The pandemic will not stop us: The impact of COVID-19 on women's peace activism in Colombia, the Philippines, South Sudan and Ukraine

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gnwp Global Network of Women Peacebuilders

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Policy Brief

In Fall 2020, a rapid review of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women peace activists in Colombia, South Sudan, the Philippines and Ukraine was conducted as part of an ongoing partnership between the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) and the New York University Center for Global Affairs (NYU CGA).[1] The review found that the crisis has delayed implementation of peace agreements, in particular their gender provisions, shifted women's peace advocacy to online spaces, impacted the membership composition of women's peace groups, and diverted women's organizational energies into humanitarian action to support community resilience.

This briefing note summarizes the policy implications of the study. The full study can be found here.

1. Prevent peace from becoming a casualty of the pandemic.

The case studies show that **the pandemic has delayed implementation of peace agreements,** especially in Colombia and the Philippines. Adoption of key legislation needed to ensure implementation of the peace agreement for the new semi-autonomous region of the island of Mindanao in the Philippines was delayed. The urgent funding needed for pandemic response meant that funds was diverted away from transitional justice institutions in Colombia and demobilization programs in the Philippines. In both countries, some interviewees suggested that the delays may aggravate grievances of members of armed groups who do not see the expected "dividends of peace." This is consistent with the findings of GNWP's other research, and the experiences shared by our members and partners in those two countries. Across all four case study contexts, fighting, communal violence and tensions between ethnic groups, and attacks by armed groups have continued, if not intensified, during the pandemic. The findings on the impact of COVID-19 on internal, ethnic and land conflicts and on border security have also been confirmed by GNWP's other primary and secondary research in all four countries.

> "You're forcing us to be poor, you're forcing us to die hungry… And we would rather die of COVID-19 instead of hunger"
>
> – Woman peace activist, South Sudan

The **lockdown measures implemented in the four countries – while necessary to contain the spread of the disease – have made women's peacebuilding work more difficult,** and in some cases, more dangerous. In contexts, where peacebuilding is a matter of life and death – for example, where women mediators play critical roles in diffusing tensions and reducing armed clashes – this has created a dilemma for the women. As noted by a government official interviewed in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), women in conflict-affected areas often refused

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to follow prevention measures, as they had "more immediate and critical problems than the virus." In a similar vein, a peace activist interviewed in South Sudan alluded to the crisis of food insecurity caused by COVID-19 and loss of income for many, stating that "we would rather die of COVID-19 instead of hunger." Continuing to demand full implementation of the peace agreement, or raising the alert about poor implementation can put women at an increased risk of violence, especially given that GNWP's research has revealed <u>patterns of power abuse and police brutality</u> triggered by COVID-19 lockdowns.

In this context, we recommend:

- **National and local governments, donors and multilateral organizations should ensure that funding is not diverted away from the implementation of peace agreements.** Commitment and pressure to meet the planned implementation milestones must be sustained. In particular, **we urge all parties to ensure that the hard-won gender-responsive provisions are not deprioritized, delayed or defunded as a result of the pandemic.**

- **National and local governments should conduct a thorough gender- and conflict-sensitive analysis of their COVID-19 responses, including lockdown measures.** While lockdowns have proven effective in stopping the spread of the virus, they have also increased risks of heightened conflict-related tensions and a resumption of violence in some contexts. Peacebuilding work that directly contributes to lowering such risks should be considered a necessity and exempted from lockdown restrictions.

- **National and local governments must establish clear prevention and accountability measures against police brutality and abuse of power,** if using security forces to enforce COVID-19 restrictions. This may include, for example, creating clear reporting channel for police brutality and violations, for example through an ombudsman or an independent commission.

- **All parties to conflicts should observe the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire**, and ensure that the terms of any ceasefire are informed by the priorities and perspectives of women peace activists.

- **National and local governments, the UN and regional actors should ensure regular consultation and engagement with civil society, including women peacebuilders, either via hybrid or virtual formats,** on issues related to conflict prevention and peacebuilding during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. This includes investments in infrastructure and capacity building to ensure that women can access these spaces.

2. Invest in women, invest in peace

Women peace activists interviewed for the CGA/GNWP review confirmed that changes in donor funding patterns have made peacebuilding work more difficult. They allege that funds earmarked for women's organizations and peacebuilding programs have been diverted to support emergency health and humanitarian response. We anticipate that the trend towards diminishing funding for

peacebuilding is likely to continue in the coming years, as donor countries' economies contract due to the impact of the pandemic.

