



ASWAN FORUM

CHAIR'S SUMMARY

ADVANCING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WOMEN, PEACE
AND SECURITY AGENDA IN A NEW NORMAL:
WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN PREVENTING CONFLICT AND SUSTAINING PEACE

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THE ASWAN FORUM

Acting in its capacity as the Chairman of the African Union (AU) and the Champion of Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development in Africa, Egypt took the initiative to launch the Aswan Forum for Sustainable Peace and Development in 2019. Owned by Africa, and supported by international and regional partners, the Forum is a high-level, multi-stakeholder platform that brings heads of states and governments, leaders from national governments, international and regional organizations, financial institutions, private sector, and civil society, together with visionaries, scholars, and prominent experts, for a context-specific, action-oriented, and forward-looking discussion on the opportunities, as well as the threats and challenges, facing the continent. It provides the first-of-its-kind platform in Africa to address the “peace-development nexus”, while championing African solutions to African problems, including through strengthening the links between policy and practice.

THE CAIRO INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION, PEACEKEEPING AND PEACEBUILDING

Founded in 1994, the Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding (CCCCPA) is an Egyptian public agency; an AU Center of Excellence in training, capacity building and research; and the Arab world’s leading civilian training center on issues of peace and security. It is a major voice of the Global South on a wide range of topics, including conflict prevention and resolution, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), preventing radicalization and extremism leading to terrorism, combating transnational threats, women, peace and security, and climate, security and development nexus.

PARTNERSHIPS





INTRODUCTION

The contribution of women as positive agents for peace has long been acknowledged. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) landmark resolution 1325 and the nine additional resolutions that together constitute the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, emphasize the vital role of women in the prevention and peaceful resolution of armed conflicts.

The African continent is at the forefront of implementing the WPS agenda with the highest number of NAPs in the world. This is also reflected in a remarkable participation of African women as agents for peace, notably in peace processes. In addition, women's protection in armed conflict and post-conflict situations is at the center of regional policies. Nevertheless, barriers continue to hinder the comprehensive implementation of the WPS agenda.

Marking the 20th anniversary of the UNSCR 1325, 2020 was destined to be the year for strengthening the momentum towards the comprehensive implementation of the WPS agenda. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges while underscoring the importance of the agenda in achieving sustainable peace. The persistence of structural drivers of armed conflict in Africa

exacerbated the impact of the pandemic on people who are vulnerable, including women. In fact, women were hit disproportionately by the pandemic yet the response mechanisms to the crisis revealed gender gaps, as a result of gender-blind measures, and weak preventative planning for this multifaceted crisis.

While altering traditional forms of mediation and peacebuilding efforts and amplifying grievances, the pandemic also brought new opportunities that if capitalized on, could ultimately accelerate the comprehensive implementation of the Sustaining Peace and WPS agendas in armed conflict and post conflict settings.

Acting in its capacity as the Secretariat of the Aswan Forum for Sustainable Peace and Development, CCCPA organized, in collaboration with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Council for Women and UN Women Egypt a Virtual Dialogue titled: **“Advancing the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in a New Normal: Women's Leadership in Preventing Conflict and Sustaining Peace”** on 4 November 2020. The dialogue brought together a select group of policymakers, experts and practitioners from

governments, civil society organizations, and regional and international organizations, to discuss how the lessons learned from the pandemic can act as an accelerator for the implementation of the Sustaining Peace and WPS agenda, as well as ensuring that the “new normal” will result in preventative and gender-inclusive efforts in both armed conflict and post-conflict settings. The objective of this dialogue was to identify challenges and opportunities that resulted from the pandemic and to suggest concrete, action-oriented recommendations to be considered during the second edition of the Aswan Forum to enhance the implementation of both the WPS and Sustaining Peace agendas.

This Chair’s summary captures the key messages and recommendations emerging from the dialogue and its ensuing discussion. Participation included Egypt’s National Council for Women, the governments of South Sudan, Liberia and Egypt, the Embassy of Canada in Cairo, the Office of the African Union Special Envoy on WPS, FemWise-Africa, UN Women Egypt, UN Women ROAS, UN Women Africa Regional Office in Nairobi, UN Women South Africa, the League of Arab States, UN United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA), UN Peacebuilding Support Office (UN-PBSO) and the Global Network for Women Peacebuilders (GNWP).



