

## **COVID-19, Women and Peace and Security and National Action Plans on UNSCR 1325 in Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia**

**Report from a virtual experience exchange among women peacebuilders and civil society from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) region**

**29 September 2020**

Conflicts in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus are often described as “frozen.” However, many of the conflicts in the region have been characterized by low-intensity violence that span more than a decade. Despite the ongoing peace negotiations or settlement efforts, violence and insecurity continue, and disproportionately affect women across the region. The COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated the insecurity. In Armenia, calls to domestic violence hotlines have increased by 50% in May 2020.<sup>1</sup> In Georgia, the closure of checkpoints between the country and the breakaway region of South Ossetia made it more difficult for those living in conflict-affected areas to access reliable information and healthcare – including maternal healthcare.<sup>2</sup> In Ukraine, shelling and attacks along the contact line in the east continued throughout the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> In the Nagorno-Karabakh region, fighting escalated dramatically on September 27, 2020, with civilian casualties reported on both sides.<sup>4</sup>

Women in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic: they have shouldered the increased burden of unpaid care work, faced greater economic instability as the majority are informal and hospitality workers, and were deprived of access to basic services.

At the same time, women in Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia, take on important roles as activists, mediators, political leaders, community organizers, humanitarian workers, educators, civil servants, peacebuilders, veterans and security personnel. They are at the frontlines of mass popular protests, among the first responders bringing aid to the internally displaced persons (IDPs) and vulnerable populations, and working towards greater social cohesion within conflict-affected communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they have provided online counselling, distributed food and hygiene packages, and disseminated reliable information about COVID-19 and prevention measures. In this context, the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the supporting Women, Peace and Security (WPS) resolutions is of vital importance in the region.

The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) with support from the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) has been working towards stronger implementation of the WPS resolutions in the region since 2013, in partnership with leading national and local civil society organizations from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. GNWP and its national and local civil society partners have advanced WPS implementation through the Localization of UNSCR 1325, technical support and substantive inputs into National Action Plans (NAPs), WPS trainings and competitions for journalists and media practitioners, and facilitating regional

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<sup>1</sup> Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, “Mapping the impact of COVID-19 on Women, Peace and Security: COVID-19 and Women, Peace and Security Database”. Available at: <https://gnwp.org/resources/covid-19-wps-database/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, “Nagorno Karabakh conflict: Recommit to inclusive peace, and protect lives and rights of civilians!”. October 2, 2020. Available at: <https://gnwp.org/solidarity-nagorno-karabakh-conflict/>

experience exchanges, among other important initiatives. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, GNWP, together with its partners, continued its efforts to ensure effective implementation of WPS. We have mapped the impacts of COVID-19 on women, and on peace and security across the region; we held a series of online trainings for journalists and launched a Media and WPS Prize in Georgia; we created an online community and conducted webinars on leadership and peacebuilding for young women in Ukraine.

On September 29, 2020 GNWP with the support from the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) organized an online regional experience exchange with its partners and other leading women peacebuilders and civil society from the region. The consultation provided a space to share good practices and lessons learned from addressing the COVID-19 pandemic through a gender and peacebuilding lens. It also generated concrete recommendations for gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive COVID-19 recovery. Participants from Albania, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Serbia and Ukraine shared insights into how the pandemic has affected WPS implementation at the local, national and regional levels. They reflected on the current COVID-19 responses and challenges experienced by women peacebuilders, and identified opportunities towards a more gender-sensitive and conflict-sensitive COVID-19 relief and recovery.

**Based on the discussions, women peacebuilders and civil society from the OSCE region identified the following key recommendations:**

- **Adopt a gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive approach to COVID-19 response and recovery, to address the disproportionate impact on women and young women, in particular those from refugee and internally displaced communities, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups.**
- **Ensure women's equal, full and meaningful participation and leadership at all levels of decision-making on peace and security, as well as in COVID-19 recovery and relief planning.**
- **Strengthen regional coordination, network building and cooperation to ensure that COVID-19 response and recovery is gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive and that WPS agenda is not de-prioritized during the pandemic.**
- **Engage non-traditional WPS actors – such as the media, religious and traditional leaders, and male allies – to ensure broad-base support for gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive COVID-19 response and recovery and protect the shrinking civic space.**

Detailed recommendations are included at the end of the report.

