

Building Holistic Security

Addressing Security Risks of Women
Peacebuilders Through Partnerships



Women
PeaceMakers
Program



University
of San Diego

KROC SCHOOL
Institute for Peace and Justice

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About

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (Kroc IPJ) launched in 2001 with a vision of active peacebuilding. In 2007, the Kroc IPJ became part of the newly established Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, a global hub for peacebuilding and social innovation.

The core of the Kroc IPJ mission is to co-create learning with peacemakers — learning that is deeply grounded in the lived experience of peacemakers around the world, that is made rigorous by our place within a university ecosystem, and that is immediately and practically applied by peacemakers to end cycles of violence. The Kroc IPJ is the bridge between theory and practice at the Kroc School, driving the Kroc School's mission to shape a more peaceful and more just world.

Together with local women peacebuilders and renowned international Women, Peace and Security organizations, the Kroc IPJ identifies the most critical peacebuilding challenges facing women leaders around the world. We then co-develop applied and actionable research to identify evidence-based solutions.

Since 2002, the Kroc IPJ has hosted the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship program. The Fellowship offers a unique opportunity for women peacebuilders to engage in a cycle of learning, practice, research and participation that strengthens peacebuilding partnerships. The Women PeaceMakers Fellowship facilitates impactful collaborations between women peacebuilders from conflict-affected communities and international partner organizations. The Fellows also co-create research intended to shape the peacebuilding field and highlight good practices for peacebuilding design and implementation.

This report was developed by the four 2020-2021 Women PeaceMaker Fellows — Nesreen Barwari from Iraq, Slava Shikh Hasan from Syria, Muna Luqman from Yemen, and Ambassador Liberata Mulamula from Tanzania — with the support of a research team comprising Sandra Melone, Neslihan Ozgunes, Eva Dalak, and Natalija Gojković. This work was also supported by members of leading international peacebuilding organizations, who provided their own expertise and perspective to shape this work. This report is based on the lived realities of women peacebuilders and peacebuilding partners, providing both concrete recommendations for an international audience and in-depth, context-specific analysis through the case studies.



Executive Summary

Women peacebuilders inevitably face risks and insecurity in their daily work. International partners have an important role to play in supporting their safety and protection. Understanding women peacebuilders' roles and the types of risks they face is the first step in ensuring an adequate response. The diversity of roles that women peacebuilders play, as well as the multiple factors that impact the types of risks they might face, need to be taken into account by international partners from the very beginning of a partnership.

This report identifies how international partners can better partner with women peacebuilders to address the risks and insecurity they face in the different facets of their work. The report analyzes the risks that many women peacebuilders experience and provides guidelines for international partners to help prevent and mitigate these risks. Through case studies, the report identifies challenges and opportunities drawn directly from the lived realities of women peacebuilders and their partners, as well as from experts working in the Women, Peace and Security field.

The report addresses how international partners who wish to work with women peacebuilders and support them in addressing the risks and insecurity they face need to recognize the scope and nature of peacebuilding work, which is often cross-cutting, overlapping with humanitarian response and development work. Understanding the nuances and breadth of women peacebuilders' work is crucial to identifying the risks they face and providing them with effective legal, political and financial protection — and is thereby essential to creating partnerships that mitigate and address these risks

Analyzing the security risks women peacebuilders experience and current strategies for preventing and mitigating these risks generated the following key findings:

- Women peacebuilders experience threats at the personal and community level as well as at the institutional level.
- Women peacebuilders know best how they can be supported and in which ways the international community can be helpful.
- There is a need for institutional policies and measures implemented by international partners to prioritize women peacebuilders' security.
- Funding is critical for mitigating risks, but funds are often inaccessible to less well-established organizations and almost totally inaccessible to non-registered organizations or to individual women peacebuilders.
- Collective action and network-building can provide protective mechanisms for women peacebuilders.



The following recommendations for international partners and funders are based on this evidence and analysis:

● Support women peacebuilders' individual strategies for security and resilience

- Recognize the scope and diversity of women peacebuilders' work.
- Be aware that women peacebuilders may not self-identify as such — and that sometimes identifying as a peacebuilder can pose a risk.
- Provide opportunities for women peacebuilders to engage in self-care practices, rest and recovery.
- Create safe spaces for women peacebuilders to gather and share and analyze risks, co-develop mitigation strategies and create solidarity.
- Facilitate psychosocial support that brings women together across existing divides rather than reinforcing those divides.
- Address structural issues that lead to burnout and fatigue, including donor expectations for results or the absence of resources for risk management.
- Where appropriate, support the visibility of women peacebuilders and highlight the successes of the work they do.

● Respond to real-time changes in conflict and security dynamics

- Allow for local women peacebuilding organizations to temporarily cease operations if security conditions change and they no longer feel comfortable working in the area.
- Establish incident tracking and reporting systems to compile and share security incidents and threats.
- Provide flexibility in reporting, especially if describing activities in a different way will help reduce risks to local peace leaders.
- Jointly analyze security incidents to extract lessons learned.
- Plan for the possibility to take radical protection steps, including providing legal support or logistical support for women peacebuilders to leave their community or country, including facilitating visa processes.
- Develop digital security plans and ensure that all partners can operate in digitally safe ways. Ensure that women peacebuilders have professional VPNs, paid encrypted mail accounts and technical support on how to utilize these for digital safety.

● Create responsive funding mechanisms

- Allocate funding resources for joint security risk management and development of risk mitigation strategies with women peacebuilders and their organizations and listen to their perspectives on what constitutes risk and insecurity.
- Be willing to share risks — especially financial risks — to support risk mitigation for women peacebuilders. Be clear about the extent to which these risks can be shared or mitigated.
- Create flexible reporting requirements and allow for verbal reporting.
- Create opportunities for multi-year, flexible and core funding to allow women peacebuilders to take control of their own programming and agenda.
- Offer need-based funding grounded in the articulated needs of grassroots women peacebuilders rather than solely in international funding priorities.
- Avoid competition between local women’s organizations for limited project-oriented funding and encourage groups to collaborate.
- Provide rapid response mechanisms and urgent action funds to support legal aid, emergency relocation, protective accompaniment and medical support.
- Create opportunities for cross-sectoral funding to support work on coalition-building across humanitarian assistance, protection and psychosocial programs.



● Address security risks at the root

- Ensure community buy-in and support for the activities of women peacebuilders by engaging with community leaders, men, family members, and peers.
- Include male relatives of women peacebuilders and men from the community in discussions on mitigation strategies.
- Identify, support and build national and international networks of women peacebuilders for them to share experiences and provide mutual support and solidarity. This includes collaboration between women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders by ensuring inclusive criteria for participation, where possible, for mutual reinforcement of their work.

● Center women peacebuilders' leadership and experiences in program design and implementation

- Identify and work with groups of women peacebuilders who reflect the diversity of experiences in any context (geography, in-country/diaspora, race, religion, ethnicity, education, age, sexual orientation, disability, etc.).
- Commit to partnering with groups that are marginalized, smaller or harder to reach.
- Carry out joint and inclusive context, gender and risk analyses with a diverse representation of women peace leaders.
- Apply an intersectional approach to identifying further vulnerabilities, risks and threats.
- Include women peacebuilders in all program processes, including design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Create opportunities for discussions between funders and women peacebuilders about what is possible, desirable and feasible, while being clear countering anxiety around losing existing support or future funds.
- Ensure that women peacebuilders' safety is taken into consideration in program design and implementation.
- Address power imbalances between peacebuilders and funders, being aware they may create pressure on women peacebuilders or their organizations to accept and undertake risks that they would not otherwise.

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Introduction

Women peacebuilders inevitably face risks and insecurity in their daily work. International partners have an important role to play in supporting their safety and protection. This report identifies how international partners can better partner with women peacebuilders to address the risks and insecurity they face in the different facets of their work. The report analyzes the risks that many women peacebuilders experience and provides guidelines for international partners to help prevent and mitigate these risks. It looks at how international partners who wish to work with women peacebuilders and support them in addressing the risks and insecurity they face need to recognize the scope and nature of the work, which is often cross-cutting, overlapping with humanitarian response and development work. Understanding the nuances and breadth of women peacebuilders' work is crucial to identifying the risks they face and providing them with effective legal, political and financial protection — and is thereby essential to creating partnerships that mitigate and address these risks.

This study frames the discussion around the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and the *Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325*. It explores the various roles of women in conflict and articulates what it means to be a woman peacebuilder. Through case studies, the report identifies challenges and opportunities drawn directly from the lived realities of women peacebuilders and their partners, as well as from experts working in the WPS field.

When developing strategies to address the risks and insecurity women peacebuilders face, international partners need to be willing to share the risk that engagement in conflict or post-conflict zones may entail. This requires open space for honest discussions about what risks exist, how they can be addressed and by whom they can be addressed. Furthermore, international partners need to think about security in a holistic manner, addressing not only the personal security of the woman peacebuilder but also the security of her organization, family and community, as all of these are integral to sustaining the woman peacebuilder's work. Similarly, international partners need to engage with the root causes of these risks, including harmful gender norms and masculinities.

Finally, a concerted effort to sustain women's peacebuilding work and facilitate appropriate risk management planning entails providing long-term and flexible funding to address women peacebuilders' needs.

The report provides specific recommendations for how international partners can best address the security needs of women peacebuilders through their partnerships with them, with a specific focus on supporting women peacebuilders' individual strategies for security and resilience; responding to real-time changes in conflict and security dynamics; creating responsive funding mechanisms; supporting women peacebuilders' leadership in program design and implementation, risk analysis, and security strategizing; and addressing security risks at the root.

This report identifies how international partners can better partner with women peacebuilders to address the risks and insecurity they face in the different facets of their work.



Conceptualizing women peacebuilders

UN Security Council Resolution 1325,¹ passed in 2000, addresses the impact of war on women and the importance of women's full and equal participation in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction. The resolution also calls for special measures to protect women and girls from conflict-related sexual violence and outlines gender-related responsibilities of the United Nations in different political and programmatic areas.²

The resolution recognizes women as critical actors and agents of change in peacebuilding and defines the pillars that have framed the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) field: participation, conflict prevention, protection, and relief and recovery.³ The premise of Resolution 1325, according to the *Global Study on the Implementation of 1325*, was that "peace is only sustainable if women are fully included, and that peace is inextricably linked with equality between women and men."⁴ However, the emphasis is largely on the participation of women in general, rather than specifically women peacebuilders — and not every woman is a peacebuilder, nor supportive of human rights.⁵ Women are political actors; they may be a force for peace or may participate in violent groups.⁶

The *Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325*, published in 2015, contains key findings on how to build sustainable peace through participation, protection, justice and prevention. It emphasizes the importance of addressing the full range of violations of the rights of women and girls and notes that women's security is strongly linked to the integrity of their rights.⁷ The *Global Study* emphasizes that security is not limited to mitigating physical violence: "Security also has political, economic and social dimensions. It is both public and private. It means absence of fear but also absence of want. It also implies active agency, to be allowed to participate in the decisions that are made on your behalf."⁸ Since the creation of 1325 in 2000, efforts have increased to consider security not only at the individual level but also in the home and community.⁹

The purpose of this report is to identify how international partners can better partner with women peacebuilders to address the risks and insecurity that women peacebuilders face in the different facets of their work. The report analyzes the risks that many women peacebuilders experience and provides guidelines for international partners to help prevent and mitigate these risks. The report will analyze common challenges for partners working to mitigate risks for women peacebuilders, a discussion of the common risks women peacebuilders experience, and tools and strategies to mitigate and prevent these risks.



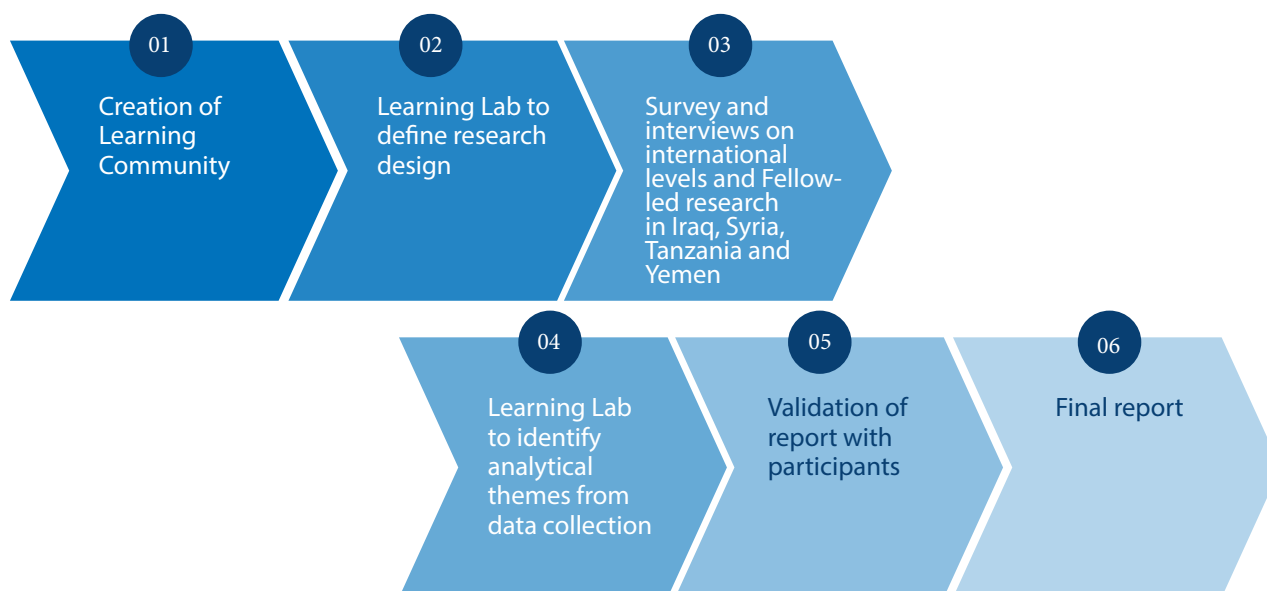
Methodology

This study was created through the work of a Learning Community of Women PeaceMaker Fellows and International Partners, with the support of the research team.