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SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

1. Covid-19 and its Disproportionate Effect on Women in Armed Conflict Situations

The outbreak of COVID-19 exposed gaps in the implementation of all pillars of the WPS agenda, including the Participation and Relief and Recovery pillars, but most notably in the Prevention and Protection pillars. Although women were the most adversely affected group from this crisis, their specific needs and rights were not sufficiently taken into consideration in

the planning of responses. Thus, women’s already existing vulnerabilities were aggravated.

1. Women’s Vulnerability as Victims of GBV

Gender based-violence (GBV) has been the most evident repercussion of the pandemic. This significant rise of GBV has been termed as the “shadow pandemic” as it surged by 25% globally since the reinforcement of lockdowns.¹

¹ United Nations, “Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women”, 9 April 2020, available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>

Numbers are expected to continue increasing and governments introduced new response mechanisms in these difficult conditions using digital platforms and hotlines to ease the reporting of cases. More coordinated and comprehensive designs for these initiatives need to be present to protect women.

Furthermore, African countries affected by armed conflict have been the most impacted by the pandemic. In countries like South Sudan, situations have been further compounded by recent floods and swarms of locusts. While most of the population already consists of internally displaced persons or refugees living in neighboring countries, the flood has worsened living conditions for hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese and displaced people in the lower part of the Nile. This has further increased women's exposure to high-risk conditions, aggravating their vulnerability to trafficking, and putting them at a high risk of becoming victims of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV).

2. Women's Economic Vulnerability

African women's long-standing economic vulnerability has been further exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. Due to lockdowns, most

of the lost jobs were in the informal women-led economic sector, which lacks the protection of formal employment. As a result of the disruption of supply chains and market closures, women's financial burdens are being further exacerbated. Women's economic security has to be prioritized in armed conflict and post conflict settings, taking into consideration the changing roles of women in these settings, where they are usually the sole or primary breadwinner of their families.

3. Women's Differentiated Needs

The critical conditions surrounding the pandemic is hindering the delivery of healthcare services to all people, but women in particular have been the most disadvantaged, with insufficient attention given to their specific healthcare needs. Maternal mortality has been on the rise as women do not seek medical help in fear of contracting the virus or transmitting it to a family member. Movement restrictions have also made it difficult for women to access health services.

Furthermore, despite being among the most vulnerable, women are not often adequately included in the planning and response efforts to COVID-19, particularly in armed conflict settings.

II. The Implementation of the WPS Agenda in Africa and the Responses to COVID-19

To advance the implementation of the WPS agenda, Africa has made considerable progress with 30 African countries having developed National Action Plans NAPs including highly effective plans with manifested outcomes (example: South Sudan having women signatories of the peace agreement and the appointment of a woman Minister of Defense). NAPs should continue to aim to unlock the WPS agenda's transformational potential for achieving sustainable peace and security. They should also be designed for impact while reflecting African women's needs and perspectives. African governments are therefore encouraged to adopt

implementable NAPs with more focused national budget allocation and monitoring and evaluation matrices.

Relatedly and in response to the pandemic, government spending priorities are fast-changing and efforts to implement the WPS agenda continue to be exerted at all levels. The newly adopted UNSCR 2532 acknowledges the critical role that women are playing in COVID-19 response efforts, while also stressing the exacerbation of the adverse impact of armed conflict situations on women and girls. Some African governments offer good practices of gender-sensitive responses to the crisis; such as



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the government of Egypt that issued a first of its kind Policy Paper that accurately depicted the situation and shaped the response to it out of its firm belief that responsive governance is key to advancing gender equality and women's rights, launching a 'Women Policy Tracker' to monitor the implementation of those policies. To date, more than 106 measures and preventive actions have been adopted in response to the pandemic. Egypt was ranked the first in the Middle East Region on measures taken by countries around the world to support women during the pandemic.² Nevertheless, in armed conflict and post-conflict settings, policies developed in response to this crisis have shown limited gender considerations. The pandemic exposed pre-identified gaps in the Prevention pillar with weak preventive approaches to armed conflict and exacerbation of vulnerabilities. In the Protection pillar, gaps were underscored with a surge in Gender-Based Violence against women and with aggravation of inequalities. The exclusion that women face from the decision-making and planning of the response to the pandemic in armed conflict situations reveals barriers in the meaningful implementation of the Participation pillar of the WPS agenda. Other gaps in the response to COVID-19 in Africa were also apparent and shed light on the lack of

comprehensive implementation of the Relief and Recovery pillar, as it was treated as a health crisis rather than a multifaceted socio-economic one, which undermined its far-reaching insecurity implications on the most vulnerable.