> "I don't know what to tell women in the communities that don't see projects, don't see education, don't see anything that was promised to them"
> – Woman peace activist, Colombia

The pandemic has not only created new challenges, but has brought to light pre-existing ones –such as the prohibitive donor requirements and heavy reporting burdens–that make it impossible for grassroots women-led organizations to access funds. Some interviewees noted that lack of flexible funding made it more difficult for them to sustain their operations during COVID-19 and to adapt to the pandemic. In the face of funding constraints, some women peacebuilders interviewed stated that their organizations have been forced to narrow their range of activities and campaigns, experienced an undermining of local inter-organizational cooperation and coordination, and seen increased competition for scarce funds.

In this context, we recommend:

- **Donors should maintain and increase investment in women-led peacebuilding**, in parallel to addressing the emergency health and humanitarian needs, recognizing that peacebuilding is a necessary component of a sustainable and long-term solution to any crisis.

- **Donors should review their funding policies, practices and requirements,** including eligibility criteria and reporting expectations**,** and consider at least temporarily relaxing some of them to make funding – including core funding – more flexible and accessible to grassroots organizations, including those led by women and youth.

- **Member States should heed the Secretary-General's call to "reverse the upward trajectory in global military spending"** and increase investment in social infrastructures and public services as a foundation of human security; as well as in women-led peacebuilding and conflict prevention initiatives.

3. Rebuild more equitable economies

The CGA/GNWP research revealed that COVID-19 has widened the gender unemployment gap across the four case studies. Statistical data obtained through secondary sources' analysis, as well as the interviews conducted with women peace activists, indicate that women have been more likely than men to lose their jobs during the pandemic, and less likely to access economic relief packages. This is consistent with the findings of other research and analysis conducted by GNWP, and can be attributed to women's over-representation in the informal economy and services and hospitality sectors around the world.

However, despite the gendered nature of the economic impacts of COVID-19, pandemic response and recovery plans rarely address women's economic needs. The COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker developed by UNDP and UN Women documented only 177 policies pertaining to women's economic security and 111 focused specifically on unpaid care provided by women, among over 2,500 policies analyzed. Analysis of the Tracker data shows that only a small percentage of COVID-19 response measures (5% in the Philippines and 6% in Ukraine) were gender-sensitive. On the other hand, 45% of COVID-19 measures in Colombia address gender-specific needs, and in South Sudan, according to the tracker, the country's two major COVID-19 policies include gender-sensitive provisions. However, interviews revealed that the gendered aspects of the policies are not being implemented – for example, the South Sudan Safety Net Project, which was designed to specifically target women to provide them with an economic safety net and provide income security to low income families, was not known to many of the interviewees, and none were aware of its rollout.

Yet, GNWP's other research and discussions with local and national partners suggest that COVID-19 offers a moment of unparalleled opportunity to bring the conversations about unpaid care work and gender inequality in the labor market to mainstream policy discussions. To seize this opportunity, we recommend:

- **National governments must base their COVID-19 response and recovery planning on thorough intersectional gender-sensitive analysis of the economic impacts of the pandemic**, and include clear, specific and fully-funded provisions for improving women's economic security and addressing the burden of unpaid care work in their response and recovery plans.

- **All COVID-19 task forces – at global, regional, national and local levels – should include at least 50% women's representation,** to strive for representation of women in all their diversity (including women peacebuilders), and establish clear channels and procedures for consultations with a broader constituency, including diverse women, on key policies and decisions. As of July 2020, only 3.5% of 115 COVID-19 decision-making and expert task forces globally had achieved gender parity, while 85.2% of these task forces were dominated by men.

4. Recognize and address shifts in family composition and unpaid care burden

An unexpected finding of the CGA/GNWP research was the extent to which the shifts in family composition during the pandemic have affected the work of women peace activists. The return of migrant workers in many countries – including the Philippines and Ukraine – has increased the average household size, while at the same time depriving families from the remittances from migrant family members, which they previously relied on to survive. This has further exacerbated both the economic burden and burden of unpaid care work that disproportionately falls on women, and further reduced their capacity to dedicate energy to peacebuilding work.

Some interviewed women peace activists predicted that the family composition may further change as a result of "fertility boom," due to lack of access to contraception and safe abortion services during the pandemic, as well as the rise in pro-natalism. Pro-natalist narratives have gained traction during the pandemic. For example, in Ukraine, the president has called on young couples to use the lockdown

to "fight the demographic crisis in Ukraine." Such narratives pose a clear threat to the gains made towards gender equality, and could lead to further exacerbating the burden of unpaid care work carried by women, including peace activists.

However, as noted above, most COVID-19 response and recovery policies have failed to recognize these changes in the family composition and to include specific provisions that address women's unpaid care work, or the income needs of returning migrants and their families. In this context, we recommend:

- **National and local governments should include social protection measures and specific responses to the income needs of returning migrants and their families** in their COVID-19 response and recovery plans. This may include inclusive unemployment benefits for migrants, especially in countries that relied heavily on migrant labor remittances before COVID-19

- **National and local governments should prioritize sexual and reproductive health services, as well as childcare services as essential and to exempt them from lockdown restrictions**. This includes family planning clinics, childcare centers and community crèches.