The Learning Community was composed of the following members:

- Women PeaceMaker Fellows from Iraq, Syria, Tanzania and Yemen;
- International Peacebuilding Partners who are representatives of the African Union, Global Affairs Canada, the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) and MADRE;
- Four research consultants; and
- Kroc IPJ staff.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire project took place online for the first time in the Fellowship's history, with all members of the Learning Community collaborating virtually as research happened simultaneously across locations.



The Women PeaceMaker Fellows conducted surveys, focus group discussions and interviews with women peacebuilders in their own contexts in 2021. In parallel, the research team conducted key informant interviews with peacebuilding professionals and women peacebuilders about the security risks they face in their work.

The central research question, created by the Women PeaceMaker Fellows with the support of the International Partners, was as follows:

How can international peacebuilding organizations better partner with local women peacebuilders to address risks and lack of security women face when working to prevent and end cycles of violence?



This question was divided into four sub-questions:

How are international organizations supporting women peacebuilders to address risks and lack of security that they face when working to prevent and end cycles of violence?

What risks and security issues exist and how were/are they addressed?

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the situation on the ground (positively and negatively)?

What are the most effective partnership models to address risks women peacebuilders face when they are working to prevent and end the cycles of violence?

To respond to these questions, the Learning Community employed mostly qualitative methods, including semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys and desk research. The research consultants conducted 57 in-depth key informant interviews with peacebuilding professionals and women peacebuilders. Purposive sampling was used to select participants for key interviews, aiming to have a cross-section of participants who were knowledgeable and involved in peacebuilding and peacekeeping programs internationally and in Iraq, Syria, Tanzania and Yemen. The Women PeaceMakers conducted focus group discussions in their own contexts with a total of 95 female and male participants.

The design allowed the researchers to operationalize key concepts of this study through discussions about the role of — and challenges faced by — women peacebuilders, grounded in the experiences and opinions of the research participants. The research team also examined how international and national organizations partner with local women peacebuilders in Iraq, Syria, Tanzania and Yemen and draw on lessons learned from other contexts.

Methodology for case studies

The case studies — focused on Iraq, Syria, Tanzania and Yemen — provide further analysis on their respective contexts, including key findings and recommendations.

In Iraq, researchers collected qualitative data through 10 semi-structured interviews. A sample of 10 women from different religious and ethnic backgrounds was chosen, which was important for understanding how women peacebuilders' experiences differ across the regions of Iraq. A story was collected for each woman peacebuilder.

In Syria, a total of 48 people (mostly from civil society, humanitarian and conflict resolution sectors) participated: Four women and two men were interviewed; eight women and four men responded to surveys; and 14 women and 10 men participated in focus groups. Data collection took place in northern Syria and neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq, with some data collected remotely from those working in or on areas under the Syrian regime's control.

In Yemen, qualitative data were collected through one focus group discussion, five interviews, and 35 responses to an online survey.

In Tanzania, the researchers collected qualitative data through 13 interviews and three focus group discussions. Purposive sampling was used to select knowledgeable interview participants who were involved in peacebuilding programs in Tanzania, including diplomats from international organizations, foreign embassy staff, leaders of national organizations, and two experts from the Police Gender Desk.

Identifying risks to women peacebuilders

Women peacebuilders face intersecting risks that can manifest separately or simultaneously, including conflict-related and identity-related threats to their security and harms related to the effects of militarized masculinity, state counter-terrorism policy, the COVID pandemic, and online spaces. In order to best support the security of women peacebuilders, international partners must ensure their inclusion in programming and risk identification processes. Some of these dimensions are highlighted in the case studies focused on Syria and Iraq, authored by Women PeaceMakers Slava Shikh Hasan and Nesreen Barwari, respectively). This chapter discusses the different types of risks that interviewees and the Women PeaceMaker Fellows identified as being the most salient in their work.

In a 2020 ICAN report, Holmes conceptualizes risks to women peacebuilders at the personal, organizational and environmental levels, divided into physical, emotional, political, economic and spiritual dimensions. In this framework, physical threats include attacks, imprisonment, harassment, surveillance or assault; emotional threats include burnout, trauma or deteriorating relationships; political threats include legal harassment, revocation of licenses, loss of access to communities or defamation; economic threats include frozen bank accounts and assets or the imposition of unreasonable taxes and fees; and religious threats include denial of religious rites or accusations of acting against religious norms.¹⁰ Holmes notes that digital threats cut across all of these categories.

Conflict-related risks for women peacebuilders

In countries where there is violent conflict, entire communities are invariably impacted by high levels of displacement, interruption of access to basic services, limitations on freedom of movement due to safety concerns and threats to physical safety. In such contexts, women peacebuilders may face additional risks due to the breakdown of governance and protection mechanisms, increased domestic violence and the additional care burden imposed by conditions of war. The severity of risk and threats to security faced by women peacebuilders depends on the context, the level of violent conflict, societal norms and whether there are legal and community safeguards in place.

Most commonly, women peacebuilders are ostracized by their families or community for engaging with all sides of a conflict. By being willing to engage across the lines of conflict, peacebuilders, and specifically women peacebuilders, expose themselves to mistrust from all sides, including from within their own communities.¹¹ Women peacebuilders may be called “traitors” for dealing with the “other” side and faced with social rejection. For example, Turkish- and Greek-Cypriot women peacebuilders in Cyprus, who joined under the name “Women Building Bridges in Cyprus - Hands Across the Divide” often face attacks from their own communities for engaging with and defending the rights of the other community. On the Greek-Cypriot side, this entails nationalist attacks in the media, while on the Turkish-Cypriot side it includes loss of jobs, arrests and threats for being “traitors.”¹²



“Violence is not limited to a particular religion, sect or ethnicity. Violence exists in all sects and religions. I continued to work and face all these challenges moving against the trend. The secret of my work is that I deal with people from the human side only and not on a national, ethnic, religious or sectarian basis.” — Siroud Muhammed Faleh Ahmad, peacebuilder from Iraq¹³

If women peacebuilders speak out about violence perpetrated by their own political, ethnic or religious group, they may be considered unpatriotic or traitorous.¹⁴ Woman PeaceMaker Fellow Muna Luqman from Yemen experienced something similar: as a humanitarian worker, she tried to prevent youth from being mobilized as fighters, thereby putting herself at risk from armed groups. The Yemeni government and warring parties identified her as a threat because she advocated for peace and criticized violence on both sides.¹⁵

Women peacebuilders often face increased censorship and surveillance in conflict-affected contexts. Civil society groups, including women peacebuilders, face attacks from anti-rights groups and government, including online attacks, surveillance and repression of protests.¹⁶ In some contexts, they may also be at risk of being killed, disappeared, abused or harassed, put under house arrest, or made subject to frozen bank accounts.¹⁷ The space in which women peacebuilders and their organizations operate may be restricted through laborious registration processes, diminished access to international funding, bans on passports and travel, and closure of organizations through legal and taxation loopholes.¹⁸ Women peacebuilders have also faced reprisals for contributing to shadow reports submitted to the Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) or reporting to the UN Security Council.¹⁹

The risks may differ depending on geographical location or the prevailing power dynamics in each conflict zone. In Iraq, as shared in focus group discussions conducted for this study, women peacebuilders residing in the Kurdistan region identify fewer threats to their security compared to women residing in central and southern governorates, who face threats from state and non-state military actors. In the case of Yemen, women peacebuilders face the risk of being tracked by female-led intelligence officials from both sides of the conflict — the Houthi “Zainabiyat” or the government’s “Al-Fatimat” — but these risks differ depending on women’s positioning in relation to the conflict parties. In the Houthi-controlled areas, women peacebuilders are targeted by sexualized smear campaigns to damage their reputations, while in government-controlled areas women peacebuilders are accused of terrorism and of being secular.²⁰

In cases where governance is weak, the absence of laws protecting women and the lack of accountability mechanisms compound the risks women face. The absence of the rule of law, along with increased impunity, creates space for increased threats against women peacebuilders.²¹ Extreme changes in context, such as in Afghanistan, can also lead to situations where women peacebuilders suddenly find themselves under severe risk. Until August 2021, women in Afghanistan were gaining in visibility and participation. With the Taliban’s takeover, Zarqa Yaftali, Executive Director of the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation, told the UN Security Council in 2022, “women and girls are now demonstrating in Kabul and elsewhere to regain the right to work and to education, facing violence and threats from the Taliban for doing so.”²²

In the case study conducted for this report, Woman PeaceMaker Fellow Slava Shikh Hasan discusses the challenges of building equitable partnerships that mitigate risk for women peacebuilders. Women generally face many risks in Syria — and even more so when working in peacebuilding. These risks include violence, harassment, exclusion, economic deprivation, arrest and exile. Societal attitudes, customs and traditions constrict women's roles, and the absence of laws protecting women put women at risk. There are no official structures, whether government institutions or agencies, that ensure the protection of women peacebuilders in Syria.

Participants report that international support does not mitigate military or security risks. Women peacebuilders report having discussed the risks they face with international partners with no subsequent interventions for addressing these or protecting them. International partners do not seem to have a vision for avoiding such risks: they focus from project design phase onwards only on the potential risks to their project rather than on the potential risks to women peacebuilders. The focus on Women, Peace and Security has primarily been on women's participation, while the provision of protection has been neglected. Even for international organizations, the concept of protecting women peacebuilders solely amounts to providing for basic needs, rather than supporting holistic protection.

Women peacebuilders' voices are being unevenly heard. While women at the political level feel they are heard, others do not, depending on their ethnic and religious affiliation. Most INGOs interact with a very small pool of interlocutors and are politicized, which has an influence on where funding is allocated. When support is provided, it is dedicated to project implementation, not to the mitigation of risks. INGOs offer women some help to attain financial independence through employment, but the biggest beneficiaries are always men, since the presence of women is pro forma, and decision-making is under men's control. Women are marginalized throughout society, and interviewees felt that when organizations hire women activists, it is often linked to a desire to attract financial support rather than to a genuine desire to enable women to become decision-makers and leaders.

Hasan emphasizes the need for a community-driven approach to problem-solving and the enhancement of networking and partnerships between community groups in the design and implementation of peacebuilding projects. She argues that, in addition to ensuring access to grants and psychosocial support for women peacebuilders, organizations need to find radical solutions for protecting those at risk rather than seeking temporary solutions. [Read the full case study on page 39.](#)



Identity-related risks for women peacebuilders

Women peacebuilders are often subject to attacks because they are women, and these attacks may be connected to norms related to gender in their respective contexts. Women peacebuilders and human rights defenders experience significant risk of sexual violence, as well as campaigns targeted at their reputations as women.²³ A Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation survey conducted in 2018 found that 72 percent of women activists living in conflict-affected societies had been exposed to violence or threats of violence.²⁴

When structures are weakened and communities disrupted, women often take over roles that were previously closed to them, and this can make them more of a target for violence.²⁵ One such arena where women may take leadership is in peacebuilding and other forms of activism. Women's participation in peace processes is increasingly facing backlash from actors who wish to silence them.²⁶

Restricted civic space, which is common during conflict, is often linked to restrictions on women's rights to free movement, to sexual and reproductive health services, and to political engagement.²⁷ The risk of imprisonment or detention often involves the risk of experiencing sexual violence as well. Participants in focus group discussions conducted for the Yemen case study shared that women peacebuilders may also face considerable limitations to their freedom of movement, especially in contexts where they are expected to be accompanied by a male relative. In these contexts, participants reported that women are more vulnerable to sexual and physical violence when a male relative is not present.²⁸

In many communities, shaming a woman is an effective tool, as a woman's honor has ramifications for her family as well. Actors may shame women peace leaders by claiming to have access to material of a sexual nature or engaging in slander about their financial or organizational legitimacy. Being the victim of sexual violence — or being assumed to have been — can also harm a woman's reputation.²⁹

The lack of supportive family, work and social environments means that women peacebuilders' experience of risk is different from that of male peacebuilders, who are generally supported in their role.³⁰ Sexual harassment, intimidation, assault and rape are major physical threats to women and are often used as tools to prevent women peacebuilders from carrying out their work.³¹ Such attacks also cause fear and have a "chilling effect" on the work of women peacebuilders, exhausting them as they divert attention and resources from their work to defend themselves in courts, fight media campaigns, or relocate for safety.³²

“...the compounded effects of the growing backlash against the women’s movement, media harassment, cultural and religious fundamentalisms, the pressures of running organizations, and the challenges of balancing family and professional obligations, make the task of sustaining individual women’s energies very difficult...many of us are tired, depressed, and angry...” — Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, *The Future of Women’s Rights: Global Visions and Strategies*³³

As discussed in the CIVICUS *State of Civil Society Report 2016*, groups that have been excluded or experience social discrimination are even more impacted by risks.³⁴ Maycock from the European Women’s Lobby also points out that women peacebuilders with marginalized identities are more likely to be attacked, discriminated against and excluded.³⁵ For example, LGBTQIA+ people in Colombia, particularly those living in rural areas, experienced specific threats, violence and exclusion during the peace process.³⁶ Similarly, the concerns of Indigenous women were subsumed under those of Indigenous men, even though their experiences of violence were often gendered.³⁷ Women peacebuilders are not a homogenous group;³⁸ they are “political actors influenced by political agendas, group interests, as well as the trauma and hardship of civil war.”³⁹ Using an intersectional lens is critical to mapping and assessing security risks, as different women peacebuilders will be exposed to different types and levels of risks. An intersectional perspective also helps ensure that peacebuilding partnerships are inclusive,⁴⁰ that the diversity of voices is considered, and that risks and threats are taken into account appropriately. Women peacebuilders have different perspectives, needs and priorities based on their personal identities and experiences — related to age, education, ethnicity, religion, disability, rural or urban background, migration status, sexual orientation, gender identity and marital status, among others — as well as on their geographic location or affiliation with political parties.⁴¹ Women experience gendered risks, and women from marginalized groups are often exposed to additional risk; these identity-specific risks can create another set of barriers to overcome in women’s peacebuilding work.

