

COVID-19 AND CONFLICT: ADVANCING WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN CEASEFIRES AND PEACE PROCESSES



Summary

This brief addresses the importance of women's full, equal and meaningful participation to an effective pandemic response and to peacemaking efforts, and how the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda can provide a critical framework for inclusive decision-making and sustainable solutions. While efforts to flatten the pandemic's curve unfold around the globe, violent conflict remains a deadly reality for far too many people. In March, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General called for a global ceasefire to allow the world to address COVID-19. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, women have been at the forefront of effective COVID-19 prevention and response efforts—from frontline service delivery to the highest levels of decision-making. With women's participation central to achieving sustainable solutions, the pandemic has brought into sharp relief how critical the WPS agenda is to inclusive and effective decision-making. This brief recognizes the vital role of women's civil society organizations in mobilizing support for an urgent cessation of hostilities, inclusive ceasefire processes and comprehensive peace talks. It also provides a preliminary analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on women's participation in ceasefires and peace processes and offers a series of recommendations, including on 'building back better'.

How is the world changing due to COVID-19?

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases reached over 16 million by 28 July 2020.¹ The impact of the crisis on women in conflict-affected contexts is of particular concern. In these already tragic contexts, many women have had their access to sexual and reproductive health, livelihoods and other essential services severely restricted. Women's increased exposure to the disease due to their high levels of engagement in paid and unpaid care work, the surge in domestic violence and already fragile health systems being overwhelmed are driving home the gender-differentiated impacts of the pandemic. Displaced, refugee, rural and other marginalized women face additional challenges including a lack of reliable information and access to critical technologies. Any resource shifts away from advocacy, expertise and programming in support of women's political participation risk harmful intergenerational consequences for women's rights,² including in areas such as girls' education and women's economic empowerment.

UN Women has synthesized the latest research and data on COVID-19's gender impacts, and formulated comprehensive recommendations for 'building back better', in the following complementary briefs:

- [Addressing the Economic Fallout of COVID-19: Pathways and Policy Options for a Gender-Responsive Recovery](#)
- [COVID-19 and the Care Economy: Immediate Action and Structural Transformation for a Gender-Responsive Recovery](#)
- [COVID-19 and Violence against Women and girls: Addressing the Shadow Pandemic](#)
- [COVID-19 and Women's Leadership: From an Effective Response to Building Back Better](#)

COVID-19 is disrupting efforts to end conflict, with gendered impacts

At least 2 billion people around the world live in places impacted by fragility, conflict and violence.³ COVID-19 has rendered the lives of people in conflict-affected areas all the more insecure. On 23 March 2020, the UN Secretary-General called for a global ceasefire to silence the guns and focus efforts on fighting the pandemic. His appeal prompted positive responses from Member States, conflict parties, regional organizations and civil society.⁴ From Cameroon, Colombia and the Philippines to South Sudan and the Middle East, adversaries took tentative steps to stop violence. However, gestures of support for the call for a global ceasefire did not always translate into concrete improvements on the ground. On 23 June, three months after the appeal, the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) released a [Policy Note exploring the challenges and opportunities presented by this call](#).⁵ On 1 July, the Security Council reinforced the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire through adoption of [resolution 2532 \(2020\)](#). Too many people continue to be affected by conflict; alarmingly, escalations in violence occurred in parts of Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen and the Sahel. In some settings, initial humanitarian pauses or unilateral ceasefires declared by conflict parties have expired, impacting the ability to deliver much-needed aid.

In a meeting of the Security Council on 9 April 2020, the UN Secretary-General outlined several trends related to the pandemic with implications for conflict prevention. These include further erosion of trust in public institutions, a rise in community tensions associated with response measures and, in some contexts,

an amplification of existing drivers and root causes of conflict. Tensions exist around the need for governments to maintain their constitutional obligations to hold elections and the conflicting public health risks posed by in-person voting. Some conflict actors are exploiting the current climate of uncertainty to press their advantage, including through opportunistic and terrorist attacks. In Libya, for example, a hospital treating COVID-19 patients was bombed in early April, and in May a maternity hospital in Afghanistan was attacked. Ongoing threats and experiences of violence such as these increase the burden of COVID-19 as individuals may avoid accessing health facilities and seeking the medical care they desperately need.

