

Women and youth peacebuilders as front liners against the COVID-19 pandemic

Thank you Amb. Verveer! Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, everyone! Let me start by giving a brief background about our organization, the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders. We're an international women's coalition that works in different countries affected by violent conflicts to effectively implement the UN Security Council Resolutions on WPS in partnership with the UN, and governments, including local authorities and leaders such as governors, mayors, indigenous leaders, faith leaders, local police and military, but our most important partners are women and youth peacebuilders in local communities.

Gendered Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

I would like to speak about what we have learned regarding the gendered impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the countries we work in such as Armenia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, the Philippines and Ukraine. As [reported in the media and also] mentioned by some of the panelists and Amb. Verveer, the COVID-19 crisis has a disproportionate impact on women and girls. The mandatory isolation and social distancing policies have aggravated domestic violence, as they trap women at home with their abusers, while women's shelters and domestic violence hotlines are struggling to meet demand.² As primary caregivers for the sick and elderly, women face greater risk of exposure to COVID-19. Additionally, women "comprise the majority of health and social care workers, and are on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19."³ Finally, the outbreak has led to an increase in the unpaid domestic labor burden on women, including childcare as schools and nurseries have closed.⁴

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is further exacerbated by armed conflict, ongoing violence, and humanitarian emergencies. The travel and mobility restrictions have severely inhibited the delivery of relief and essential services and humanitarian aid to vulnerable groups, including women, young women and girls, people with disabilities, Internally Displaced People (IDP), and refugees.

Women and youth peacebuilders on the frontlines

In Armenia, Georgia, Indonesia and the Philippines, women and youth peacebuilders are making face masks and distributing them along with food packages to the elderly, people with disabilities, and vulnerable populations. In the Philippines, in addition to the food packs, face masks, dignity kits (that contain sanitary pads, soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, disinfectant, isopropyl alcohol) are distributed to women and girls in IDP camps. In Ukraine, women civil society have set up a phone and text network wherein they make phone calls or send text messages to women who are vulnerable to physical, mental, and emotional abuse to let them know that support is available. And a lot of times, just listening and talking to the women who are in abusive relationships already make a big difference—especially in these times of isolation.

¹ A presentation by Mavic Cabrera-Balleza, CEO of the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders at the online panel discussion "Covid 19 – A Gender Perspective on the Growing Humanitarian Crisis" organized by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security on April 08, 2020.

² Méliissa Godin, "As Cities Around the World Go on Lockdown, Victims of Domestic Violence Look for a Way Out", Time Magazine, 18 March 2020. Available at: https://time.com/5803887/coronavirus-domestic-violence-victims/?fbclid=IwAR04Wwz5Q-xRLjPAzFl99mJmoYk5u_ktkIO7xbXMLwYOnKEM6uiRUh3719U. Accessed on 27 March 2020. Accessed on 31 March 2020.

³ Rosamund Hutt, "The coronavirus fallout may be worse for women than men. Here's why", World Economic Forum, 12 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/the-coronavirus-fallout-may-be-worse-for-women-than-men-heres-why/>. Accessed on 27 March 2020.

⁴ Ibidem.

The assistance is targeted to conflict-affected areas, such as Nagorno Karabakh which is on the border of Armenia and Azerbaijan; in certain areas of Mindanao in the Philippines; and in Kherson, Ukraine the state/oblast that neighbors Crimea. With your permission, I would like to announce that we have set up a [Go Fund Me account to support the women and youth peacebuilders' response to COVID 19.](#) It's on the GNWP's Facebook and twitter pages and also on our website.

Impact on conflict-affected situations and peace processes

In Colombia where killings of human rights defenders and activists is common even after the signing of the peace agreement between the government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the COVID-19 outbreak has aggravated these threats, as the government has reduced the protective measures offered to human rights defenders, making them more vulnerable than ever.

In DRC, the COVID-19 pandemic has put an additional strain on the country, as many aid workers were evacuated. There are also concerns over a possible closure of borders with Burundi and Rwanda, which often serve as supply routes including especially for humanitarian aid.

In the Philippines even though there is a ceasefire agreement with the Communist Party, the security-oriented response to the COVID 19 crisis can easily lead to the violation of the ceasefire agreement since it is mainly the police and military that are enforcing the lockdown and mobilized to implement the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. People are demanding to be tested but instead they are being arrested.

The COVID-19 outbreak has unique dimensions in conflict-affected situations and women and youth peacebuilders' profound understanding of those dimensions makes it absolutely necessary for them to be at the core of the decision-making on the response to this crisis. They are the ones who will bring what is needed – a response that is founded on human rights principles and feminist values

Clearly, while governments remain undecided or are caught up in their politicking, women and youth peacebuilders in local communities are out there doing life-saving work; securing the gains of their peacebuilding efforts; and preventing the outbreak of violence.

I'll stop here and look forward to the comments and questions from our audience members.

Other points raised during the Q &A

- We need to ensure the integration of gender and WPS perspectives in humanitarian action. Local women and youth peacebuilders should be part of coordinating mechanisms on the ground such as the Humanitarian Gender Clusters.
- On the question of rising conservatism amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, "It is beyond conservatism in some cases. It is outright misogyny. Some government leaders such as in the Philippines and Hungary are demanding emergency powers in the guise of COVID19 response. This can lead to denial of much needed services such as sexual and reproductive health care for women.
- On the question "What makes you hopeful? The boldness and audacity of women and youth peacebuilders to be the first responders make me hopeful!"