Risks related to challenging traditional norms of femininity and (militarized) masculinity

Through their work, women peacebuilders challenge traditional gender roles, which are often linked with power structures that can drive armed conflict and other crises in society.⁴² Women peace leaders may face backlash from their families and communities and from conservative and patriarchal religious, ethnic, cultural and political groups.⁴³ For example, women peacebuilders in Myanmar have shared that they face “backlash within their households and communities for acting ‘unwomanly’ and have been actively blocked, or at times even imprisoned, when their activities were deemed ‘too political’ or ‘inappropriate for women.’”⁴⁴ In contexts where a highly patriarchal culture prevails, male members of the family may attack women peacebuilders in defense of their “honor,” as has happened in Yemen.⁴⁵ The main driver of the threats and attacks described in this section are related to traditionally assigned gender roles and the idea of “masculinities” — particularly the way in which dominant forms of masculinity respond to challenges to traditional gender roles.

In many societies, the ideal of “masculinity” is something that men and boys must live up to, which may include being a provider for the family and being strong and courageous, violent, aggressive and not in touch with one’s emotions — all characteristics linked to achieving and wielding power. Men and boys who do not conform to these expectations and values often pay a high price; they may be excluded, shamed or ostracized.⁴⁶ These social costs make it harder for men to move away from what is defined as “masculinity” and act differently from what society expects of them. Yet transforming some of these traditional norms of masculinity is critical not only to addressing drivers of conflict but also to providing more space for women peacebuilders and their work.



Militarized notions of masculinity valorize domination and violence, closely linking being a man to being a combatant. Men and boys may come under pressure to support military action, fight, kill and be willing to die for their nation or community, and women are expected to support such actions.⁴⁷ This type of violent masculinity justifies heterosexual male dominance over society and reinforces control of and discrimination against women and girls, sexual and gender minorities, persons with disabilities and other groups that do not conform to this narrow version of masculinity. In situations of prolonged armed conflict, the use and acceptance of violence on these groups of people can become normalized.⁴⁸ Women peacebuilders who oppose violence and call for a different response to armed conflict may thus face greater threat within an environment of militarized masculinity. A staff member of an international peacebuilding NGO working in the MENA region confessed that, as a result of their work, “Women started to claim their rights against the men in their family and some got arrested or beaten by their brothers... we put them at risk.”⁴⁹ Addressing (militarized) masculinities is thus an essential component of addressing risks faced by women peacebuilders. Focusing on masculinity also makes the concept of gender visible to and relevant for men, alerting them to the fact that gender is something that affects their own lives as well as those of women.



“We generally don’t speak about it enough. We focus too much on women being ‘victims,’ men are also stuck/drawn in their roles as violent perpetrators by a dysfunctional culture...It’s a power issue, a relationship gone wrong— not a ‘women’ issue! We must engage men and show them how they will thrive in an egalitarian society. They have more power, yet also often feel powerless and are just as trapped by patriarchy. We now see a backlash on all fronts...Our feminist work is sustainable only if based on dialogue and transformation on both sides of the equation.” – Carole Frampton, PeaceNexus⁵⁰

Furthermore, precisely because traditional gender norms see women as “caregivers” or bearers of the “honor” of the family, attacks or threats are likely to target family members to intimidate women peacebuilders, and family members may be mobilized to stop women peacebuilders’ work.⁵¹ For example, Iraqi woman peacebuilder Siroud Muhammed’s father “received calls, telling him if he does not silence his daughter, they will silence her with two bullets.”⁵² In Myanmar, some male family members of women peacebuilders were persecuted by armed actors in retribution for women’s involvement in conflict monitoring and other peacebuilding activities.⁵³ Especially in such contexts where patriarchal norms are prevalent and women’s empowerment or public participation may be seen as a threat, creating “community buy-in” is essential. The risks that women peacebuilders face are compounded when there is an absence of support from family or community members, therefore engaging with them can help build support for women peacebuilders’ work.⁵⁴ Dialogue with communities — and, in particular, male community members — can encourage their buy-in and support for the work of women peacebuilders by identifying and demonstrating how this work concretely benefits *them*.⁵⁵

In many conservative societies, support for the rights of sexual and gender-based minorities is considered taboo and a “Western agenda,”⁵⁶ and women peacebuilders who advocate for these rights often face costs for doing so. For instance, as illustrated in the Iraq case study, women peacebuilders in Iraq have been subjected to smear campaigns that use sexualized images, accused of social deviancy connected to the peacebuilders’ support for LGBTQ+ rights, of being sex workers or acting in a way that is not in accordance with Sharia law. In Colombia, the inclusion of women and LGBTQ+ groups helped make Colombia’s peace deal “one of the most inclusive peace agreements in history,”⁵⁷ but conservative actors rejected the peace agreement, arguing that it destabilized family values and traditional gender roles, including through supporting LGBTQ+ rights.⁵⁸ Women peacebuilders faced backlash from the religiously conservative part of the population for their solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community, and violence against women and LGBTQ+ activists increased.⁵⁹ In other conservative contexts, including in the MENA region and Nigeria, working on gender inclusivity or LGBTQ+ rights in itself is, as mentioned above, seen as “Western-imposed” and against societal values. One interviewee noted that this is a challenge in many Islamic societies, where the biggest risk is “when women are seen to associate with westerners — with men — or if they are seen to go against religion.”⁶⁰



It is essential to create safe spaces where male relatives of women peacebuilders, and men in the community where women peacebuilders are very active, can come together to explore the links between risks faced by women peacebuilders and norms of masculinity and how they might participate in community peacebuilding efforts and protection of women peacebuilders. Engaging with men — both family members and broader community members — who are willing to embrace values of gender equality, respect and nonviolence is important, and these allies can then share these perspectives with other men. Collating and sharing stories of change and progress by men who have already transformed their ways of thinking and living can inspire and support other men in their own process of reconsidering gender roles. Finally, it is beneficial to facilitate dialogue between feminist activists, non-religious groups and progressive religious leaders, as the latter can help translate these values of gender equality for broader religious communities.⁶¹



In the case study conducted for this report, Woman PeaceMaker Fellow Nesreen Barwari analyzes how women peacebuilders in Iraq experience limitations on their freedom of movement, especially in contexts where patriarchal norms are dominant. Men do not create “space” for women activists and often question their capabilities, leaving them out of spaces where they may have access to international partners. Furthermore, patriarchal norms and the limitations they impose on women’s role in society in general mean that women are expected to tend to family duties and their husbands, or they are shamed for working in public spaces. Mitigating and addressing these challenges requires addressing militarized masculinities and patriarchal norms. Working with men and boys to transform the norms and behaviors that constitute risks to women — and women peacebuilders in particular — helps address the drivers of armed conflict and supports the safety of women peacebuilders.

The situation in Iraq is challenging for women peacebuilders because of existing cultural norms and security conditions. While the security situation in the Kurdistan region is stable, the central and southern governorates experience security challenges that limit women’s work, including peacebuilding activities. International assistance has had some positive impact on the activities and the people directly involved, but much more progress is needed. Participants noted that it is very difficult for women peacebuilders to put themselves “on the map.” Only those who are connected through women’s networks are successful in building these desired relationships. Women peacebuilders also believe that funding from international partners is often directed towards larger organizations and that the process involved in acquiring funding is too challenging, complicated and cumbersome. This is compounded by the tendency of international partners not to accept activists’ ideas, initiatives or feedback.

Women peacebuilders take efforts to protect themselves, including disappearing, not communicating on social media, changing their clothing or location, and maintaining community support for their work. Women peacebuilders feel strongly that their knowledge and understanding of the local community and of the local context, and their own priorities and needs, should be taken into consideration and supported by international partners. The interviewees felt that the priorities imposed by international partners often do not match the needs of local communities. Women peacebuilders feel that the presence of international partners by their side provides much-needed protection.

Barwari emphasizes the need for national-level protections for women and legal support for women activists. She argues that partners should design projects in collaboration with local partners and fund projects over longer periods of time. Partners should also extend recognition to women peacebuilding in public discussions and provide support for health and social wellbeing. [Read the full case study on page 43.](#)



Risks related to counterterrorism initiatives

In some contexts, peacebuilding activities may be perceived by governments as “supporting terrorism,” putting women peacebuilders at risk of being labeled “terrorists.” This usually happens in contexts where the government has refused to acknowledge the existence of conflict or civil war and describes their own activities as “countering terrorism” or “providing law and order.” In Sri Lanka, the government accused foreign actors who did not abide by its “peace-through-war” approach of harboring terrorist sympathies and interfering in sovereign affairs while presenting its own operations as humanitarian, protecting civilians from terrorism.⁶² In Turkey, academics who condemned human rights violations against the Kurdish population and demanded a reactivation of the peace process through a petition signed under the name “Academics for Peace” were accused of being terrorists. Over 600 signatories were charged, with 39 imprisoned and a few having their citizenship revoked.⁶³

Where women peacebuilders are accused of being “terrorists” or “foreign agents,” they may face media smear campaigns,⁶⁴ online and physical harassment, arrest or prosecution, with the objective of silencing their voices and stopping their work.⁶⁵ In 2019, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism noted that states use vague and broad definitions of “terrorism” to punish those who do not conform to traditional gender roles and to suppress social movements that seek gender equality and the protection of human rights.⁶⁶ The Special Rapporteur stated that women peacebuilders, while combating violent extremism and terrorism and other forms of violence through their activities, “are themselves being labeled extremist and are facing constraints on their ability to operate” and face the risk of being criminalized by the State.⁶⁷ A 2017 report from the Duke University International Human Rights Clinic noted that such “counterterrorism” measures can be used as political tools to silence dissidents rather than counter violent extremism.⁶⁸

In addition to increased violence against women in the domestic and public spheres, women peacebuilders have faced increased pressure due to the pandemic.

Moreover, international counterterrorism measures have had a chilling impact on the work of women peacebuilders by cutting off their access to funding, since much of the work that women peacebuilders do involves engagement with entities on all sides of the conflict — something often proscribed by funding regulations related to counterterrorism measures.⁶⁹ In contexts such as Syria, the Lake Chad Basin and other places where sanctioned groups are active, the U.S. and the U.K. have established restrictive rules of humanitarian engagement.⁷⁰ When engaging with these areas, donors and international organizations often transfer the risk onto their local partner organizations; some Islamic charities providing funds for humanitarian relief have been prosecuted for indirect provision of funds to terrorist organizations.⁷¹

International humanitarian organizations have advocated successfully in the U.K. for exemption from the counterterrorism bill that would apply to humanitarian workers in many conflict zones and that peacebuilding work constitutes a “reasonable excuse for travel”, but there are concerns that peacebuilders may fall through the cracks of protection.⁷² As reported in a 2017 study, women peacebuilders “fear that the government will use those anti-terrorism laws to stop our organization from carrying out our work, if they do not like what we do” and live with the fear of being accused of being a terrorist as “more and more laws regarding counter-terrorism” mean that “everything could fall at some point under counter-terrorism, depending on who defined who [as] a terrorist, and what it means to be supporting terrorism.”⁷³

Risks related to the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has directly compounded risks faced by women peacebuilders⁷⁴ and increased violence against women leaders, human rights defenders and women peacebuilders.⁷⁵ In some places, the pandemic further restricted civic space, as states took on broad emergency powers and used the pandemic as a pretext for restricting rights. These restrictions posed a threat to women peacebuilders,⁷⁶ and the emergency responses implemented by certain countries significantly reduced the democratic and judicial oversight that can help protect women peacebuilders.⁷⁷ Human rights protections were widely curtailed,⁷⁸ thus making the environment in which women peacebuilders operate that much more precarious.⁷⁹ Curfews and quarantine in response to the COVID-19 pandemic further restricted freedom of movement, association and assembly, putting women peacebuilders at heightened risk.⁸⁰ Women peacebuilders have experienced a surge in domestic violence, targeted attacks and threats from armed groups.⁸¹ For example, women peacebuilders in Colombia came under increased attacks during the pandemic due to mobility and travel restrictions, which enabled attackers to more easily identify and track targets.⁸²

In addition to increased violence against women in the domestic and public spheres, women peacebuilders have faced increased pressure due to the pandemic. The pandemic led many women peacebuilders to work three jobs simultaneously: they have continued their peacebuilding efforts; they have provided humanitarian relief, which included the making and distribution of face masks, food packages and hygiene products to vulnerable populations; and they have worked as primary caregivers for their relatives and others in need of assistance.⁸³ These different roles created additional risks: Women were intimidated and their ability to provide relief and recovery threatened. One extreme example is the killing of Carlota Isabel, a woman peacebuilder in Colombia. In March 2020, Carlota was shot in her home on the same day that she was organizing food supplies for vulnerable families affected by the pandemic.⁸⁴ On the other hand, there are examples, as shared by Woman PeaceMaker Fellow Muna Luqman, of women peacebuilders using “emergency response” as a cover to do their peacebuilding work in relative safety.

Another repercussion of the pandemic is that existing funds for gender equality programs were diverted to COVID-19 emergency response, further starving funding for women’s organizations.⁸⁵ Moreover, weak government responses to the pandemic and the redirection of public resources to fighting COVID-19 left vacuums sometimes filled by extremist groups and criminal gangs, some of which sought to instill a culture of misogyny and violence against women.⁸⁶ The pandemic heightened the need, therefore, for greater investments in safe spaces, basic services, justice and trauma counseling for women facing violence and threats.

During the pandemic, many women peacebuilders shifted their work online, which has exposed them to the risk of government surveillance and other risks connected to online work. Cybersecurity risks are discussed in more detail in the following section.



Risks related to digital security and surveillance

Advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) present both an extraordinary opportunity and an extraordinary threat for women's engagement in peacebuilding work. On the one hand, new technologies can bring education and life-saving information to wide audiences. They can elevate women's voices and raise awareness about their priority issues. They can create more diverse spaces for civil society strategizing, activism and participation in political processes and peace negotiations. On the other hand, ICTs can be used to perpetuate exclusion, misogyny, sexist violence and harmful gender norms.⁸⁷

Women peacebuilders, like activists in general, communicate and coordinate largely through the internet and via social media and communication apps. They collect and store their research and findings, including sensitive data on their computers and online. Reports that were innocuous when initially shared, may — with a changing context — become a liability. With the onset of COVID-19, most communications and gatherings were also conducted online, with online platforms such as Zoom taking the place of physical spaces and increasing the likelihood of security breaches.