These added complexities come on top of existing difficulties in accessing care in weak and often overwhelmed health systems in conflict-affected contexts. In Syria, for example, UN data show that after nine years of war, only 64 per cent of hospitals and 52 per cent of primary health-care centres are fully functional and that up to 70 per cent of health-care workers have left the country.⁶ In some contexts, the COVID-19 pandemic may become a conflict multiplier by creating additional competition for medical supplies and services, as well as food.

In the face of these challenges, women's civil society has been mobilizing around the world using online platforms and social media to call for an urgent cessation of hostilities, inclusive ceasefire processes and comprehensive peace talks. For example, nine Yemeni women's networks issued a joint

statement calling for a ceasefire and an inclusive ceasefire agreement process to follow, and a coalition of over 70 Afghan

and international NGOs issued a joint statement reaffirming the call for a humanitarian ceasefire.

Women's participation is essential to achieving peace during and after the pandemic

A key element of the WPS agenda is women's participation in peacemaking. Women's full, equal and meaningful participation is central to achieving sustainable solutions in peacemaking as well as in pandemic response and recovery. The WPS agenda, underpinned by 10 UN Security Council resolutions,⁷ offers an essential analytical lens to understand and respond to conflict and instability. It recognizes the differentiated impacts of conflict on women and girls and places women at the centre of efforts to prevent its outbreak and achieve sustainable peace. The pandemic has brought into sharp relief how critical the WPS agenda is as a framework for effectively addressing the immediate impact of COVID-19 on conflict-affected populations as well as ensuring the sustainability of longer-term recovery, resilience and peacemaking processes.

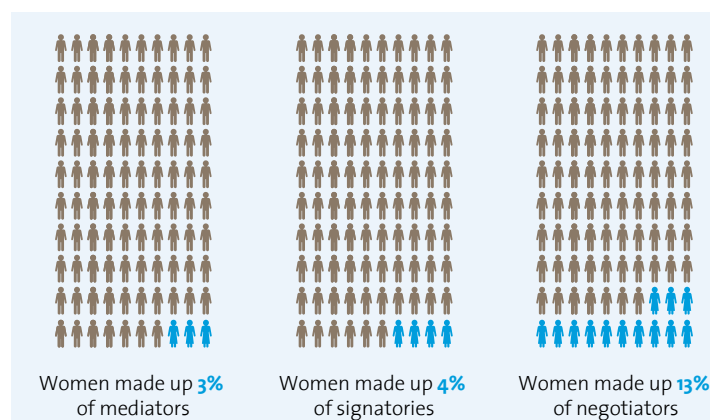
Women have a fundamental right to and interest in participating in decision-making that affects them and the future of their countries. Beyond this, women's engagement in peace processes brings substantive advantages. Their direct participation in a critical mass can contribute to shifting dynamics and broadening the issues under discussion, which increases the likelihood of addressing the root causes of the conflict as well as building community buy-in to the process and outcomes. Research suggests that when women are included, peace agreements are more likely to last.⁸ Moreover, women civil society actors can help apply pressure on conflict parties to reach agreement or to go back to the negotiating table when talks have faltered.

Still, women's inclusion in formal, high-level mediation ('Track I') processes has long been difficult to achieve.⁹ Despite two decades of analysis, interventions and policy advocacy, the prevailing norms in these spaces have remained relatively resistant to change. The modalities for women's participation in formal peace processes, however, are well documented.¹⁰ These range from direct participation as members of delegations, mediators and advisers supporting processes as part of mediation teams, to observers, briefers and members of advisory boards.¹¹ Historically, mass mobilization and advocacy to apply pressure on parties to include women in talks has been fundamental to securing their participation and to gender-responsive outcomes.