## How has COVID-19 affected Women, Peace and Security in Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia? Key messages of women peacebuilders from the region

The following is a summary of the key themes, takeaways and emerging challenges raised during the discussion.

- 1. COVID-19 has deepened social inequalities – including gender inequality – across the region. It aggravated violence against women, restricted women’s and girls’ access to quality education and healthcare services, exacerbated poverty and discrimination.**

All participants agreed that the pandemic has negatively affected women and youth, in particular those from IDP communities, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups.

COVID-19 has led to a **rise in violence against women and girls**, which has placed a strain on domestic violence shelters and other resources and services. In North Caucasus, rural women are particularly vulnerable, as there are no shelters or domestic violence hotlines, and access to social services is more difficult. Participants from Azerbaijan, Moldova and Ukraine also shared that cultural and gender norms such as shame and humiliation play a powerful role in keeping many women and girls, particularly in rural communities silent and in fear of reaching out for help.

**Gender inequality has been exacerbated by the increasing burden of unpaid reproductive and care labor.** Participants shared that women have to juggle domestic work and homeschooling their children with their day jobs (“productive” labor) and community roles, including as first responders, sewing masks and distributing food packages during the lockdown. This challenge is particularly acute for women peacebuilders, who have had to adapt their work to address new needs and emerging threats due to the pandemic.

Women’s **loss of income has aggravated the other challenges they face**, affecting their families and communities. Participants from Moldova highlighted that the pandemic has resulted in loss of employment and decreased income for many women. A participant from Ukraine shared that it is estimated that the proportion of the population living under the poverty line in her country will increase to 45% due to the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Women make up the majority of small-business owners and freelancers in Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia. Rural women who rely on agriculture for their livelihoods have also been affected by the pandemic. For example, in the breakaway region of Abkhazia, in Georgia, women have relied on export of citruses for their livelihood. The closure of borders with Russia and Georgia has left many of them without a source of income.

Participants expressed overall concern with the **inadequate response to women’s economic insecurity** during the pandemic. They noted that specific measures to address women’s economic needs, including the increased burden of care, have not been introduced.

**Access to quality education** has been identified as a particular challenge for rural communities, especially for low-income rural households, because of lack of access to the internet. A participant

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<sup>5</sup> Razumkov Centre, “Рівень бідності через коронавірус злетить: чого чекати українцям”, 20 October 2020. Available at: [https://razumkov.org.ua/komentari/riven-bidnosti-cherez-koronavirus-zletyt-chogo-chekaty-ukraintsiam?fbclid=IwAR23nmZYeQqaua19UiZhEklUkvsdm4Y-cpZx2x6DnVN7hrjwGH54e8l1f\\_0](https://razumkov.org.ua/komentari/riven-bidnosti-cherez-koronavirus-zletyt-chogo-chekaty-ukraintsiam?fbclid=IwAR23nmZYeQqaua19UiZhEklUkvsdm4Y-cpZx2x6DnVN7hrjwGH54e8l1f_0)

from the North Caucasus region in Russia observed that the shift to online classes means that low-income rural households who do not have stable internet connection are denied access to education.

**There is poor access to quality healthcare services, particularly for those living in occupied territories or conflict-affected areas.** For example, participants from Moldova highlighted that the mobility restrictions in the Transnistria region have severely limited women's access to healthcare particularly, sexual and reproductive health services.

Participants urged national governments to take action to address growing food insecurity, rising violence and poverty in their communities. They stressed that national COVID-19 planning and recovery needs to integrate a human security approach. This requires an investment in social services to support those most affected by the pandemic.

## **2. Despite being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, women are excluded from COVID-19 policy planning, and decision-making**

Women leaders are the fore of local and regional COVID-19 relief and recovery efforts are being left out of policy-making and decision-making that directly affect their well-being and their communities. Such exclusion is reproduced in policy- and decision-making on to COVID-19 response and recovery. Most policies and measures to address the pandemic are gender-blind and insensitive to the differential needs of women, youth, IDPs, LGBTQIA+ people, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups. Support for women and youth peacebuilders at the local and national level is vitally important as they bring fresh perspectives to crisis response. Moreover, they demand sex- and age-disaggregated data on COVID-19, call for a gender-responsive approach to recovery, and shift from state-centric framework of security to human security to better address the concurrent health, social and economic crises caused by the pandemic.