The increased usage of online platforms — both before and since the COVID-19 pandemic — has brought additional risk for women peacebuilders, as governments and other actors also use the internet and online platforms to follow and censor the activity of civil society, especially human rights defenders and peacebuilders.⁸⁸ Women peacebuilders face unlawful surveillance, cyberstalking, censorship, hacking of devices, doxing (a practice that shares private information about a person online) and deepfake videos, which use artificial intelligence to create false images and depictions that are harmful to one's reputation.⁸⁹

Women peace leaders may be targeted by campaigns on social media that try to discredit, threaten or harass them or invade their privacy.⁹⁰ These campaigns often include the dissemination of doctored pictures, information designed to discredit the peacebuilders, and violent hate speech and threatening messages on social networks, including calls for gang rape and murder. LGBTQIA+ communities face additional threats and censorship due to stigma and discrimination related to norms around gender and sexuality.⁹¹ Surveillance and censorship increase when there is conflict or increased authoritarianism, and the insecurity of digitally stored and/or digitally transmitted information becomes a major risk.

Women peacebuilders experience threats on the personal and community levels as well as related specifically to their work and institutional partnerships. In order to take a holistic approach to security, it is important to take into consideration how these different types of threats and risks intersect. The next chapter will address considerations for preventing and mitigating these risks.



Addressing risks holistically

A holistic approach to security for women peacebuilders requires addressing personal or community-based risks as well as work-related concerns. The risks and stressful circumstances faced by women peacebuilders in their daily work — as described in detail above — are compounded by the fact that women peacebuilders frequently try to overcome seemingly insurmountable problems in difficult circumstances and with very limited resources.⁹² Their organizations may be understaffed, their funding may be sparse, and the pressures to deliver tangible results to donors may be too high. International partners who wish to work with women peacebuilders and support them in addressing the risks and insecurity they face need to recognize the scope and nature of women peacebuilders' work in order to understand these risks and provide them with effective legal, political and financial protection. Partnership-related challenges are highlighted in the case studies focused on Tanzania and Yemen, authored by Women PeaceMakers Ambassador Liberata Mulamula (with the support of Tatu Mkiwa Nyange) and Muna Luqman, respectively. The focus on Women, Peace and Security has primarily been on women's participation, while the provision of protection has often been neglected. Even for (most) international organizations, protecting women peacebuilders solely amounts to providing for basic needs, not holistic protection. This chapter addresses how international partners can prevent and mitigate risk for their peacebuilding partners.

Addressing risks at the personal and community levels

Women peacebuilders already take measures to protect themselves; understanding these individual measures can help organizations further support these efforts. Barry and Nainar lay out some of the measures that peacebuilders take, including the following: developing mutual support; making strategic choices about when to engage; either combatting slander or ignoring it; protecting family members (or protecting themselves from family members) by relocating or taking additional security measures; building solidarity and networks with other women peacebuilders, including by building an international profile; using coded language when communicating or limiting means of communication; enlisting state protection; and changing their identity or using a different type of work as a cover.⁹³ However, international partners have a responsibility to prevent and mitigate risks to local partners, and institutional policies and measures are critical in addition to the peacebuilders' individual efforts. Partners can unintentionally worsen the risks local peacebuilders experience, but they can also mitigate these risks.

Self-identification and community-based identification

How funders view women peacebuilders and how women peacebuilders view themselves may differ; while funding organizations search for partners who are women peacebuilders or describe existing partners as peacebuilders, this can contradict the peacebuilders' self-perception and perhaps put the peacebuilders at risk in their communities. Women peacebuilders may not always self-identify as peacebuilders; they may not consider their work to be peacebuilding, may de-value their role as peacebuilders,⁹⁴ or consider themselves more aptly described as activists, human rights defenders, humanitarians, community leaders or healers. In some contexts, governments do not consider their country to be in conflict, and calling oneself a peacebuilder contradicts the government narrative; using the title "peacebuilder" can put women peace leaders at risk of experiencing violence from security agencies or other authorities.⁹⁵ Heinze and Stevens note in a 2018 study on women peacebuilders in Yemen that



women leaders and activists generally understood their contributions to peace and stability in a holistic way... all women activists replied by describing a wide range of activities... from mediating between warring parties, monitoring crime and policing, humanitarian relief for IDPs, keeping children in school, training people in vocational skills, publicly speaking out against violence and more. Most described themselves broadly as 'community activists,' identifying and responding to local needs and issues as they saw them...96

Moreover, women peacebuilders may not be recognized as peacebuilders by their communities. A woman peacebuilder from Tanzania stated,

*In my area, there is no specific name for a woman dealing with peace work; for example, paralegals who assist Indigenous (people) to access their rights — the common name used for them is human right defenders. Also, most national organizations at the grassroots level have more than one core function. Some are Legal Aid Service (LAS) providers with gender focus issues like GBV or child rights. They all contribute to peacebuilding, but the term 'women peacebuilder' is rarely used.*⁹⁷

Finally, international partners tend to support women peacebuilders through organizations that are recognized as "civil society" in the "Western" sense. In many contexts, there are various forms of collective organization, such as informal organizations or community self-help groups,⁹⁸ that may lose the opportunity to engage in partnerships and strengthen existing capacities. As Eva Zillen from Kvinna till Kvinna points out, "We have to find ways to fund networks and non-registered organizations."⁹⁹

Some partners and donors are working to address these challenges by creating a wide definition for peacebuilding work and who can be a peacebuilding partner; this helps partners to maintain their self-identification and avoid some of the risks associated with the title "peacebuilder." Many international partners are aware that having a single and narrow definition of peacebuilding could be reductionist and that there is a need to base their identification of women peacebuilders on a set of principles as well as on the type of impact envisioned by their activities. This coincides with how many women peacebuilders see their work and allows for the creation of partnerships with peacebuilders working across a diverse range of fields, such as humanitarian response, development or human rights, and across the grassroots, national, regional and international levels.



“We don’t want to get pigeon-holed into creating a definition. [Women peacebuilders] as a role, as an identity, is overlapping, not exclusive to other identities. It’s mainly about the way of working. Building bridges as an ethos and a strategy, always seeing the humanity in the other. There is a tension between a more ‘justice-oriented’ rather than ‘restorative justice’ approach, and [women peacebuilders] do see peace as having to have justice and human rights together. It’s an identity and role.” — Melinda Holmes, International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)¹⁰⁰

Some international partners focus on the role that women peacebuilders play to build bridges between groups and implement a multisectoral approach. These international partners see a woman’s peacebuilding identity as multilayered and inclusive rather than separated from other identities such as human rights activist or humanitarian actor. This view allows international partners to support women’s peacebuilding across the ways they are active in building peace, including leading community-level interventions and managing relief and recovery. For example, some organizations focus on work that addresses root causes of conflict, such as power imbalances and human rights violations. As Carole Frampton from PeaceNexus pointed out, “We consider that everybody has the potential to contribute to peace, social cohesion, inclusive governance, constructive governance, and responsible business.”¹⁰¹ Some international partners may not use the word “peacebuilding” but choose to use other terms that they feel better describe similar processes and issues. As Ozong Agborsangaya from the African Development Bank noted, “We use ‘resilience’ the most. We try to address the drivers of fragility, which *is* peacebuilding.”¹⁰²

In some cases, the women peacebuilders are well known and have been active for a long time. However, as women peacebuilders are often neither self-identified nor visible,¹⁰³ international partners rely on their local staff, contextual information and a mapping of actors to identify women peacebuilders and women’s organizations working on peacebuilding. A woman peacebuilder from the Global Peace Foundation in Tanzania described how important local expertise is in identifying women peacebuilders, noting, “When we need a woman at grassroots level who engaged in a peace issue — for example, a woman advocating for women rights or GBV issues or child rights, etc. — usually we go to village leaders and ask them to assist us in identifying them through their experiences or village register or those women who already attached to NGOs within their areas, and they know exactly the right person to choose.”¹⁰⁴

These good practices highlight the importance of a multisectoral lens on peacebuilding work and reliance on context-specific knowledge and experience to understand localized definitions of peace and to identify potential partners.



Woman PeaceMaker Fellow Ambassador Liberata Mulamula, with support from Tatu Mkiwa Nyange, explores how recognition and common vision can help mitigate security risks facing women peacebuilders in her case study written for this report. Peacebuilding in Tanzania addresses conflicts at family and community levels, often focused on land use and resource-related conflicts that result in violence, abuse, trespassing, killing of livestock and loss of property.¹⁰⁵ Women peacebuilders in Tanzania engage in conflict resolution and peacebuilding to address these issues but are rarely recognized for their work. Women peacebuilders in Tanzania face violence, harassment and rejection by their communities.

Mulamula and Nyange highlight that some study participants feel excluded from funding processes, as funds are often disbursed from international organizations to large organizations such as UN Women, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) or international NGOs. Funds are frequently given to a small group of national organizations but rarely trickle down to local NGOs.¹⁰⁶ The peacebuilders note that they are invited to participate in meetings and events organized by national or international organizations and are asked to speak up and share their opinions, but they rarely manage to tap directly into funding. Mulamula and Nyange emphasize that participatory approaches, especially those that include networking between national and international organizations, can be useful tools. Local women peacebuilders need support to become more visible and need to gain direct access to financial and technical assistance from international organizations.

The Tanzania case study highlights the importance of viewing peacebuilding work through a multisectoral lens and relying on context-specific knowledge and experience to understand localized definitions of peace and to identify potential partners. Creating strong partnerships bolsters the effectiveness of peacebuilding work and unifies solidarity and institutional support. Partnerships can also help mitigate risks and threats to women peacebuilders. Mulamula and Nyange emphasize the need to prioritize grassroots organizations and to provide capacity-building to local women peacebuilders so that they can gain recognition and great opportunities. Funders should ensure that partnership priorities are created in collaboration with local women peace leaders and that women peace leaders benefit from lessons learned from activities and experiences. [Read the full case study on page 47.](#)

Promoting protection for physical and psychosocial well-being

It is important for partners to consider both physical protection and provisions for psychosocial and physical well-being. As discussed above, women peacebuilders face significant threats to their physical safety. Peacebuilding work can also take a toll on psychosocial health. Women peacebuilders will be better able to sustain their work over the long term if they have support and protection. Supporting the emotional well-being of staff, especially by addressing exhaustion and fear, is important, and international partners should prioritize self-care and rest and recovery opportunities for members of the organization. Psychosocial support sessions with all staff to help identify vulnerabilities and address internal conflict that can arise in stressful situations is also beneficial. This contributes to reducing vulnerabilities and strengthening organizations.



Physical protection

Partners can provide support to women peacebuilders through measures like supporting them to relocate temporarily or providing safe transportation. Reinforcing and expanding physical protection usually requires providing financial support so that women peacebuilders can move themselves and their families, hire security staff, or move offices to a safer neighborhood. Women peacebuilders should be central to these decisions and to planning and implementation of programs; they understand best what risks they experience and often have a vision for how best to prevent and mitigate risks. International partners and funders should ensure that women peacebuilders are fully and meaningfully included in all phases of project implementation and that partnerships are equitable. In an equitable relationship, where both parties' contributions are of equal value, the likelihood of correctly identifying the needs and priorities on the ground, as well as the best way to address them, is higher. This helps avoid incongruence between the agendas of donors and international partners and needs on the ground. An equitable relationship also helps to reduce the potential risks faced by women peacebuilders who are implementing activities on the ground. Centering and listening to women peacebuilders as equal and respected partners is critical to ensuring that interventions and programs do not create or exacerbate problems.¹⁰⁷

“Women and men at the grassroots level give us information and tell us what needs to be taken into consideration, what can be achieved and what cannot be achieved.” — Rim Aljabi, Search for Common Ground¹⁰⁸

In terms of mitigation or intervention, no “one size fits all,” and the strength of any given response lies in its “ability to be tailored to a specific situation.”¹⁰⁹ It is essential for women peacebuilders to be part of this process, and for there to be open and honest discussions about the risks involved for both sides, as well as the potential for risk transfer and sharing. As Carole Frampton from PeaceNexus points out, women should be able to “define what safety is, what their level of comfort is.”¹¹⁰ In order to get a full view of risks and mitigation strategies, it is important to work with a diverse representation of women peacebuilders. Organizations use gender, conflict and stakeholder analyses to identify potential partners. One way in which international organizations and funders ensure diversity is by defining target locations that are outside of the capital, in more remote locations. They may consciously select organizations from differing “camps” and geographical locations to create a diverse network and mutual learning environment for organizations that are based in the capital and those that are more rural. International partners have pointed out in interviews that they identify not only the different actors but also the areas of tension and division and where these could be bridged by welcoming in different voices.¹¹¹

“We need to ensure that women can do this work safely... Listen to them! They know the risks — provide them with the protection mechanisms. Do not say “there are risks for women so let’s not work with women” — say: let’s see how to address them.”
— Helena Gronberg, ICAN¹¹²

Psychosocial and physical well-being

Psychosocial and physical health should also be prioritized by partners. In addition to the structural limitations they face, women peacebuilders frequently carry a high level of personal commitment that prevents them from taking time off.¹¹³ Barry notes that women peacebuilders are “more likely to rank the safety and well-being of others above their own... they are often too busy, or consider it shameful, to ask for help.”¹¹⁴ They may also be working in environments where mental health issues are stigmatized and there is not enough trust or support to talk about the challenges they face.¹¹⁵ The culture of “activism,” be it in human rights, women’s rights or peacebuilding, often leads to unsustainable work habits and to women peacebuilders disregarding their personal well-being, as noted by Barcia and Penchaszadeh, “because taking care of one’s own needs is perceived as unimportant in the face of others’ suffering.”¹¹⁶ These factors can lead to exhaustion and burnout and to poor judgment and decision-making, putting the life of women peacebuilders and of others at risk. Stress and exhaustion increase the vulnerability of women peacebuilders and their capacity to deal with situations of emergency and risk. Psychosocial well-being can also be supported by ensuring that family members and other loved ones are included in any protection plan.

Many women found their way to peacebuilding through experiences of personal trauma, loss and grief, and peacebuilding is their way of finding meaning in their pain. In their work, they encounter and witness more trauma, pain, grief and loss. International organizations need to realize that many women peacebuilders highly value their ability to act as a witness in their respective contexts. Women peacebuilders need safe spaces, therefore, to share their stories as part of building their own peace and preventing burnout. The value of providing safe, shared spaces for women peacebuilders to get together, share and develop joint strategies, heal and recuperate from burn-out should not be underestimated — and many organizations employ this as their central strategy to support and protect women peacebuilders. Safe, shared spaces allow women peacebuilders to share experiences and strategies and to build solidarity.¹¹⁷ This practice of building connection and sharing with others builds the resilience of women peacebuilders and is essential for sustaining their work.