At the same time, limited but noticeable gender-sensitive measures were introduced in an attempt to protect women in times of crises in armed conflict and post-conflict situations. These efforts were mainly driven by women actors, most notably local women leaders, and women peacebuilders, who were the first responders and have been working on enhancing resilience to such crises. Nevertheless, the role of women peacebuilders as key actors in preventing armed conflict and sustaining peace remains undermined.

At the continental level, the African Union has developed guidelines on "Gender-Responsive Responses to COVID-19", focusing in particular on vulnerable segments of society and those living in crisis and armed conflict affected countries, in order to ensure that a gender-sensitive perspective is included in the analysis and responses to the pandemic. Women's organizations and local community leaders, including peacebuilders, have been actively working on supporting the people in need and facilitating the distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

² According to the UN Women/UNDP COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker



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III. The Opportunities Offered by the Response to Covid-19 for Women Peacebuilders

1. Harnessing Digital Platforms and Technology:

With the global online switch and the access to digital platforms, women are given the opportunity now more than ever to access information through technology, voice out their opinion and participate in conversations and dialogues that are integral to the decision-making process. Digital platforms have made policy spaces open to increase women's representation and active involvement in peace processes as mediators. In that regard, FemWise-Africa has shown increased presence with active support to women on the ground and documented the network's members' experiences during the crisis. However, infrastructure in Africa still lacks the capacity to include underrepresented women in remote areas whose voice and opinion are crucial to achieving an inclusive decision-making process. These are emerging challenges that should be considered

by policymakers, development partners and donors.

2. Efforts of Women Peacebuilders:

There exists a substantial link between the WPS and the sustaining peace agenda as women's full and meaningful participation translates to the sustainability of outcomes. Women's involvement in efforts to prevent, resolve and rebuild from armed conflict are highlighted as key for those efforts' effectiveness. In fact, women peacebuilders have been on the frontlines of trying to reverse the devastating effect of armed conflicts and crises and have been a case in point for the valuable input women can have in these situations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they have been providing access to information on healthcare, humanitarian aid, social services as well as psycho-social support. Women peacebuilders also play a vital role as intermediaries between their communities and the government, by informing the latter of the locals' needs and echoing the experiences on the ground.



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IV. The Way Forward/Key Recommendations

Access to digital technology:

Access to and use of technology should take into account the structural barriers that deprive certain segments of the society, notably on the local level, from participating. Africa's digital infrastructure should be enhanced to ensure access to technology so that men and women peacebuilders including youth can better position themselves in the center of this digitized space to engage not only armed conflict parties, but also people affected by armed conflict, with the aim of achieving more inclusive peace agreements and outcomes.

Digital solutions are also possible areas of investment to enhance women's financial resilience to crises in armed conflict situations. Harnessing technology for armed conflict prevention and resolution should be strategized to be participatory and inclusive for a better involvement of young men and women in the process.

Coordination Mechanisms:

It is necessary to ensure coordinated efforts between ministries and national institutions towards the normalization of gender-responsive budgets and gender-sensitive preventative planning and response to crises. More effective and systematic coordination between the different actors and stakeholders (governments, civil society organizations, regional and

international organizations, financial institutions and the private sector) to address the challenges and opportunities for greater roles of women in the decision making, and more robust inclusion of women, is necessary to build back better.

Funding:

Financial assistance for women peacebuilders and women-led organizations needs to be increased and fostered. It is crucial for them to continue exerting the required level of effort, taking into account that only 0.2% percent of financial assistance currently goes to women-led organizations.

Women Peacebuilders:

African women peacebuilders have a wealth of experiences from the grassroots level engagements and traditional mediation methods that need to be considered and reflected while designing peace processes, policies and responses to realize sustainable and long-lasting peace. It is essential to ensure that women peacebuilders are effectively supported through focused and tailored capacity-building activities to strengthen their technical skills and further empower them in promoting gender-sensitive perspectives to crises. Women peacebuilders should have continuous financial support, especially during times of armed conflicts. The media should also play a bigger role in showcasing women peacebuilders' important contributions.



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