The participants emphasized that the **COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for sustaining democracy and peace**, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected areas. Furthermore, women face significant obstacles to democratic participation both as voters and as elected political leaders, all which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. In Serbia, the June 2020 parliamentary elections presented a challenge to women's participation and inclusion in political leadership. There was a lot of uncertainty about the modalities of voting, and whether it is safe to vote. Women have found it more difficult to vote in the elections because of the increased burden of domestic work, and their responsibilities as primary caregivers for the sick. In addition, participants noted that even women who have been elected face obstacles to being heard in political spaces, often silenced or marginalized in national governing bodies.

## **3. COVID-19 has slowed down the implementation of the WPS agenda and fueled tensions and conflict**

Participants observed that **WPS implementation has been deprioritized during the pandemic**. They attributed this deprioritization to a misconception that the WPS agenda is unrelated to the challenges posed by COVID-19. However, participants argued that the WPS agenda has never been more relevant in a time of crisis. They noted that – when they exist – National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS are a useful framework to address the human security impacts of the pandemic. A participant from Kazakhstan reflected: “Kazakhstan does not have a NAP on WPS. COVID-19 has shown us the importance of developing one.”

**The WPS agenda is particularly critical given the escalation of conflicts across the region during the pandemic.**

In light of the 20th anniversary of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, a participant from Georgia warned that there is a risk of backsliding on the achievements of the past two decades of women's work to build sustainable peace. She noted that peacebuilding and reconciliation work has been made more difficult during COVID-19 because the isolation and mobility restrictions have made it more difficult to bring people together and build trust. In this context, she emphasized the importance of implementation and Localization of the WPS agenda. She stressed that the groups mobilized through Localization have continued their work to build peace and address the root causes of conflict.

However, **the dominant perception that the WPS agenda is irrelevant to COVID-19 relief and recovery has resulted in further delays in the implementation of NAPs in the region.** A participant from Tajikistan shared that a NAP on WPS was drafted prior to the pandemic, but the adoption process has stalled during COVID-19. In Albania, despite the adoption of a NAP on WPS, implementation at the national and local level remains a challenge, largely due to a lack of political will. While civil society has worked tirelessly to localize the WPS agenda, there is still limited commitment from local governments and authorities to implement it. In the wake of the pandemic, the implementation has further slowed down. Other participants noted that a lack of awareness and information regarding the instruments of the WPS agenda at both the national and local level has prevented its implementation. This is further fueled by the fact that NAPs are seen as separate from governance policies at the local level. Thus, participants emphasized that Localization of the agenda, and raising awareness of local actors about its importance is a key step towards WPS implementation. However, this has been made more difficult by the pandemic. Participants from Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine shared that due to mobility restrictions, it has been difficult or impossible to convene people, and to build new relationships that would advance the WPS agenda and peacebuilding more broadly.

Participants also identified the **spread of fake news** as a major challenge to the implementation of the WPS resolutions and promotion of sustainable peace. Participants from Moldova and Ukraine noted an increase in false information about the pandemic, resulting in disinformation about the necessary preventative measures. As a result of the disinformation, some people do not believe that COVID-19 is real, or that it can affect them. There is also **lack of awareness about the impacts of COVID-19 on women and on peace.** A participant from Kosovo noted that there is a need for more research, to better understand the gendered impacts of the pandemic. Participants from Georgia highlighted that journalists do not have access or connections to local women in conflict-affected areas – as a result, their perspectives are absent from the media coverage of the crisis.

**4. The COVID-19 mitigation measures – curfews, lockdowns, restrictions on mobility – have made the work of local peacebuilders, who are at the forefront of advancing WPS implementation and calling for inclusive peace, more difficult.**

Participants reflected on how COVID-19 has shifted the organizational priorities for many civil society organizations. To respond to COVID-19, many organizations have re-structured and mobilized to meet the emerging needs of communities. Participants underscored that the pandemic has also affected funding for civil society. There have been delays in the disbursement of funds; or funds have been diverted away from civil society organizations towards government-led responses to COVID-19. As a result of these challenges, several participants reported that some activities had to be delayed or suspended.