Providing integrated security for women peacebuilders, including encouraging self-care, is critical to the sustainability of their work and the survival of their organizations and movements.¹¹⁸ When developing protection plans, partners should take the specific needs of women peacebuilders into consideration based on their ethnicity, state of health, gender identity or sexual orientation. As with providing for physical security, funding is critical to women peacebuilders being able to participate in safe, shared spaces and engage in self-care.

Building networks of solidarity for collective care

Interviewees highlighted the importance of networks in supporting women peacebuilders, both in terms of psychosocial well-being and in terms of physical security. Being a member of a network or coalition can offer women peacebuilders a greater range of potential partners that can offer solutions or resources when security risks occur. In some cases, simply being associated with partners – especially at the international level – provides an additional layer of protection.

In countries around the world, women peacebuilders, activists and human rights defenders form their own networks to “create spaces where they can be heard, settle disputes, address unjust treatment, promote women’s involvement in decision-making, propose initiatives for community development and seek justice for female survivors of violence and sexual abuse.”¹¹⁹ Through collective action, women increase their impact in building peace in the community and increase the degree of protection for themselves.¹²⁰ It is important to recognize and support existing networks so they can continue their peacebuilding and protection work, as well as expand their membership and outreach.



“I mainly needed to learn about success stories from other countries to address our own issues.”

— Siroud Muhammed Faleh Ahmad, Iraqi Al-Amal Association, peacebuilder from Iraq¹²¹

A number of international partners, such as ICAN, MADRE and LSE Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth, consciously build and support existing networks of women peacebuilders around the world and run campaigns that seek to expand the network of support for women peacebuilders.¹²² Working together to push an agenda or to advocate for change is a useful way to protect individual women peacebuilders from being targeted or harmed.¹²³ International support and solidarity can also — in most cases — act as a form of protection, due to the perceived political cost of harming a woman peacebuilder, especially when she has visible links to the international community who, it is assumed, may intervene on their behalf.¹²⁴ For example, Frontline Defenders issues official ID cards for women human rights defenders as a practical tool to keep them safe. The IDs act “as both a form of activist accreditation and as proof of international solidarity.”¹²⁵ Peace Brigades International assigns international accompaniment to women peacebuilders, bringing visibility and additional protection to their work.¹²⁶

International partners who consciously promote collaboration or fund networks support this kind of solidarity and protection. As Bahar Ali from Iraq points out, being part of a network “...was a good experience that I benefited from on a personal level and helped me a lot in getting to know the suffering of women in other countries and communicating with them and benefiting from their own experiences.”¹²⁷ In these safe spaces, women peacebuilders convene to share best practices, strengthen their voices collectively, and build solidarity across countries.¹²⁸

This effect is strengthened when partners help create and enhance linkages between women leaders and activists within and across state and society, including those involved in women’s movements, professional associations, faith-based organizations and community-based organizations. Helping to bring different groups to work together creates synergy. As CIVICUS notes, “It is becoming clear that movements are stronger and have more impact when they are intersectional and when they are led by women, young people, and other members of groups who are challenging their exclusion.”¹²⁹

As Magda Zenon from Hands Across the Divide points out, “Networks are doing a really great job of creating community. You know someone has got your back. If you don’t know something, you can connect to someone who knows. You can support someone and be supported.”¹³⁰

Addressing risks at the institutional level

International partners can support women peacebuilders through funding or provision of measures to support physical protection, psychosocial well-being, and connection to network, but they can also work to prevent and mitigate risks to women peacebuilders by centering women peace leaders as equal partners in program design and implementation. This section addresses how women peacebuilders can be better supported through equitable partnerships and how funding – particularly flexible and long-term funding – can be critical to ensuring their safety.

Shared risk management

Even though international partners increasingly work with local actors to implement programming,¹³¹ measures in terms of security and risk management are still lagging.¹³² Risks and insecurity are often discussed regarding what it means for program implementation rather than for the security of women peacebuilders themselves.¹³³ A 2020 Global Interagency Security Forum report found through a survey of over 200 respondents that regardless of the level of risk in an environment, security does not feature prominently in partnership discussions or budget decisions.¹³⁴

As pointed out by several interviewees, when international partners arrive with their own — or their donors' — agenda, asking local organizations or actors to implement their pre-set priorities, this can potentially create great risks for the women peacebuilders with whom they are working. As discussed in the Tanzania and Iraq case studies, some local women peacebuilders feel that they have been forced to adjust to donors' priorities and that partnerships are often unjust. Women peacebuilders may face backlash when priorities set by external actors, such as “promoting the return of refugees” or “demobilizing soldiers,” do not match the needs and priorities of the local communities or governments.¹³⁵ Furthermore, in the implementation of these priorities, international partners may introduce or reinforce tensions among groups by targeting their activities towards communities based on ethnicity, religion or other societal characteristics.¹³⁶ For example, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, aid was often targeted through a categorization of people along ethnic lines, resulting in tensions between refugees and people who did not flee and between different groups of returnees.¹³⁷

“If support is provided, it will be dedicated to project implementation rather than risk mitigation... INGOs have no vision to avoid such risks, because when designing projects, they focus on risks facing the projects, rather than risks which women could encounter.”¹³⁸ – Woman peacebuilder from Syria

International partners may have different levels of risk tolerance than their women peacebuilder partners. Most women peacebuilders are active on the frontlines because they are passionate about their work and committed to their mission, and partners may assume that women peacebuilders are likely to continue doing their work regardless of international support and that local and national NGOs “can deal with higher risks because they are used to them, and sometimes that they are less impacted by psychosocial distress because they have become desensitized.”¹³⁹ However, this may not be true. This assumption made by international partners about different levels of risk tolerance contributes to their tendency to “transfer risk” by prioritizing their needs and minimizing their own risk — in terms of fiduciary or legal controls — and transferring the risk that this might incur to their local partners. International partners feel obliged to follow strict budget rules defined by their own donors, and this inflexibility prevents local organizations from shifting resources to risk management. Fears about losing funding and inflexible expectations from donors/international partners around “results” in unstable contexts put pressure on women peacebuilders to take additional risks to get things done without necessarily having a safe and open space to discuss these additional risks with donors or international partners.¹⁴⁰

Many international partners lack a clear strategy for dealing with security risk management or the safety of their staff. The “duty of care” often fails to cover local staff or the staff of partners.¹⁴¹ The women interviewed as part of the Yemen case study indicated that UN agencies or INGOs that find themselves in a situation where their staff is threatened often fail to protect their staff; they do not report threats for fear of being asked to leave Yemen, and some staff are let go instead. This will be discussed in more detail in the Yemen case study.



“We need to find safer ways to give money — that doesn’t put them [women peacebuilders] at risk. A lot of the funding modalities are based on pushing the risk on those that are willing to take the risk. They are willing to do so because they need the money to do the work. Our back donors push it on us, and if we are not careful the risk is transferred.” – Eva Zillén, Kvinna till Kvinna¹⁴²



In the case study conducted for this report, Woman PeaceMaker Fellow Muna Luqman analyzes the critical role women peacebuilders are playing in Yemen. The country's humanitarian crisis and conflict are said to be the worst in the world, causing widespread hunger, disease and attacks on civilians. The crisis has also led to disruptions in economic activities with a substantial reduction in jobs, private sector operations and business opportunities, due to insecurity and lack of supplies and inputs, leading to massive layoffs to the country's workforce in both formal and informal sectors. Yemen has ranked at the bottom of the table for gender equality in the World Economic Forum *Global Gender Gap Report* for years and ranked 155 out of 156 countries in the 2021 report.¹⁴³ Yemeni women are almost entirely absent from political life — in 2021, less than one percent of parliamentarians were women, and no women served in ministerial positions.¹⁴⁴ The participation rate of women in the labor force is 6.3 percent.¹⁴⁵

The role of Yemeni women peacebuilders is key, as they can meaningfully provide insight into community-based resilience strategies. Yemeni women-led organizations fill an important gap created by the collapse of Yemeni state institutions and the financial shift of international organizations to concentrate on humanitarian emergency relief. Consultations with local women peacebuilders show that the international pool of funds encourages only partially, and in a fragmented way, gender-responsive localized responses. The support provided by some donors does not include any form of protection or risk measures and lacks security elements for women peacebuilders.

Yemeni women's rights actors at the grassroots level and in the diaspora use various strategies to work in this difficult context. Their efforts result in the release of detainees, conflict resolution for water and land disputes, and saved lives at the frontlines and in crossfire areas. They use different techniques to mobilize the community. An important finding is that women need to be included as part of the solution, not as passive beneficiaries of assistance. The role of local women peacebuilders and organizations is critical to paving the way to self-reliance, recovery and resilience.

However, women are often sidelined by international programming. Yemeni women remain under-represented in peace talks. Furthermore, international partners often come in with their own agendas and priorities, and this influences whom they support in terms of women activists and peacebuilders on the ground.

Luqman emphasizes the need to increase access to humanitarian funding, prioritizing multi-year, flexible and sustainable funds, to consider gender when distributing humanitarian aid, and to ensure that women are involved in all phases of program management. She notes the need for institutional strengthening and a feminist humanitarian policy. [Read the full case study on page 51.](#)



Funding as a foundation for security

Funding is foundational for women peace leaders to conduct their work, but it is also critical for improving their physical and personal security. Funding is a key tool that allows women peacebuilders to secure the resources and materials they need to prevent and mitigate risks for themselves, their family members, and members of the community. Secure and multi-year funding streams allow women peacebuilders the flexibility they need to adjust as security dynamics shift. However, women peacebuilders face many barriers to receiving funding. This section addresses how international partners can help reduce funding-related challenges and promote flexible funding for women peacebuilders.

Women peacebuilders face multiple challenges in accessing resources to carry out their work. One of the primary challenges is that funding for peacebuilding and women peacebuilders is insufficient, and their organizations receive little institutional funding beyond short-term projects.¹⁴⁶ Only 0.2 percent of bilateral aid targeting fragile countries has gone to women's rights organizations in the past decade.¹⁴⁷ Funds have also been diverted towards the COVID-19 pandemic response, further drying up an already shallow funding reservoir.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, there is evidence that major donors are increasingly channeling funds through large INGOs or UN bodies rather than to local organizations.¹⁴⁹ This inevitably curtails the ability of these local organizations to develop longer-term strategies to address root causes of conflict, insecurity and gender-based violence and to engage with decision-making processes.

International partners shared in interviews that, in some cases, women peacebuilders may be recognized but not supported financially because the international partners may consider the activities carried out by women peacebuilders and their organizations or networks not as "peacebuilding" but as humanitarian assistance or development.¹⁵⁰ These funding silos can prevent some women peacebuilders from receiving funding and leave them without international support, which impacts both their work and their security. In some cases, international partners refrain from supporting certain women peacebuilders because their visions of "peace" differ. For example, following the conclusion of the war in Sri Lanka, women peacebuilders were sidelined because they advocated for power sharing rather than simply an end to hostilities.¹⁵¹ In an interview for this study, a UN representative stated that an institutional policy restricted aid to certain women peacebuilders of another country because the peacebuilders work with both sides of the conflict, and this approach did not align with the solutions envisaged by the UN for that country. Similarly, a woman peacebuilder from yet another context shared that she was consistently denied funding because she was engaging with communities whom the donors did not want to support.

In many contexts, peacebuilding work is generally still very male-oriented, and men are often able to forge connections with donors and networks much more easily than women. Women peacebuilders are often excluded from spaces where peace is discussed, sometimes intentionally, sometimes by the sheer circumstance that their multiple roles (spouse, mother, sole breadwinner, caretaker for elderly and sick, among others) prevent them from attending formal meetings that take place in the capital or at times during the day or night when women cannot attend. Moreover, in circumstances of selective and scarce funding, power dynamics and competition can become issues among more established women's peacebuilding organizations and newer ones.¹⁵² While rarely acknowledged, the power struggles and competition between different generations of women's peacebuilding organizations tend to undermine their work by creating competition for money and power.¹⁵³ The situation was further exacerbated by competing demands for aid under COVID-19.¹⁵⁴ Funds are often inaccessible to less well-established organizations and almost totally inaccessible to non-registered organizations or to individual women peacebuilders.¹⁵⁵ Unless the funds are expressly designed for them, non-registered organizations, social movements and individuals almost never qualify for support. This poses a risk to women peacebuilders because in circumstances of active conflict, under authoritarian régimes or in closing civic spaces, women peacebuilders may be forced into hiding or exile, and their organizations forced to de-register,¹⁵⁶ remain unregistered, or register outside of the country, which then affects their eligibility for funding.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, the safety and security situation has meant that, as pointed out by Michelle Bachelet, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "In Myanmar, where women human rights defenders have long been a force for peace, many women's civil society groups have been forced to shut down amid the violence that has unfolded since February 2021."¹⁵⁸

Given the immense risks involved in working in conflict zones or environments with restrictive enabling environments, donors and international partners tend to gravitate towards organizations with whom they have already worked or that have the experience and capacity to implement the desired programs.¹⁵⁹ Women peacebuilders who are more visible to the donor community — elite, urban — are more likely to receive support. International partners noted in interviews that even if they may be aware that these women are generally “elite, English-speaking and highly educated... who have a proven track record”¹⁶⁰ and may not be “the best women to represent the ‘average’ women,” the challenges, time and risks involved in engaging with less well-known grassroots organizations or women peacebuilders act as a deterrent.¹⁶¹ Individuals and organizations who can speak the language or use the right “lingo” and write project proposals that appeal to donors’ agendas are the ones most likely to be visible and to get support. This selective support may also reinforce tensions and divisions among women peacebuilders and between peacebuilders and the international community.¹⁶²

Women peacebuilders who are marginalized — Indigenous, from a rural area or from a religious minority, among other backgrounds — risk being ignored by the international community. While calls for proposals may be transparent and open to all who would like to apply, the conditions for receiving support are often too demanding for smaller grassroots organizations, and funds are largely channeled through multilateral agencies or larger INGOs.¹⁶³ The calls are often offered only in English, are accessible only through the internet, and demand fulfillment of technical criteria, which smaller or newly established organizations do not have or cannot provide.¹⁶⁴ The funding that is available tends to be donor-driven and project-oriented, with time-intensive reporting requirements and a lack of flexibility to cover core costs.¹⁶⁵

Women peacebuilders need access to resources to be able to afford tools such as VPNs, safe transportation options or support for mental health. Women peacebuilders are best supported by international partners through long-term engagement and provision of core and flexible funding. Some embassies make direct and flexible funds available to women peacebuilders, including Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, the U.K. and the U.S. A direct relationship between women peacebuilders and embassies contributes to their credibility and access to other donors. One beneficial practice is when embassies invite women peacebuilders to submit proposals and support them in refining them in a process of co-creation.¹⁶⁶ Some grant-making organizations are also well-positioned to reach frontline women peacebuilders. ICAN, MADRE, Kvinna till Kvinna and WILPF provide long-term accompaniment and flexible core funding to women-led groups that have been impacted by conflict and war and that are small, located in inaccessible or remote areas, or unreachable by embassies or large aid agencies.¹⁶⁷ They are thus able to support movements in situations when other donors are not. Some international partners interviewed who work specifically on peacebuilding, local development and women’s human rights, such as Search for Common Ground, Action Aid and Kvinna till Kvinna, make a conscious effort to identify and support grassroots and local women organizations, as well as to ensure a diverse portfolio of support, which includes marginalized and minority women and their organizations.¹⁶⁸

International partners can play a significant role in supporting women peacebuilders’ physical safety and psychosocial and physical well-being. Funders and partners should create equitable partnerships with women peacebuilders, ensuring that funding opportunities are accessible and centering women peacebuilders’ voices in program design and implementation. Creating equitable partnerships and providing flexible, long-term funding are critical tools for supporting the work and safety of women peacebuilders around the world.





