

**Mavic Cabrera-Balleza's<sup>1</sup> presentation at the virtual event “Connected or muted?  
New opportunities for women’s participation in peace processes in times of  
COVID-19”**

**Organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway  
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Lyse Doucet, Chief International Correspondent, BBC -London (LD): 1.What are the challenges and opportunities identified by women on the ground when it comes to participating in peace processes during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Mavic Cabrera-Balleza (MCB):** Good morning/afternoon/evening, Lyse, Thanks for having me. Greetings to Minister Sørdeide, Sp Envoy Pedersen, ASG Jenča, Sp Envoy on WPS Sørheim-Rensvik, and my fellow panelists Sanam Anderini and Sylvia Thompson and everyone who is online.

### **Challenges**

I’ll start by giving an example from my home country the Philippines. The peace agreement between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is in its implementation – the most important phase in any peace process. This implementation phase is very accurately described as the **transition from rebellion to governance** because its core element is the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). It gave women and youth peacebuilders an outstanding opportunity to participate in the formation of the regional government that is anchored on the vision of long-lasting peace. Despite some challenges, it was able to form its parliament as well as its executive office—including the Bangsamoro Women’s Commission. **The implementation of the peace agreement was well on its way—the institution building, the policy making—but this all came to an abrupt stop because of the COVID-19 crisis.**

In Colombia, despite the ceasefire declared by the Ejército Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army) which recently ended, women peacebuilders and everyone else are facing widespread violence—from domestic violence, to attacks against human defenders and women activists, to clashes between paramilitary groups, adding to the insecurity caused by this deadly virus. (*Note: The ceasefire ended on April 30, 2020.*)

The situation is even more dire for the over three million Venezuelan refugees in Colombia living along the borders and in areas that have a strong presence of paramilitary groups.

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In South Sudan, the COVID-19 outbreak disrupted the implementation of the 2018 revitalized peace agreement, including one of its most important provisions which is the 35 percent quota in women's representation in political institutions.

To summarize the main challenges that women and youth peacebuilders confront are:

- 1) Major disruption to their work—Losing opportunities to advance the transformative elements of their work such as the 35 percent quota for women in South Sudan, the establishment of gender-responsive electoral code in the BARMM in the Philippines;
- 2) Increased security and health risks not only to themselves but their families, co-workers, and the local communities they work with;
- 3) The COVID 19 pandemic is a conflict multiplier due to the competition over resources, medical supplies and services, food insecurity, and economic insecurity; and
- 4) Suspended or decreased funding for the work of women and youth peacebuilders.

What these challenges tell us is that peace is fragile. Our gains are easily reversible. We risk losing what we have gained in terms of reducing violence and conflict, in terms of mediation, women's meaningful participation in peace negotiations and decision-making.

### Opportunities

Let's look at the opportunities. **In many conflict-affected communities, women and youth peacebuilders have taken on the roles of humanitarian workers and front liners during this crisis.** They are the same women and youth who are working for peace, who are mediating, who are advocating for gender-inclusive peace processes, and the implementation of peace agreements. Hence the pandemic has given women and youth peacebuilders opportunities to:

- 1) Demonstrate in very concrete terms that the WPS agenda is a sustainable, inclusive, intersectional, and integrative agenda because it calls for—among many things, social protection—quality and accessible health care systems, food security, and economic security. It also brings forth the nexus of peace, humanitarian work, and development. After all, poverty and conflict are socio-political determinants of people's health, and at the same time, poverty is one of the root causes of conflict.
- 2) Assert the importance of a more comprehensive framework of human security as opposed to national security.
- 3) Strengthen confidence, build trust in local communities and broaden our peace constituency.

- 4) Emphasize that similar to our global efforts in implementing UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda overall, COVID-19 response needs to put women on the forefront. To make this happen we need global solidarity, political and financial commitment.

And finally, as feminist peacebuilders, we are not only thinking about the current situation. Equally important is that we are learning from this devastating experience. We seize the opportunity to demand even more strongly to the UN, governments, regional organizations, donors, private sector, fellow civil society, all stakeholders, to change our ways of doing things including especially how we respond to conflict and crisis. **We are looking forward to new ways of working, new ways of doing things. No more business as usual. We are not going back to normal.** We need to do everything guided by our feminist values and human rights principles.

**LD:** We've long talked about the digital divide—When you look across the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, are they all going to have access to good and safe enough internet and computers to keep these processes going online?

**MCB:** Billions of people are going online to stay in touch during the COVID-19 pandemic. Important discussions like what we're having now are being held virtually. The internet is the answer to many of our problems during this crisis. However, globally, just over half of households (55%) have an internet connection. In developed countries, 87% are connected compared with 47% in developing nations.<sup>2</sup> But **in the least developed countries including conflict affected countries, only 19% have internet access. This digital divide impacts women more than men.** Wide gender gap in mobile phone ownership often coupled with a wide gender gap in Internet use. Globally, women are 23% less likely than men to use mobile internet.<sup>3</sup>

Most women peacebuilders in conflict-affected communities we work in like in Marawi, Philippines, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, in South Sudan, they don't even have 24-hour electricity. They are not able to participate in virtual conferencing. Before the pandemic, local women peacebuilders use their office internet or cybercafe but that's not possible anymore.

**I really challenge what people say that the pandemic is an equalizing situation because we can all go online. That is simply not true in the context of communities affected by conflict.**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-digital-divide-internet-data-broadband-mobbile/> from the World Economic Forum. The original source was UNESCO. accessed on May 03, 2020

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2019.pdf> accessed on May 03, 2020



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Equality for Women.  
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**LD:** Bearing in mind that the responses to the pandemic have been very different around the world—for example, South East Asian nations which have previous experiences of deadly diseases and viruses reacted more quickly, fewer people died and economies are getting back into action even more quickly. There may not be one situation globally. Are there some parts of the world where people you are talking to are saying maybe we can meet face-to-face soon. Or are they still saying it's too soon. We better do it from a distance.

**MCB:** In most countries we work in, even though the women and youth peacebuilders want to do their peacebuilding work in local communities, they are not allowed. In South Sudan for example, there is increasing ethnic or communal violence in Jonglei, Warap and Lake states. You cannot do community level mediation via Zoom. It's just impossible in that context. We've tried everything in terms of the technologies. The women and youth peacebuilders are willing to go to the local communities but they are not allowed because of the lockdown. The main problem too is it's a very militarized response to the pandemic. The women and youth peacebuilders, the humanitarian workers who want to mediate or deliver relief aid are harassed or arrested.

We are witnessing local women peacebuilders responding to the crisis so quickly because that's in their DNA. That is what they do. They live and work with the most vulnerable so they know what is needed on the ground. They courageously build peace amidst wars instead of being silenced by the violence. Women peacebuilders fearlessly stand on the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis instead of retreating from fear of this invisible enemy. Let me end with an appeal to all of those listening to us today including policy makers and decision makers. **Support women peacebuilders during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. Peace cannot be one of the casualties of this pandemic. Thank you for this important conversation.**