In peace processes, ceasefires are a critical part of initial security arrangements. They exist largely to stop the violence, create space for humanitarian access, provide a window of opportunity to reframe conflict dynamics and create the conditions to commence

broader peace processes. While the success and sustainability of ceasefires is largely driven by the willingness of the conflict parties to seize the opportunity to pursue peace, the involvement of women's civil society has been shown to apply political pressure on conflict parties and help shift dynamics. As such, it is vital that processes to secure a ceasefire include women's participation from the outset and are responsive to the differentiated needs of women and men affected by conflict. Indeed, such agreements can lay the foundation for the inclusion of women in comprehensive peace processes that follow. UN Women-commissioned research suggests that, even prior to COVID-19, only 11 per cent of ceasefire agreements included gender provisions—half the level of such provisions in other types of peace agreements.¹²

FIGURE 1:
Between 1992 and 2018, women's inclusion in formal processes has been far from full or equal



Source: UN Women and CFR 2019.

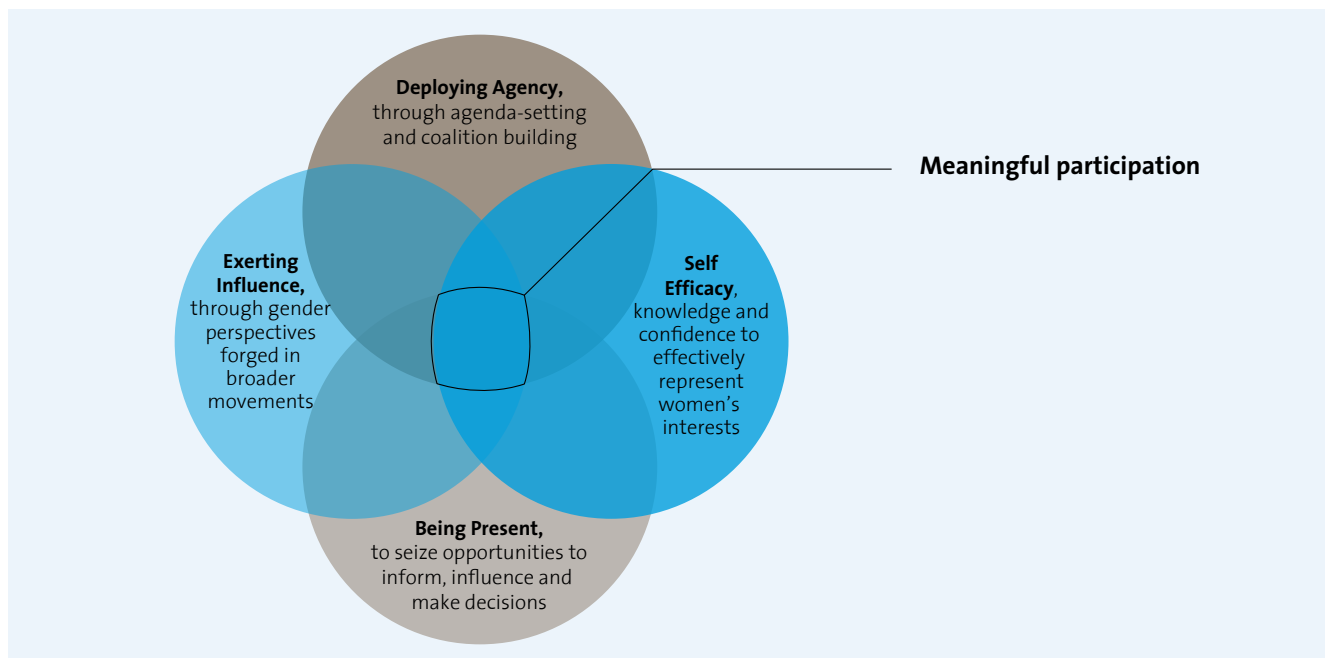
While the current peace and security landscape is often characterized by protracted conflicts and stalled mediation processes,¹³ important mediation work continues at all times with opportunities for women's meaningful participation. Political advocacy, shuttle diplomacy and other conversations remain essential elements of conflict prevention and resolution efforts. In some existing peace processes, discussions continue to move forward virtually or via remote means, offering facilitators the opportunity to include stakeholders hitherto traditionally excluded, including women.