Creating equitable partnerships and providing flexible, long-term funding are critical tools for supporting the work and safety of women peacebuilders around the world.

Key findings

● Women peacebuilders experience threats at the personal and community level as well as at the institutional level.

Risks to their physical person in the form of threats, arrests, imprisonment and sexual violence are very real and widespread for women peacebuilders. The COVID-19 pandemic directly compounded risks faced by women peacebuilders and increased violence against women leaders, human rights defenders and peacebuilders. In some places, the pandemic further restricted civic space, as states took on broad emergency powers and used the pandemic as a pretext for restricting rights. These restrictions posed a threat to women peacebuilders, and the emergency responses implemented by certain countries significantly reduced the democratic and judicial oversight that may protect women peacebuilders.

The various risks and stressful circumstances faced by women peacebuilders in their daily work are compounded by the fact that women peacebuilders frequently try to overcome seemingly insurmountable problems in difficult circumstances and with very limited resources. Taking measures that enhance the holistic security of women peacebuilders, including encouraging self-care, is critical to the sustainability of their work and the survival of their organizations and movements.

● Women peacebuilders know best how they can be supported and in which ways the international community can be helpful.

Listening to women peacebuilders and their assessment of what is and is not safe is key to planning for their protection. International partners should ensure that women peacebuilders are included in programming and risk identification processes to best plan for their protection. Risks do intersect and can happen separately or simultaneously: Women peacemakers experience risks related to the conflicts in which they work; the peacebuilders' identities; the ways in which the peacebuilders challenge gender norms; and related to the COVID-19 pandemic, counterterrorism policies and digital surveillance.

International partners need to recognize the value of the information, community connections and knowledge brought to them by their women peacebuilder counterparts in planning, designing and implementing programs. In an equitable relationship, where both parties' contributions are of equal value, the likelihood of correctly identifying the needs and priorities on the ground, as well as the best way to address them, is higher. In terms of mitigation or intervention, there can be no "one size fits all," and the strength of any given response lies in its ability to be tailored to a specific situation. It is essential that women peacebuilders be part of this process and that there be open and honest discussions about the risks involved for both sides, as well as the potential for risk transfer and sharing.



- **There is a need for institutional policies and measures implemented by international partners to prioritize women peacebuilders' security.**

Even though international partners increasingly work with local actors to implement programming, measures in terms of security and risk management are still lagging. International partners can unintentionally exacerbate the risks their peacebuilding partners face, be they physical or psychosocial. Risks and insecurity are often discussed in terms of what it means for program implementation rather than in terms of the security of women peacebuilders themselves. This difference in risk tolerance contributes to the tendency of international partners to “transfer risk” by prioritizing their needs and minimizing their own risk and instead transferring the risk to their local partners.

- **Funding is critical for mitigating risks because funding allows women peacebuilders to afford measures for physical protection as well as psychosocial well-being. However, funds are often inaccessible to less well-established organizations and almost totally inaccessible to non-registered organizations or to individual women peacebuilders.**

Women peacebuilders who are on the margins — whether Indigenous, from rural areas or from a religious minority, among others — risk remaining marginalized and being ignored by the international community. Given the immense risks involved in working in conflict zones or environments with restrictive enabling environments, donors and international partners tend to gravitate towards organizations with whom they have already worked or who have the experience and capacity to implement the desired programs. Women peacebuilders who are more visible to the donor community — usually elite and urban women — are likelier to receive support. Unless the funds are expressly designed for them, non-registered organizations, social movements and individuals almost never qualify for support.

- **Collective action and network-building can provide protective mechanisms for women peacebuilders.**

Building networks is a way women peacebuilders, activists and human rights defenders can increase their impact in building peace in their respective contexts while also enhancing their own protection. It is important to recognize and support existing networks so they can continue their peacebuilding and protection work, as well as expand their membership and outreach. Networks are also key for building a sense of solidarity and collective care for women peacebuilders.

Recommendations

When developing strategies to address the risks and insecurity women peacebuilders face, international partners need to be willing to share the risk that engagement in conflict or post-conflict zones may entail and thus open space for honest discussions about what risks exist, which can be addressed by whom, and in what ways. Furthermore, international partners need to think about security in a holistic manner, addressing not only the personal security of the woman peacebuilder but also of the security of her organization, family and community, as all of these are integral to sustaining the woman peacebuilder's work. Similarly, international partners need to engage with the root causes of these risks, which include harmful gender norms — especially militarized masculinities.

Based on the findings in this report, international partners and funders should do the following:

● Support women peacebuilders' individual strategies for security and resilience

- Recognize the scope and diversity of women peacebuilders' work.
- Be aware that women peacebuilders may not self-identify as such — and that sometimes identifying as a peacebuilder can pose a risk.
- Provide opportunities for women peacebuilders to engage in self-care practices, rest and recovery.
- Create safe spaces for women peacebuilders to gather and share and analyze risks, co-develop mitigation strategies and create solidarity.
- Facilitate psychosocial support that brings women together across existing divides rather than reinforcing those divides.
- Address structural issues that lead to burnout and fatigue, including donor expectations for results or the absence of resources for risk management.
- Where appropriate, support the visibility of women peacebuilders and highlight the successes of the work they do.

● Respond to real-time changes in conflict and security dynamics

- Allow for local women peacebuilding organizations to temporarily cease operations if security conditions change and they no longer feel comfortable working in the area.
- Establish incident tracking and reporting systems to compile and share security incidents and threats.
- Provide flexibility in reporting, especially if describing activities in a different way will help reduce risks to local peace leaders.
- Jointly analyze security incidents to extract lessons learned.
- Plan for the possibility to take radical protection steps, including providing legal support or logistical support for women peacebuilders to leave their community or country, including facilitating visa processes.
- Develop digital security plans and ensure that all partners can operate in digitally safe ways. Ensure that women peacebuilders have professional VPNs, paid encrypted mail accounts and technical support on how to utilize these for digital safety.



● Create responsive funding mechanisms

- Allocate funding resources for joint security risk management and development of risk mitigation strategies with women peacebuilders and their organizations and listen to their perspectives on what constitutes risk and insecurity.
- Be willing to share risks — especially financial risks — to support risk mitigation for women peacebuilders. Be clear about the extent to which these risks can be shared or mitigated.
- Create flexible reporting requirements and allow for verbal reporting.
- Create opportunities for multi-year, flexible and core funding to allow women peacebuilders to take control of their own programming and agenda.
- Offer need-based funding grounded in the articulated needs of grassroots women peacebuilders rather than solely in international funding priorities.
- Avoid competition between local women’s organizations for limited project-oriented funding and encourage groups to collaborate.
- Provide rapid response mechanisms and urgent action funds to support legal aid, emergency relocation, protective accompaniment and medical support.
- Create opportunities for cross-sectoral funding to support work on coalition-building across humanitarian assistance, protection and psychosocial programs.

● Address security risks at the root

- Ensure community buy-in and support for the activities of women peacebuilders by engaging with community leaders, men, family members, and peers.
- Include male relatives of women peacebuilders and men from the community in discussions on mitigation strategies.
- Identify, support and build national and international networks of women peacebuilders for them to share experiences and provide mutual support and solidarity. This includes collaboration between women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders by ensuring inclusive criteria for participation, where possible, for mutual reinforcement of their work.

● Center women peacebuilders' leadership and experiences in program design and implementation

- Identify and work with groups of women peacebuilders who reflect the diversity of experiences in any context (geography, in-country/diaspora, race, religion, ethnicity, education, age, sexual orientation, disability, etc.).
- Commit to partnering with groups that are marginalized, smaller or harder to reach.
- Carry out joint and inclusive context, gender and risk analyses with a diverse representation of women peace leaders.
- Apply an intersectional approach to identifying further vulnerabilities, risks and threats.
- Include women peacebuilders in all program processes, including design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Create opportunities for discussions between funders and women peacebuilders about what is possible, desirable and feasible, while being clear countering anxiety around losing existing support or future funds.
- Ensure that women peacebuilders' safety is taken into consideration in program design and implementation.
- Address power imbalances between peacebuilders and funders, being aware they may create pressure on women peacebuilders or their organizations to accept and undertake risks that they would not otherwise.



Conclusion

Women peacebuilders inevitably face risks and insecurity in their daily work, and international partners have an important role to play in supporting their safety and protection. Centering women peacebuilders and listening to the types of risks they face is the first step to ensuring an adequate response. The diversity of roles that women peacebuilders play, as well as the multiple, overlapping types of risks they face, need to be taken into account by international partners from the very beginning of a partnership. International partners can help address these risks by creating a strong foundation for risk-responsive partnerships—including the provision of long-term and flexible funding—and by taking a holistic approach to security that centers the experiences of women peacebuilders. Preventing and mitigating risks to women peacebuilders not only supports women peacebuilders, but lays the foundation for multisectoral and long-term efforts to end cycles of violence.



Syria Case Study: A focus on women's participation without providing protection

By Slava Shikh Hasan

*Highlighting how unequal partnerships
exacerbate risks for women peacebuilders in Syria*

CASE STUDY



*Note: this research was conducted
prior to the 2023 earthquake that
affected Syria and Turkey.*

Context

The crisis in Syria is still very much ongoing. The situation and needs vary tremendously across the country, and funding to support people's basic needs is scarce. Syrian society is not yet at the point of starting to imagine a peaceful Syria.

Women generally face many risks — and even more so when working in peacebuilding. These risks include violence, harassment, exclusion, economic deprivation, arrest and exile.¹⁶⁹ The *de facto* authorities fear the empowerment of women inside Syria, especially when they are peacebuilding activists. Societal attitudes, customs and traditions constrict women's role to doing housework only. The dominance of armed actors, including Syrian régime forces, the absence of laws protecting women, and the lack of accountability mechanisms all put women at risk. Women are not provided with sufficient job opportunities or funding to focus on peacebuilding.

Clan-based and area-based considerations, as well as the absence of effective governance, limit access to information from international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Women are marginalized throughout society, and interviewees felt that when organizations hire women activists it is often linked to a desire to attract financial support rather than to a genuine desire for women to become decision-makers and leaders.

While some women activists have been able to become more visible thanks to their expertise, their work in their communities, and their connections with the international community, participants felt that most international organizations direct their funding towards those non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with whom they have pre-existing personal relationships.

The support provided by international bodies to local communities in Syria and neighboring countries varies considerably based on geographical location, religious and ethnic affiliations, and the challenges in each area.



Key findings

Peacebuilding itself, as a series of nonviolent activities that oppose injustice and violence, and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security are not necessarily understood or embraced across the country. Women work to resolve and prevent conflicts in many ways, yet much of their work is not referred to as “peacebuilding.”

There are no official structures, whether government institutions or agencies, that ensure the protection of women peacebuilders in Syria. Syrian women peacebuilders residing in neighboring countries also lack protection. Some programs exist to support them, but they are difficult to access. Refugee women are at additional risk, fearing host country rules and laws and terrorist cells’ threats to harm them.

Interviewees reported that international support does not mitigate military or security risks. Women peacebuilders report having discussed the risks they face with international partners with no subsequent interventions for addressing or protecting them. International partners do not seem to have a vision for avoiding such risks: They focus from the project design phase onwards only on the potential risks to their project rather than on the potential risks to women peacebuilders. The focus on Women, Peace and Security has primarily been on women’s participation, while the provision of protection has been neglected. Even for international organizations, protecting women peacebuilders solely amounts to providing for basic needs, rather than supporting holistic protection.

“So far, the biggest focus has been on women’s participation only, while the provision of protection has been poor. Even for international organizations, the concept of protecting women peacebuilders is basic and needs development.” —
Woman peacebuilder, Syria

Women peacebuilders’ voices are being unevenly heard. While women at the political level feel they are heard, others do not, depending on their ethnic and religious affiliation. Most INGOs interact with a very small pool of interlocutors and are politicized, which has an influence on where funding is allocated. When support is provided, it is dedicated to project implementation, not to the mitigation of risks. INGOs offer women some help to attain financial independence through employment, but the biggest beneficiaries are always men, since the presence of women is *pro forma*, and decision-making centers are under men’s control.

While international and local organizations do sometimes seek feedback and input about the support they provide to women peacebuilders, participants report that they do not seem to share it with donors. Furthermore, recommendations and results are periodically shared via project reports, but no feedback is received from donors, which leads to communication gaps. No real mechanisms are in place to measure projects’ impacts on target groups, nor do accountability mechanisms exist between local and international organizations.