Working remotely has provided a new set of challenges for local peacebuilders. Participants stressed that because of the limited access to high-speed internet, particularly in conflict-affected areas, it is more difficult for them to reach the communities they work with, and bring people together. Participants from Ukraine stressed that **women – including women activists – have found it more difficult to participate in discussions and consultations taking place online.** Many of them do not have access to the necessary equipment and a stable internet connection. Participants recognized that access to technology, including smartphones and computers, is gendered. Others have found it difficult to join online meetings because of the increased burden of care, and the fact that they share a single room with their husband and children, which leaves them with very little personal space. Participants emphasized that remote work requires a different approach to their work – they pointed out that it is difficult to build trust online, an essential component in peacebuilding work. Restrictions on in-person meetings, limited mobility and the lack of resources to support remote work, has forced women peacebuilders to adjust to changing circumstances and implement new strategies to continue their work.

Moreover, participants noted that a lack of information technology skills, knowledge on privacy and cyber-security were obstacles to the participation of women activists in digital advocacy and in online spaces. The virtual working spaces also create new threats for women, including cyberbullying. To address these emerging challenges, in Georgia, one of GNWP's partners with support from UN Women, conducted training for conflict-affected and IDP women on IT skills, cybersecurity, privacy, fake news, violence and harassment. Through these workshops, the women obtained important skills that will help reduce their vulnerability online and use information and communication technologies for more effective advocacy.

While often marginalized in policy discussions, COVID-19 has contributed to increased levels of anxiety, feelings of isolation and exhaustion, including among women peacebuilders and activists. Participants expressed “zoom fatigue” and warned that women peacebuilders face an increased workload and levels of stress due to the pandemic. In Ukraine, GNWP's partners have been providing online counselling and psychosocial support to women leaders to address this challenge.

## Recommendations

**Adopt a gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive approach to COVID-19 response and recovery, to address the disproportionate impact on women and young women, in particular those from refugee and internally displaced communities, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups.**

1. **Member States, regional and international organizations should ensure that COVID-19 response and recovery plans** include a strong gender lens, address the human security needs of women and other marginalized groups, and identify strategies to address the long-term impacts of the pandemic. They must recognize the intersecting layers of marginalization and needs of women IDPs, veterans, ethnic minorities, and other vulnerable groups.
2. **Member States must ensure that WPS implementation is not stalled or deprioritized during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery.** They should strengthen commitment and investment in the development, adoption and implementation of NAPs on WPS in equal partnership with, and support civil society-led efforts to advance the implementation. Gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive provisions related to COVID-19 response and recovery should be integrated into NAPs and Local Action Plans (LAPs) on WPS. Existing NAPs and their monitoring frameworks should be reviewed and adjusted to integrate the emerging needs due to the pandemic.
3. **National authorities and local authorities must prioritize the Localization of UNSCR 1325 as a key strategy for the WPS implementation of the WPS resolutions.** This includes adoption and costing and budgeting of Local Action Plans, integration of WPS provisions into existing local plans, policies and strategies, and training of local officials on WPS and Gender-Responsive Budgeting, to ensure that they can integrate these principles into their COVID-19 response and recovery planning.
4. **Donors and international and regional development partners should fund initiatives that invest in addressing specific impacts of COVID-19 on women, young women and girls, including:**
  - a. Investment in **women's economic empowerment**, as a prerequisite of human security and economic security, and of WPS implementation.
  - b. **Access to factual investment in "information security"** – This includes safe access to the internet, cell phones, libraries, and other sources of factual information to address barriers in terms of access to technology.
  - c. Investment in **capacity building on digital security**, particularly for women activists, peacebuilders and human rights defenders, to address the low levels of knowledge regarding privacy and digital security.
  - d. Timely and quality investment in **ensuring access of women to sexual and reproductive health and rights services**, particularly in conflict-affected territories. Ensure that sexual education is grounded on medical science to help women understand their own bodies and make informed decisions on their health as a prerequisite of effective access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.
  - e. Investment in **awareness-raising campaigns and advocacy led by civil society at the national and regional level and women's rights organizations** on topics such as, but not limited to: violence against women, access to sexual and reproductive health services and digital literacy.