Spurred by COVID-19, reinvigorated efforts to secure peace—such as through the UN Secretary-General's call for a global

ceasefire—may provide new entry points to shift existing dynamics and drive conflict actors to talks. Women, and their gender differentiated needs and perspectives, must be included each and every time talks are held. This applies equally to ceasefire discussions where trust between parties is low and participation often more so, as well as to talks on arrangements for peace agreement implementation.

As peace processes continue under the shadow of violent conflict and a global health emergency, sustained attention must be dedicated to mitigating the high risk that women’s leadership, gender expertise and context-specific gender analysis may be overlooked precisely when needed most.

FIGURE 2:
Elements of women’s meaningful participation in peace and security processes



Source: UN Women 2018a.

How to ensure women’s inclusion in peacemaking during the pandemic

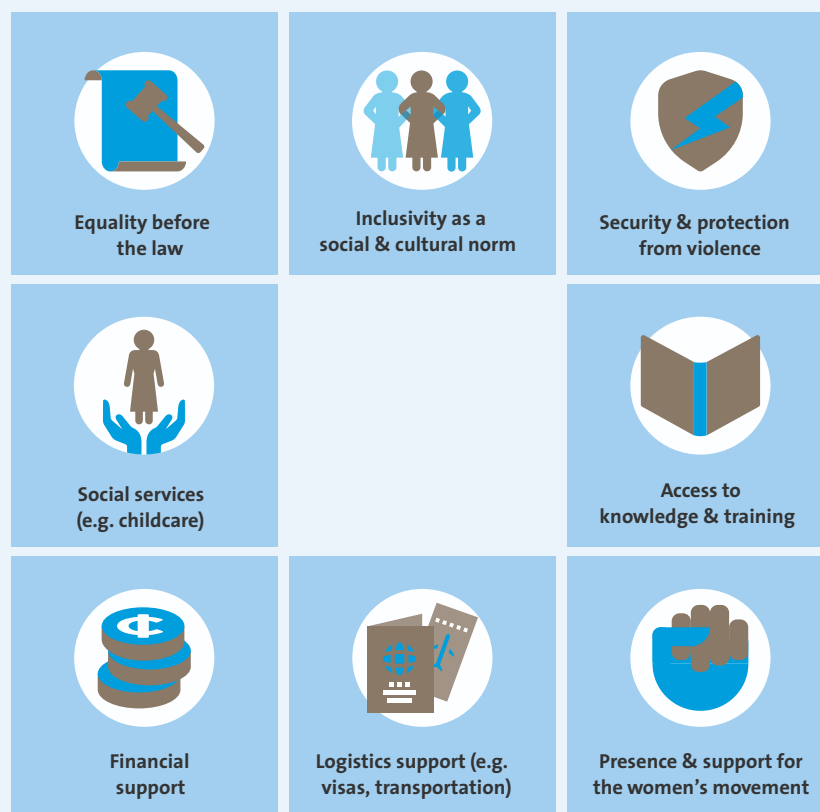
Transformative and inclusive approaches to sustainable peace are essential. This year’s 20th anniversary of UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), the Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire and the mobilization of efforts to respond to COVID-19 across the UN system provide a critical opportunity for the international community to re-energize and refocus attention on inclusive possibilities for peace. The following recommendations are offered as advice to Member States, mediators and their teams and, above all, to conflict parties to ensure gender-inclusive, formal peace processes during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 1. Continue to call for and support women’s meaningful participation in ceasefire and peace negotiations.** Persistent political advocacy is a potent tool. It is essential to raise the need publicly for all ceasefire and peace talks to include

women, to incentivize conflict parties to include women on their delegations and to press mediators to explore creative options to mainstream women’s participation. As effective ceasefires need to address the particular needs and experiences of women in conflict, pressure should be applied to encourage parties to engage in inclusive ceasefire negotiations. Where unilateral ceasefires are declared, the momentum leading to those commitments must be harnessed to open the political space for comprehensive peace talks with women’s full, equal and meaningful participation. Successful examples of women’s participation and advocacy in securing agreements should be highlighted as part of public messaging and strategic communications. Further investments in knowledge products, discussions and trainings on gender-responsive ceasefire arrangements should also be made.