International and national organizations do involve local communities in some dialogue sessions at the local level, provide capacity-strengthening for women, hold public meetings amongst decision-makers and international representatives, and conduct programs to reduce gender-based violence (GBV) and harassment. However, participants felt that these trainings are heavy on theoretical information and light on the practical side. Women are only represented in a *pro forma* fashion and are not present in decision-making positions. Additionally, the focus is on the humanitarian sector, relief, protection, food and health rather than peacebuilding with a longer-term lens. One of the biggest challenges is that many organizations and their staff are not convinced of the importance of women's participation, nor are they convinced of the necessity of civil society's participation either in the political process or in peacebuilding. Technical resources and expertise, which are essential to supporting any agenda, are still scarce, especially when it comes to Women, Peace and Security.

The impact of some partnerships has been positive, including some political empowerment projects and training to strengthen skills and knowledge. However, research reveals that half the respondents felt that the support given did not delve into issues deeply; it was administrative and did not empower women to work for their political and/or human rights. NGOs work in a competitive rather than a cooperative way, with little sharing of information and cooperation, which makes national-level work and peacebuilding delicate.

“There is a lack of faith in the cause by many humanitarian workers, whether from INGOs or mediators. They consider the partnership merely a work-related task. For us, it's a survival cause, both on the humanitarian and international levels, for peacebuilding.” — Woman peacebuilder, Syria

Most of the key informant interviews reveal that the relationship between the organizations for which they work and international donors/partners seems equal and fair but that most local organizations lack the competencies and organizational structures to be sustainable and specialized or to plan strategically. They depend to a great extent on donor-imposed activities, at the expense of local communities' needs. Many respondents noted that most support does not consider the sensitivity of local needs. Peacebuilding requires great awareness of local culture, of connections and of those who can have an impact on the conflicting parties.

Some activities do reach grassroots, local and/or individual women peacebuilders, depending on geographic location. For example, Syrian women in Turkey have a better chance of being included than women in Syria. Throughout Syria and the region, grassroots women peacebuilders remain isolated, and new mechanisms to reach them are needed. Opportunities for women to engage in the international peacebuilding field are limited to a very small number of people whose circumstances allow them to participate in international forums and who have access to the required travel documents. Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting to online platforms provided more women with increased opportunities to enhance their local and international presence.

Many Syrians feel that they cannot influence the situation in Syria because of the negative competition between organizations; the difficulty and cost of transferring funds inside Syria; the imbalance between locations that receive a lot of support compared to those that receive little; and the discrepancy in international actors' agendas between working on women's issues but ignoring women's basic needs for stability, security and safety. Language barriers, difficulties in communicating and convincing organizations about local women's needs, not fully understanding the Syrian context, and the administrative burdens linked to partnerships also pose challenges.



Conclusion and recommendations

While women's participation in peacebuilding has been emphasized in Syria, women's protection has been ignored. In light of this case study's findings, international partners should:

- Take a community-driven approach to problem-solving. Implementation challenges do not mean that support should be discontinued.
- Form women-led community committees so that women can become change-makers and peacebuilders.
- Ensure that peacebuilding projects are designed and implemented in such a way as to encourage networking and partnerships between community groups.
- Support programs that build the national identity of all conflict parties and promote tolerance without exclusion or discrimination.
- Assist women peacebuilders at risk rather than seeking temporary solutions. Create a clear and specific rescue strategy and have a dedicated office or email for emergency communication.
- Provide protection — including security, financial and/or legal support — for women peacebuilders under threat and help them develop safety plans.
- Provide operational grants (not solely project grants) for women-led peacebuilding projects with direct technical assistance, support loans, co-financing and other forms of financial assistance.
- Simplify procedures for funding applications for women peacebuilders; find ways to address language and cultural barriers.
- Collaborate with a greater number and variety of women peacebuilding actors, including small or grassroots women-led organizations and individual women peacebuilders.
- Conduct and publish research and disseminate reports on peacebuilding and protection mechanisms.
- Support women's work that targets people of all genders and ages, rather than solely women as the target group.
- Select Syrian and international project staff who are well-versed in the Women, Peace and Security and protection agendas.
- Provide group psychotherapy workshops related to the trauma women activists face, bringing people together around common ground rather than based on their religion, race, language or place of residence.

Iraq Case Study: International presence as a form of protection

CASE STUDY

By Nesreen Barwari

*Highlighting patriarchal norms and lack of protection
for women peacebuilders in Iraq*



Context

The situation in Iraq is challenging for women peacebuilders because of both existing cultural norms and security conditions.¹⁷⁰ The security situation in the Kurdistan region is stable, with freedom of expression and movement. The central and southern governorates, however, are rife with multiple official and unofficial militaries and militias, deliberately obstructing peacebuilding and women's work.¹⁷¹ International assistance has had some positive impact on the activities and the people directly involved, but much progress is needed. In Iraq, women peacebuilders who are activists are divided along ethnic and religious factions — Sunni Muslim and Shia Muslim, Christian, Turkmen, Yazidi and Kurdish. Interviewees reported that women do not necessarily work together across these divides and are often in conflict with each other. The respondents also noted the perception of many Muslim women is that many Kurdish and Yazidi women get a lot of support from international partners, while they do not.

“...continuing to work in this field is not an easy task. It is challenging to secure funding for your organization... being a mother... coordinating between family matters, other interests, and work is a big burden...so is working in “hot spots” ... I work in a multi-forces area and there are conflicts between them. It is possible that I and other civilians might be victims of these conflicts.” — Suzan Safar, DAK Organization for the Development of Yazidi Women, Mosul



Key findings

There is no common definition for or use of the term “woman peacebuilder.” Women are involved in key humanitarian, human rights and development work — even sometimes in community mediation. The most commonly used term for women engaged in this work in the Iraqi context is “activist.” Some of the women interviewed are active at the political level, while others work on community rehabilitation or community integration, or on providing psychological support for women who have suffered from violence during the war. Participants noted that it is very difficult for women peacebuilders to put themselves “on the map.” Only those who are connected through women’s networks are successful in building these desired relationships. Susan Aref from the Women Empowerment Association in Erbil stated, “My presence in women’s networks at the regional and national level put me on the global, regional and local map.” Women peacebuilders also believe that funding from international partners is often directed towards larger organizations and that the process involved in acquiring funding is too challenging, complicated and cumbersome. This is compounded by the tendency of international partners not to accept activists’ ideas, initiatives or feedback.

“Believing in the cause is the most important way that helped me reach my goals, and I always tell the international bodies, I do not work for you, I work for my family and my people... You will leave, but I remain and work here, and I am known to the community, and I work to meet their needs and interests. I derive my strength from strong women, such as the widow who raises her children alone in the light of difficult circumstances and despite poverty as well when I see that women are the ones who support each other. I do not believe in the saying that the women are their own worst enemy.” — Siroud Muhammed Faleh Ahmad, Iraqi Al-Amal Association

Women peacebuilders feel they face a number of obstacles in accessing and receiving support from international or regional actors. One of these obstacles is the fact that the culture is very patriarchal, and the peacebuilding environment is dominated by men. Men do not create “space” for women activists and often question their capabilities, leaving them out of spaces where they may have access to international partners.

In addition to the precarious security situation and the weakness of state institutions, women peacebuilders face numerous risks and obstacles to their work. There is no structure in place to protect women, not even in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). As noted by Dr. Nada Muhammad Ibrahim of the Iraqi Organization for Women and Future and member of the Iraqi Council of Representatives for the Iraqi National Front, “Even though there are better laws and regulations in KRI, especially family law and the active role of women in society, there is no sufficient protection for women at all.” The situation is worse in the rest of Iraq where these laws are not in place.

Furthermore, patriarchal norms and the limitations they impose on women's role in society in general mean that women are expected to tend to family duties and their husbands, or they are shamed for working in public spaces. The peacebuilders interviewed reported that they are subjected to smear campaigns and defamation, including being accused of being "prostitutes" or "promoting homosexuality." Their family members receive threats, and often male family members are encouraged to stop their work. For example, male relatives might receive a call saying, "If you don't stop her, we will kill her." In addition, women's freedom of movement may be limited in areas where male accompaniment is required. According to Huda Rafid Ahmed of the Women's Protection Project, "It is not easy for women to work in such areas or sectors connected to security... The issue of mixing men with women is very sensitive which poses a restriction on building peace comprehensively." In other words, restrictions on women's mobility can have a clear impact on the ability of women peacebuilders to do the work they need to do.

The extent of the limitations posed by patriarchal norms varies from region to region, with the Kurdistan region being more open. In KRI, women have greater freedom of movement, independence and means to participate in public life. In southern regions, the norms are more conservative, meaning that women's freedom of movement and participation in public life are both restricted.

Women peacebuilders make efforts to address the risks they face. Some of these include:

- Disappearing for a while and not appearing in the media;
- Not publishing activities on social media until they are completed;
- Coordinating with the security authorities when moving around;
- Wearing locally accepted clothing so as not to be identified as an "outsider";
- Obtaining necessary permits to work officially;
- For female activists in the central and southern governorates, traveling to the Kurdistan region as a safe haven or outside the country for a period; and
- Maintaining community support for their work.

International organizations support women peacebuilders in several ways. They support the participation of women peacebuilders in regional and international networks and events, which is an area where women noted that they have found the greatest benefit. They feel that it "helped... a lot in getting to know the suffering of women in other countries and communicating with them and benefiting from their own experiences." International partners also provide support that strengthens and encourages women peacebuilders and gives them visibility in international fora such as the UN Security Council.

International organizations have been supporting women peacebuilders through capacity strengthening activities such as training and courses. Women peacebuilders have found this type of support to be very helpful. However, they also noted some challenges:

- Activities are limited to a small group of women — often elite, educated and well-connected (the "usual suspects").
- Partnerships are limited to large organizations that are already acknowledged in the international arena.
- Activities lack comprehensiveness, often working on superficial issues; there is too little diversity of choice offered, and trainers often lack knowledge about local context and cultural and religious gender dynamics.
- Funded programs often emphasize the number of participants included but do not necessarily address gender norms, gender issues and gender dynamics.

The capacity to continue working after an international, regional or national organization's projects are completed depends on the extent of the impact and duration of the programs and projects: the longer the period, the greater the benefit. Women peacebuilders feel strongly that their knowledge and understanding of the local community and of the local context, and their own priorities and needs, should be taken into consideration and supported by international partners. A common view among interviewees is that the priorities imposed by international partners often do not match the needs of local communities.



“The support that is provided by the international communities must target projects that are coming from within, in coordination with the concerned and affected population. There must be deeper communication with the concerned authorities and the people to bridge the reality and avoid the superficial solutions.” — Ban Najeeb, Women Minorities Forum, Iraq

Women peacebuilders feel that the presence of international partners by their side provides much-needed protection. However, Feryal Al Kaabi of Awan Organization for Awareness and Capacity Development in Diwaniyah noted that there is an “urgent need for legal support centers affiliated with international partners to provide legal advice and maintain the safety of the women defending and attempting to build peace. The influence of international partners is considered vital.”

It is important for partners to recognize that international presence is a form of protection, and creating more equitable partnerships is critical for supporting the protection of women peacebuilders in Iraq.

Conclusion and recommendations

Women peacebuilders in Iraq face serious security threats and are often restricted by patriarchal norms. Partnership with international organizations offers key protections, but peacebuilders often feel that their priorities and feedback are not taken into consideration. In light of this case study’s findings, international partners should:

- Support the Government of Iraq in creating a legal framework and mechanisms to protect women in general.
- Provide legal support centers for women activists.
- Design projects in collaboration with local partners, so they are part of the design process as well as implementation.
- Fund projects longer term, helping to sustain results and achieve desired goals.
- Conduct trainings related to the field of security and safety that include methods and tools for protection.
- Provide support for health-related and social needs when women peacebuilders are exposed to risks.
- Recognize the work women peacebuilders do in public settings and political discussions.
- Provide ongoing psychological support for women peacebuilders.

Tanzania

Case Study: Strengthening participatory approaches in partnerships

CASE STUDY

By Ambassador Liberata Mulamula and Tatu Mkiwa Nyange

Highlighting how recognition and common vision can help mitigate security risks to women peacebuilders



Context

Tanzania is considered one of the most peaceful countries in Africa. According to the 2022 Global Peace Index, Tanzania ranks 91st out of 163 countries globally.¹⁷² Tanzania has historically occupied a leadership position in promoting regional cohesion, peace and security in eastern and southern Africa, the Great Lakes Region and beyond.¹⁷³ The country is the 13th-largest and 7th-largest contributor to UN¹⁷⁴ and African Union (AU) peacekeeping, respectively, including stationing women at the forefront.¹⁷⁵

The global Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda recognizes that international peace and security are inextricably linked to gender equality and women's leadership.¹⁷⁶ In 2020, Tanzania launched a development process to create a Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan (NAP) to enhance inclusion of women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.¹⁷⁷ The process of developing the National Action Plan on WPS is in progress, under the collaborative leadership of the Government of Tanzania and the Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation (MNF) with UN Women and support from different stakeholders,¹⁷⁸ including the embassies of Denmark, Canada and Finland.

Peacebuilding in the Tanzanian context includes peacefully resolving conflicts and differences at family and community levels. It also involves addressing land-use and resource-related conflicts (particularly around water and mining), which regularly result in violence, abuse, trespassing, killing of livestock and loss of property. Clashes between farmers and pastoralists over land and water are an ever-growing problem in Tanzania and the region.¹⁷⁹ Inspired by their deep understanding of local realities, local women peacebuilders in Tanzania engage, frequently independently, in conflict resolution and peacebuilding at local levels. However, they rarely recognize their own skills and capacities and are often neither recognized nor honored for their work in this field. They face challenges and risks, including violence, harassment and rejection by their own communities.