**Ensure women's equal, full and meaningful participation and leadership at all levels of decision-making on peace and security, as well as in COVID-19 recovery and relief planning**

1. **International and regional organizations, including the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) must call on Member States and Participating States to ensure the direct, substantive and formal inclusion of women** in areas where they continue to be under-represented such as political processes, constitution-building, economic development and the security sector. **They need to put pressure on national governments to ensure that the pandemic is not used as an excuse to increase the restrictions on civil society, limit their access to international financing funding, and shrink the space for meaningful participation.**
2. **It is essential that Member States ensure that women constitute a minimum 50% of COVID-19 response and recovery committees and task forces**, and that women civil society, women from conflict-affected regions, women IDPs and other marginalized groups are equally meaningfully represented and are able to meaningfully consult and participate.
3. **Member States should adopt legislative measures** to ensure the participation of women in all aspects of public and political life, including but not limited to the implementation of temporary special measures such as mandatory or voluntary gender quotas.
4. **Member States, with support from international and regional organizations and civil society, should identify and work towards removing barriers to women's political participation and substantive representation** in elections, political parties, parliaments and in local and national politics. This includes special attention to the barriers that may be faced by minority women. International donors and partners should support research to better understand such barriers and the ways to address them.
5. **Donors and international development partners should provide flexible, accessible and long-term funding to civil society organizations**, particularly for grassroots and women-led organizations, to enable them to overcome barriers to participation, including, but not limited to translation, access to the internet, time demands, among other factors.
6. **Donors and international development partners should invest in capacity-building such as training courses and mentoring programmes** directed at advancing women's participation in politics, leadership and peacebuilding.
7. **Member States should recognize the importance of young people's contributions to local and national peacebuilding and commit to their meaningful inclusion.** It is important for governments and multilateral actors to invest in gender-sensitive civic education, funding for youth-led initiatives and increased spaces for intergenerational participation in policy-making processes.

**Strengthen regional coordination, network building and cooperation to ensure that COVID-19 response and recovery is gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive and that WPS agenda is not de-prioritized during the pandemic**

1. **International and regional organizations should support civil society to develop a coordinated, comprehensive, gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive analysis of COVID-19 impacts in the region.** The analysis will become a basis for the development of a regional COVID-19 response and recovery strategy, which will provide guidance for policy-makers to ensure regional cooperation and a coordinated response.
2. **International and regional organizations, donors and international development partners should invest in regional exchanges of women leaders** to promote peer-to-peer learning, sharing of best practices and exchange of lessons learned, to ensure that communities build back better after COVID-19. They should ensure **the inclusion of women from diverse backgrounds** – including IDP women, LGBTQIA+ persons, grassroots activists and representatives of academia – in those exchanges.
3. **National and local governments must prioritize and strengthen political, institutional and financial support** for local women peacebuilders working on the implementation and Localization of the WPS agenda with local actors. They must commit to generating awareness and information on the instruments of the WPS agenda at both the national and local level to demystify perceptions of the WPS agenda as unrelated to governance policies at the local level.

**Engage non-traditional WPS actors – such as the media, religious and traditional leaders, and male allies – to ensure broad-base support for gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive COVID-19 response and recovery and protect the shrinking civic space**

1. **International and regional organizations should support the civil society to organize trainings and capacity building workshops programs to build the capacity of journalists and other media representatives and practitioners,** including journalists, university professors, and editors to report on WPS and women's roles in COVID-19 response and recovery, strengthen gender-sensitive reporting and to provide a balanced, diversified and non-stereotypical portrayal of women and women's perspectives in the media, in particular in the coverage of conflict, peace and pandemic response.
2. **Donors and international development partners must strengthen financial support for local media, including media in local languages,** to increase their accessibility and visibility, and to incentivize reporting on the human security needs of marginalized groups, including women minorities, veterans, refugees, and IDPs.
3. **National and local governments should recognize and address the role of religious leaders and groups in undermining access of women to sexual and reproductive health** – for example, by undermining international conventions such as the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Civil society and women peacebuilders must engage with religious leaders to raise their awareness about the importance of these rights as part of the human security framework.
4. **International and regional organizations and civil society should acknowledge the important role that male allies** – particularly those in high-level positions – have in WPS implementation and promoting gender equality. They should critically engage them through their activities to cultivate their support for promoting women's rights and advancement of gender equality at the national, regional and international levels.