- **National and local governments should recognize those working in sexual and reproductive health services, including community clinics, and childcare as essential workers** that are at increased risk of exposure to COVID-19, and prioritize them in vaccination programs.

5. Recognize digital access as a necessity, and strengthen accountability for harassment, hate speech and incitement of violence online

The pandemic has also underscored the fact that affordable and reliable access to the internet is not a luxury but a necessity. Interviewees emphasized that their peacebuilding work has moved partially or entirely online during the pandemic. Some stressed that this has excluded women – especially those living in rural areas – who do not have access to the internet, computer or mobile phones, or lack of skills and knowledge to use the virtual platforms. In Colombia, women peacebuilders emphasized that 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. Additionally, the shift to digital spaces has created privacy concerns for some women activists – as they lacked a safe and private space to conduct their work at home.

> "COVID-19 has become an opportunity to reach out to women with whom we have not worked before"
> – Woman peace activist, Ukraine

Moreover, the power of social media has also been demonstrated by the pandemic. Women peacebuilders across the four countries noted that social media has become the primary source of information for many within their societies. Some women peacebuilders have been able to harness this power – for example, by connecting with other activists they could not have otherwise networked with or moving some of their activities, protest actions and organizing online and cultivating a broader

constituency, including young peacebuilders and the diaspora. At the same time, as the influence of social media increases, so does the need for greater control and accountability. Recognizing this, in September 2020, GNWP held a month-long boycott of Facebook, calling out the platform's role in threatening peace and democracy by deliberately misinforming the public, allowing for weaponizing of misinformation, providing a platform for amplifying ethnic tensions, spreading hate speech and inciting violence, and failing to react to posts promoting misogyny, sexual harassment and rape.

Post-pandemic, the advances in digitalization of peacebuilding work and overall access to information are unlikely to recede. Thus, closing the gender digital gap and ensuring greater accountability from the technology giants must become a priority. In this context, we recommend:

- **National and local governments, donors and multilateral organizations should support women peacebuilders to close the digital gap**, by creating infrastructures to ensure reliable access to the internet in least developed countries and areas, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 9, and providing digital skills training, including training on cyber-security and the use of digital platforms, to women peacebuilders.

- **UN, Member States and other donors should include access to technology and the internet, where available, as a fundamental component of all funded peacebuilding initiatives.** Funds must be directed to local service providers and dedicated to ensuring or increasing women's access to safe spaces for the use of digital resources, such as women's shelters, community centers or clinics.

- **Social media platforms must engage with feminist civil society groups to hold themselves to greater accountability and upscale their fact-checking mechanisms,** and to ensure immediate removal of content that promotes deliberate misinformation, fuels misogyny, and incites violence. This requires implementing stricter content regulation policies and accountability frameworks to ensure that digital spaces are safe and enabling environments for all women, especially women activists and peacebuilders.

- **Governments and the United Nations must adopt robust accountability systems and measures for social media platforms**, to prevent the spread of misinformation and hate speech.

6. Address the "shadow pandemic" of violence against women

Across the four case studies, increases in different forms of violence against women were documented, including domestic and intimate partner violence, early, child and forced marriages, and attacks on women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders. Women peacebuilders interviewed by the students have also emphasized that the increased use of social media and digital spaces led to an intensification of cyber harassment. This adds to the already existing wealth of evidence pointing to violence against women as a "shadow pandemic," exacerbated by COVID-19. In contexts affected by conflict, the "shadow pandemic" is even more intense and debilitating, and results in women's diminished capacities to invest in peacebuilding and democratization.

The research has also exposed the inadequacy of mental health services available to women - both those who have experienced violence, and those suffering from burnout and other mental health issues due to isolation and increased burdens of domestic and unpaid care work during the pandemic.

In light of this, we recommend:

- **National and local governments, especially in countries affected by conflict and in the process of implementing a peace agreement should prioritize access to basic services, including sexual and reproductive health**, for victims of sexual and gender-based violence, and ensure accountability for such violence, as part of conflict prevention and recovery efforts;

- **Member States, the UN and other donors should encourage and support the establishment of rapid response funds for women activists, peacebuilders and human rights defenders** who face threats and provide them with quickly accessible funding for relocation of themselves and their families and to access other forms of protection.

- **Member States, the UN and other donors should encourage and support the establishment of civil society-driven early warning and response mechanisms** to elevate awareness about hotspots of violence against women and activists, and to deliver swift protection and relief.

- **Member States, the UN and other donors should guarantee that basic services, including mental health support, are available to women, in particular survivors of sexual and gender-based violence**, and that these are not defunded in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. This should include access to safe spaces, shelters, trauma counselling as well as sexual and reproductive health services and trauma counselling. They should also ensure that these services are accessible to all women, including those living with disabilities.