Key findings

“We believe that peace begins at home and that global peace cannot be achieved without advocating peace in the family, where the lawyers, farmers, teachers and presidents are born. Learning about the value of peacemaking at an early age will make peacebuilders in the future.” — Woman peacebuilder, Global Peace Foundation, Dar es Salaam¹⁸⁰

Women in Tanzania contribute to peacebuilding at all levels of society, but the term “women peacebuilders” is rarely used and little known. Local women peacebuilders are those who work to promote peace at the household level, with their families, as well as at the community, national and sometimes international levels. Like other women in Tanzania, they face multiple challenges, including gender stereotyping, inequality, abusive language and aggression from their male counterparts, and isolation from their peers. At the same time, women peacebuilders are able to use their place in their communities and culture to influence situations, as noted by this representative of the Tanzania National Committee for Prevention of Genocide:

Women peacebuilders are actually very powerful. In some cultures, we tend to think that women “have no voice.” But they have some best practice. For example, in a Maasai community where the women group turned the otherwise tense situation into a peaceful meeting. It was a fact-finding mission into what led to a violent conflict with loss of lives and properties. The Maasai youths were accused of taking part, and they were very defensive. During the meeting they came prepared for violence. Just then, a women group arrived in a kind of peaceful demonstration. The youths gave way for the women to sit; and when the meeting was getting hot, with the youths threatening to start chaos, the women will just stand up and do some sign known to their culture and all the youths go back to their place.¹⁸¹

The importance of partnerships

The role local women peacebuilders attribute to their work in Tanzania is to stand up and act to reconcile families and communities. At the same time, peacebuilding involves ongoing awareness-raising with victims of violence and perpetrators of different forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). However, women peacebuilders noted in interviews that they generally lack even enough funds to purchase smartphones that would enable them to use social media and share the process and results of their work, hence remaining invisible and vulnerable.¹⁸² They also find that access to existing funding is challenging. The peacebuilders highlighted how they are invited to participate in meetings and events organized by national or international organizations and are asked to speak up and share their opinions, but they rarely manage to tap directly into funding. A representative of Women Fund Tanzania (WFT) noted, “National organizations and local women peacebuilders don’t know how to articulate their agenda, according to funders, and sometimes their [funders’] priorities do not align with realities on the ground.”¹⁸³

Some participants in this study feel excluded from funding processes, as funds are channeled through third parties that have a reputation for knowing how to handle larger funds, such as UN Women and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs).¹⁸⁴ Funds rarely trickle down. One interviewee said, “Funders tend to work with the same national organizations, while individual peacebuilders and smaller organizations find it hard to survive. When women peacebuilders try to fit donor objectives, this often leads to competition between them rather than competency, reducing efficiency and impact of their work.”¹⁸⁵ Conversely, participants from larger organizations consider that calls for proposals are transparent and sufficiently accessible to all.

When the government offices or organizations need local peacebuilders’ support, they ask village leaders or the Local Government Authority (LGA) for advice, and women are often not represented in those offices. The criteria for identifying partnerships with local peacebuilders depend on local customs and authorities. Only when women become members of the Ward Reconciliation Committee, for example, can they obtain a peacebuilder’s profile and participate in national or international peacebuilding dialogues, forums or village meetings. Tanzanian women paralegals become visible when acting as human rights defenders for those whose rights have been violated, helping the survivors to seek justice from court or gender desk offices.

Creating strong partnerships bolsters the effectiveness of peacebuilding work and unifies solidarity and institutional support. Partnerships entail mutual learning, empowering rather than undermining internal actors, and capitalizing on local knowledge and skills.¹⁸⁶ One participant stated, “Effective partnership models occur when there is good tripartite relationship between the local and international organization and the government,”¹⁸⁷ mutual understanding and equal relationship between the parties.

However, few local women peacebuilders reported being able to establish partnerships with international organizations, and, when partnerships exist, they feel that the relationship is not balanced. One noted, “I see a gap between us, we are not equal in partnership. We have more knowledge compared to them.”¹⁸⁸ Yet, representatives of larger organizations expressed the opinion that “they do try to make partners own processes, involve them in the decision-making and implementation and encourage local actors to share views.”¹⁸⁹ Partnerships and international support generate positive impacts, legal aid, training, equipment, increased security and better visibility for the work of peacebuilders, so creating transparent and mutually beneficial partnerships is critical.

“Effective partnership requires both partners to have existing trust and transparency; ownership and commitment; a shared sense of purpose and vision with a common understanding of mutual benefit and existence of trust environment in which partners can share successes, failures and challenges.” — Woman representative, Global Peace Foundation (GPF)¹⁹⁸



Conclusions and recommendations

The way forward to improve engagement with local women peacebuilders, facilitate safety and security and support the efficiency and impact of their work is to promote a more participatory approach, create both bottom-up and top-down consortia and strengthen networking with national (such as the Tanzania Media Women Association [TAMWA], the Tanzania Gender Network Program [TGNP] and Women Fund Tanzania [WFT]) and international organizations. Local women peacebuilders should be supported as they work to place themselves “on the map,” become more visible, and gain direct access to financial and technical assistance from international organizations. International organizations should contextualize their priorities to improve the equality of partnerships and plan their activities in direct alignment with women peacebuilders at the grassroots level.

In light of this case study’s findings, international partners should:

- Prioritize equal partnerships with local peacebuilders and provide technical and financial assistance with managing funds and writing reports.
- Fund grassroots organizations directly rather than channeling their funding through third parties.
- Provide capacity strengthening to local women peacebuilders to improve their networking skills with national and international stakeholders and to place themselves “on the map.”
- Ensure that partnerships are equal and that programming priorities are created in collaboration with local women peace leaders.
- Share activities, experiences and lessons learned with local women peacebuilders.

Yemen Case Study: Disconnection between the priorities of donors and women peacebuilders

CASE STUDY

By Muna Luqman

Highlighting the need for increased and flexible funding for women peacebuilders in Yemen



Context

The nine-year-old conflict that has been raging in Yemen is between the internationally recognized government, backed by a Saudi-led military coalition, and Houthi rebel forces (aka Ansar Allah), supported by Iran. The country's humanitarian crisis and conflict are said to be the worst in the world, causing widespread hunger, disease and attacks on civilians. The crisis has also led to disruptions in economic activities with a substantial reduction in jobs, private sector operations and business opportunities, due to insecurity and lack of supplies and inputs, leading to massive layoffs to the country's workforce in both formal and informal sectors.¹⁹⁰ The fragmentation of existing central economic institutions like the Central Bank of Yemen, in combination with these conflict conditions, has impaired normal distribution of food imports and aid, essential to Yemenis. Airports, seaports and major commercial operations have been adversely affected by escalating conflict and destruction of infrastructure (roads, facilities, etc.). This dramatic deterioration of conditions has translated into a significant increase in poverty. For many, joining a militia or other conflict-related economic activities remains the only gainful opportunity in a "war economy." The conflict and the ensuing economic crisis are among the main drivers of Yemen's deepened food insecurity.

Yemen has ranked at the bottom of the table for gender equality in the World Economic Forum *Global Gender Gap Report* for years and ranked 155 out of 156 countries in the 2021 report.¹⁹¹ Yemeni women are almost entirely absent from political life — in 2021, less than one percent of parliamentarians were women, and no women served in ministerial positions.¹⁹² The participation rate of women in the labor force is 6.3 percent.¹⁹³



The rate of violence against women in the context of the conflict is very high¹⁹⁴; men and boys make up the vast majority of direct victims of armed conflict, forced recruitment and arbitrary detention, while women and girls are at greater risk from airstrikes, kidnapping and sexual and gender-based violence (S/GBV). Negative gender stereotypes, rigid gender roles, limited mobility due to gender roles and patriarchal attitudes, a discriminatory legal system and economic inequality have compounded women's vulnerability to violence. Since women are responsible for providing food and care in their homes, they have had to struggle with the challenges of limited access to food, water, sanitation and health care services — access that has steadily deteriorated as the conflict has continued.¹⁹⁵ Displacement and the breakdown of protection mechanisms have dramatically increased the vulnerability of women and girls, with men and boys also experiencing higher levels of GBV. In addition, the increase in poverty has led to negative coping strategies such as child labor, child marriage, survival sex and begging. Yemeni women and girls are stepping into roles that are traditionally filled by men. Without a gender-transformative agenda, peace in Yemen will be impeded, and the rights of women and girls will remain in the shadows.

Key findings

The role of Yemeni women peacebuilders is key, as they can meaningfully provide insight into community-based resilience strategies. They were the first to warn of an impending crisis and call for a ceasefire to focus efforts on combating the COVID-19 pandemic, including trying to address basic needs, by disbursing salaries and providing clean water and electricity. Women across the country find themselves in charge of managing the poverty afflicting their communities and taking action to mitigate and respond to protection needs. One humanitarian worker interviewed said, “75 percent of our volunteers are women, because women have access to women, children and men, while men have only access to men. Women are in demand, they are dedicated and come on time, however, they get an incentive not a salary, around 50-70 USD per month.”¹⁹⁶

Yemeni women-led organizations fill an important gap created by the collapse of Yemeni state institutions and the financial shift of international organizations to concentrate on humanitarian emergency relief. Consultations with local women peacebuilders show that the international pool of funds encourages only partially, and in a fragmented way, gender-responsive localized responses. The support provided by some donors does not include any form of protection or risk measures and lacks security elements for women peacebuilders.

The loss of men to conflict has led to an increase in female-headed households with women having to take on new roles that heighten their vulnerability. According to prevailing gender roles, men are recognized as the “protectors” of women and families. Without a male relative present, women are more vulnerable to sexual and physical violence. Within this context, an unchaperoned woman faces increased risks of violence at checkpoints. Even so, women peacebuilders are extensively involved in civil society in Yemen. However, especially in *de facto* Houthi-controlled areas, they face increased risks. Women-led organizations operating in areas under government control report difficulties with the renewal of licenses, as well as government requirements that their activities be supervised.

Yemeni women's rights actors at the grassroots level and in the diaspora use various strategies to work in this difficult context. Their efforts result in the release of detainees, conflict resolution for water and land disputes, and lives saved at the frontlines and in crossfire areas. They use different techniques to mobilize the community. An important finding is that women need to be included as part of the solution, not as passive beneficiaries of assistance. The role of local women peacebuilders and organizations is critical to paving the way to self-reliance, recovery and resilience for all Yemenis.

Too often, women are sidelined by international programming. Yemeni women remain under-represented in peace talks.¹⁹⁷ United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, such as 1325 and subsequent resolutions, reiterate the importance of women's participation in peace talks and peacebuilding negotiations, while other resolutions, such as 2216, include calls for ending violence in Yemen but not for the inclusion of women, thereby limiting women's participation in dialogue processes. Furthermore, international partners often come in with their own agenda and priorities, and this influences whom they support in terms of women activists and peacebuilders on the ground.

This study identified the following gaps:

- Donor funding criteria are often difficult for women-led peacebuilding organizations to meet. Some impose stringent conditions, including high annual budget requirements, which automatically exclude many women-led organizations.
- Most funding is short-term, service-oriented and designed to respond to emergencies, without support for gender-transformative outcomes and effective participation of women and girls in peacebuilding and leadership. Gender equality often cannot be addressed with short-term programming/funding — initiatives are needed along the humanitarian-peace-development nexus to make the impact more sustainable, and this requires long-term support to women's organizations.
- There is a disconnect between administrative requirements for traditional development programs and those for peacebuilding programming of local women peacebuilders, who are often not part of humanitarian coordination groups, despite their being first responders.
- Women-led organizations experience gendered barriers to meaningful and quality engagement with international partners in the following ways:
 - Coordination mechanisms do not officially require the participation of national and local women's organizations, beyond those receiving grants from international organizations.
 - International actors rarely recognize local Women's Rehabilitation Organizations (WROs) and Women-Led Organizations (WLOs) as first responders or rarely conduct a mapping of them in humanitarian or development settings, rendering it unlikely for them to be involved in coordination, despite their knowledge of the local context.
 - Efforts to strengthen the capacity of local actors are limited. There are no visible long-term funding modalities for capacity strengthening and operational support. The lack of a critical mass of women activists in coordination structures and consultations results in gender-unequal outcomes in humanitarian and peacebuilding needs assessments and other decision-making processes.
 - Cultural and language biases and patriarchal structures within UN agencies and international organizations pose additional challenges to women's meaningful engagement in coordination, while also complicating procedures and requirements.
 - The lack of donor policy coherence between humanitarian, conflict, peace and development work funding streams excludes women, who often work across these lines, from the process.
 - There is a disconnect between support programs and needs on the ground.
 - Country-Based Pooled Funds remain elusive for WLOs.

An important finding is that women need to be included as part of the solution, not as passive beneficiaries of assistance. The role of local women peacebuilders and organizations is critical to paving the way to self-reliance, recovery and resilience for all Yemenis.



Conclusion and recommendations

Supporting women-led organizations — especially through including and funding them — is key to promoting women’s contributions to peacebuilding and to protecting them from the innumerable risks they face. This support provides opportunities for local and national women’s organizations to apply their contextual knowledge and become change agents for gender equality, peacebuilding and humanitarian development, allowing WROs and WLOs to grow. In light of this case study’s findings, international partners should:

- Increase access to humanitarian funding, ensure its sustainability, and support the capacity of local WROs and WLOs for self-sustaining fundraising, prioritizing multi-year, flexible and sustainable funds, including opportunities along the humanitarian-peace-development nexus. Allocated funding should be flexible and fund core operational and technical costs. The flexible and equal funding and strategic partnerships demonstrated by ICAN civil society network and MADRE are good practice models that have had a huge positive impact on the work of women-led organizations in Yemen.
- Engage community committees in all program phases — design, implementation and evaluation — and ensure women are represented in community committees to channel their voices toward a more gender-sensitive humanitarian response approach.
- Enable partnerships between Yemeni women peacebuilders and international partners to support their advocacy, strengthen their alliances, and support the establishment of larger networks of women peacebuilders to qualify for and access humanitarian funding.
- Promote “long-term and predictable,” quality funding, avoid politicizing humanitarian access, and allow actors (particularly women-led organizations) to define their approaches and priorities and build institutional capacities.
- Ensure that financial aid is in line with humanitarian principles, is not exploited by armed groups, and has a gendered perspective.
- Incorporate multi-year, institutional, capacity-strengthening support for local and national responders.
- Develop a national database of WLOs and WROs working on humanitarian, peace and development nexus programming to provide peacebuilding initiatives, as well as development and scalable service delivery to affected women and girls during crises, and to facilitate the distribution of information on future funding opportunities.
- Develop a feminist humanitarian policy dedicated to prioritizing gender-transformative practices through partnerships and investments in WLOs and WROs in crisis contexts.
- Include local women peacebuilders in all program phases, from initial assessment through program design to final evaluation.

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