICT industry, to ensure new technologies can be created equitably and with women in mind.
3. **Civil society** working on ICTs should cultivate solidarity, cooperation, and exchange of experiences among themselves, as well as with women-led peacebuilding organizations. For example, they should create digital hubs to share information, and make resources on issues related to cyber-security and effective use of ICTs available in diverse local languages.
4. **Donors, including the UN, Member States and international NGOs** should support civil society to create their own ICT platforms and products, including safe spaces for dialogue and data collection platforms.

Strengthen the protection of women's rights in the under-regulated online space, by adopting concrete laws, policies and protocols to ensure their safety, in line with existing legal frameworks to protect women's and girls' rights.

1. **Member States, international and regional organizations** should review and update existing laws and commitments related to the international and regional frameworks on women's rights to make sure they adequately address the new forms of threats and violence faced by women online. This includes commitments made under: the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, National Action Plans on WPS, and Maputo Protocol, among others. The review should be conducted in consultation with civil society, including diverse women and youth organizations.
2. **Member States, international and regional organizations** should – based on the above-mentioned review – adopt new protocols, policies or strategies to explicitly address online hate speech, harassment, and abuse, especially against women activists and peacebuilders.
3. **Member States** should ensure transparency in their negotiations and contracts with technology companies, and ensure that these are in the interest of the population, and do not leave space for discrimination or abuse against the most vulnerable, including conflict-affected women and communities.

4. **Member States** should ensure that digital security laws are not used to criminalize opposition, censor critical voices, or foster a culture of censorship. They should also introduce clear transparency and accountability laws to reduce the government powers of surveillance, especially of civil society.
5. **Member States, international and regional organizations** should show support for women who face major repercussions for active participation using ICTs, by publicly condemning instances of attacks and hate speech against women activists online.
6. **Member States, international and regional organizations** should join civil society in putting pressure on ICT and social media companies to adopt more robust policies to prevent the spread of hateful narratives and misinformation, which incite and promote violence. This also includes reforms to user engagement and algorithmic recommendation engines that currently facilitate connections between extremist users.
7. **ICT companies and social media platforms** should increase content regulation and review their policies to ensure strict zero-tolerance for hate speech, abuse, and incitement to violence, including sexual and gender-based violence.
8. **ICT companies and social media platforms** should conduct gender-responsive training on preventing online abuse, including sexual and gender-based abuse and harassment, for their staff. The training should be mandatory for staff and management at all levels.
9. **ICT companies and social media platforms** should work with governments, the UN and civil society to create safe and effective mechanisms for reporting online risks and threats, and ensuring accountability of the perpetrators.
10. **ICT companies and social media platforms and Member States** should collaborate through formal private-public partnerships, to create guidelines for safe ICT use that are region- and context-specific, and have a particular focus on women's safety online.
11. **Women's organizations, journalists, women activists, and civil society** should continue and amplify their efforts to build an international solidarity movement to highlight and demand accountability for hate speech and violence and harassment against women online.
12. **Women's organizations, journalists, women activists, and civil society** should form pressure groups and advocate on the issue of respecting women's rights online and introducing stronger restrictions and content control to prevent hate speech and abuse.
13. **Civil society** should continue their efforts to educate women about their rights online and the right to access to the Internet. Civil society should also continue to provide free legal assistance to women via legal support centers to hear and claim their rights through ICT access and online safety.

Invest in programs to strengthen the capacities of women and youth to access and effectively use online spaces, especially given the online nature of the new normal in the context of COVID-19.

1. **Member States** should develop concrete strategies for translating policy processes (including peace negotiations) to online spaces. These should clearly outline the norms for the use of online spaces to ensure their safety, and be accompanied by the creation of gender-sensitive infrastructure to enable broad-base access and capacity-building for conflict-affected women and youth and increase their participation in online spaces effectively.
2. **Member States, civil society and international organizations** should provide capacity building on the use of online platforms to marginalized and conflict-affected groups, in particular women living in conflict-affected areas, women refugees and internally displaced persons. These should include dedicated courses on the use of technologies for advocacy, communications and campaigning, research, monitoring, mediation, and participation in peace processes. These could also include dedicated training for women activists and women's rights organizations to use more advanced technologies, including blockchain and artificial intelligence.
3. **Member States** should ensure access to digital literacy education in communities, including through integrating it in school curricula, and allocating national budget into capacity-building programs for women. This will also strengthen the economic empowerment of women, often linked to their access to online tools.
4. **Donors, including the UN, Member States and international NGOs** should encourage and support the inclusion of ICT use and capacity-building components in peacebuilding programs. They should also support the creation of ICT specialist positions within peacebuilding organizations, especially those operating at the national and local level, to build their organizational capacity.