FIGURE 3:

The building blocks: For women to enter, remain and contribute effectively in peace processes, an enabling environment is required



All foundational building blocks for women's meaningful participation in peace processes are under pressure from protracted conflict and the impacts of COVID-19

Source: UN Women 2018b.

- 2. Press for dedicated measures to promote women's meaningful participation in formal negotiations.** As formal discussion spaces are created, whether online or in person, temporary special measures such as quotas and reserved seats should be actively explored.¹⁴ A comprehensive package of context-specific incentives should be provided to overcome any additional COVID-19-related barriers to women's safe participation. Needs-based financial compensation, transport, childcare and other support needs should be made available along with access to digital tools for women.
- 3. Provide specific support to women on negotiating delegations.** Ensuring that women on conflict party delegations are able to participate meaningfully requires targeted support to address their specific needs. Women

negotiators should be offered, consistent with their male counterparts, expert support on key thematic issues under discussion, including security arrangements, humanitarian needs and gender equality issues. Gender advisers must be deployed to support ceasefire discussions, and gender inclusivity training should be provided to all delegates in ceasefire and peace talks, women and men alike.

- 4. Increase support to women's civil society organizations.** The voices of women's civil society organizations should be amplified. Their critical contributions to community leadership, decision-making and peace need to be recognized and their perspectives incorporated as part of the gender-responsive conflict analysis that should underpin all mediation strategies. It is equally critical for civil society actors to hear about

and input into overall mediation or negotiation strategies. Opportunities should be facilitated to enable regular exchanges between civil society leaders, negotiating parties, mediators and mediation teams. UN system-wide Community Engagement Guidelines, currently being finalized in a process led by DPPA, will provide recommendations in this regard. Flexible and sustained financing should be provided to women's civil society groups and grass-roots organizations to support their ongoing work.¹⁵

Examples of the UN mobilizing funding for women's meaningful participation

The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund is a multi-partner trust fund supporting women's organizations in conflict and humanitarian settings. It provides funding for local women's organizations to support their meaningful participation in peace and security processes. More information can be found at <https://wphfund.org/>.

The Gender Promotion Initiative of the UN Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund reflects a commitment to inclusive peacebuilding and the advancement of gender equality. The Fund has been made accessible to civil society organizations in recognition of their importance to peacebuilding. More information can be found at <https://www.pbfgyi.org/>.

5. **Call for the inclusion of gender-responsive COVID-19 commitments in agreements.** In the context of the pandemic, women's groups have highlighted the need for provisions on humanitarian access, prisoner exchange/release, access to public health, social protection and economic assistance as essential to supporting women's rights and

6. **Support multi-track peace processes.** Grass-roots women's groups are already playing significant roles building trust across communities and supporting local peace initiatives. A survey of 63 peace processes leading to formal peace agreements found that 60 per cent had parallel Track II processes, with 71 per cent of those informal processes showing clear evidence of the involvement of women's groups.¹⁷ While women's civil society has often been engaged in peace processes, including through advisory boards, consultative mechanisms and other forums, more needs to be done. Digital technologies offer new opportunities to amplify women's voices across different levels of a process, or to connect women's perspectives brought out in Track II and III forums with Track I actors and thus inform formal processes. Track II and III actors should regularly be invited to engage with Track I delegates as briefers and to engage in consultations and dialogues to drive more comprehensive approaches.

7. **Ensure women are engaged as a vital constituency in the implementation of agreements.** Women's perspectives should be integrated in all gender-responsive conflict analysis, planning and process design. Ceasefire and peace agreements should integrate inclusive verification arrangements, with monitoring teams that are gender diverse; collect sex- and age-disaggregated data; and have access to the most vulnerable populations in the community, including internally displaced persons and refugee and minority women. Minimum quotas for women's participation should be pursued.

8. **Apply a gender lens to navigating the shift to mediation over digital platforms.** As mediation increasingly makes use of technology, opportunities and risks exist for women's inclusion. The Syrian Women Advisory Board and the Technical Advisory Group for Yemen have been able to meet more regularly through online platforms and have engaged

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