

COVID-19 and Conflict Mediation: Women, not the Pandemic Can Revive Diplomacy



by Francesca Caruso

COVID-19 has silenced half of the world's roads, skies and sea lanes but not its guns. Deadly conflicts are still ravaging several African, Asian, Middle Eastern and South American countries independently from calls for humanitarian ceasefires to respond to the pandemic. In countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan and Burkina Faso, COVID-19 cases are increasing by the day amidst ongoing conflicts, weak state capacity and worsening socio-economic and environmental indicators.

While the pandemic has not yet hit the population of those countries as violently as it has Europe, the US and China, growing contagion figures represent serious concern. In most war-torn countries, conflicts have degraded health systems, exhausted local coping mechanisms and increased acute vulnerabilities. Moreover, the implementation of preventive

measures, such as hand-washing and "social distancing" are unrealistic in such contexts.

In Yemen, a country ravaged by conflict and where water scarcity has long been a threat, an estimated 7.2 million people are in need of emergency shelter, 3.6 million are internally displaced and around 20.5 million people will require assistance to access drinking water and sanitation in 2020.¹ A tragically similar context is at play in Syria, where preventive measures to tackle the pandemic are difficult to imagine, let alone put into practice, both within and beyond areas controlled by Damascus.

Against this backdrop, on 23 March 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for an "immediate global ceasefire" to allow humanitarian assistance and prevent the spread

¹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarian Response Plan, June-December 2020*, June 2020, p. 5-7, <https://reliefweb.int/node/3638954>.

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of COVID-19.² The appeal – the first global ceasefire request in the history of the UN – resonated across the world, and was endorsed by several member states, civil society organisations and conflict parties. From Colombia to Cameroun, the Philippines and South Sudan, 11 warring parties and guerrilla groups stressed their commitment to a cessation of hostilities in order to tackle the virus.³

Endorsements of the UN ceasefire call in the Middle East and North Africa have been ambiguous however. In Libya, despite a brief humanitarian pause, clashes quickly resumed. In Syria, the truce remains fragile amidst a humanitarian catastrophe on Europe's doorstep while in Yemen, despite the announced ceasefire by the Saudi-led coalition on 9 April for six weeks, attacks have continued.⁴

Initial optimism that the pandemic may turn into an opportunity to fasten peace talks, by forcing belligerents to work together to face the unexpected consequences of the calamity, have proven misplaced. As of today, the virus has not impacted warring states to the extent it was originally thought and past experience attests to the fact that public health concerns or natural

calamities have rarely proven powerful drivers for conflict resolution.

Moreover, the restricted measures put in place to fight the pandemic have also impacted international diplomacy and mediation efforts. In Africa, for instance, the virus has delayed the implementation of critical peace agreements and hampered mediation efforts in South Sudan and in the CAR.⁵

While conflicts are likely to continue, the impact of the pandemic on women and gender issues requires more careful attention. Women and girls are paying a high price and programmes that support women have already been disrupted, despite their needs being amplified.⁶ The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) documented the closure of more than 5,600 mobile clinics and community-based centres offering sexual and reproductive healthcare in 64 countries, including Afghanistan, Syria and Sudan due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷

All of this is happening under particular circumstances as 2020 was supposed to be the celebratory year of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and

² UN News, *COVID-19: UN Chief Calls for Global Ceasefire to Focus on "the True Fight of Our Lives"*, 23 March 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059972>.

³ Edith M. Lederer, "UN Chief: Cease-Fire Appeal Backed by Parties in 11 Nations", in *AP News*, 3 April 2020, <https://apnews.com/7317ac3dc1997cf98530f636e78513dd>.

⁴ "Yemen War: Fighting Escalates After Coronavirus Truce Ends", in *Middle East Eye*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/175036>.

⁵ Smail Chergui, "Peace and Security amidst COVID-19", in *African Union Peace and Security OpEds*, 15 April 2020, p. 3, <http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/oped-peace-and-security-amidst-covid-19-by-h-e-amb-smail-cherqui-au-commissioner-for-peace-and-security>.

⁶ UN Secretary-General, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Women", in *UN Policy Briefs*, 9 April 2020, p. 2, <https://shar.es/abqVos>.

⁷ International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), *COVID-19 Pandemic Cuts Access to Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare for Women Around the World*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.ippf.org/node/4782>.

Security (WPS).⁸ Twenty years ago, the Security Council adopted this historical resolution, aiming to shift the narrative from women as victims of conflict to women as active contributors to peace processes and conflict resolution.⁹ The resolution stressed the importance of the full involvement of women in all efforts relating to the maintenance and promotion of peace, such as the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace-building, peace-keeping, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction.

Today, COVID-19 may hamper the implementation of the WPS resolution and erode the limited gains made over the past decades. Yet, it may also turn into an opportunity to re-emphasise the importance of this resolution and scale up efforts to secure increased women participation in peace-processes and mediation.¹⁰

While technology and digital communications have kept diplomacy alive through meeting platforms and messaging apps, such digital measures cannot represent comprehensive mediation tools.¹¹ Given that such modalities are likely to remain in

place for some time, there is a need to ensure greater presence via trusted interlocutors and mediators.

Women peacebuilders may thus play pivotal roles as they are permanently on the ground and can liaise with international mediators and local armed groups. To make this happen, a paradigm shift in the way women are included in peace processes is needed. This can only start by recognising of what women peacebuilding organisations are already doing.

In the CAR, women civil society organisations are working hard to raise awareness about the risks of COVID-19 among rural communities while also training women members on the field via mobile phones.¹² In the DRC, young women leaders are working to prevent and offer counselling on increased sexual violence and abuse during the pandemic. In the Philippines, women activists are distributing face masks, disinfectants and dignity kits for girls and women.

In South Sudan, young women are using community radio to raise awareness of domestic violence and COVID-19 preventive measures such as hand washing and social distancing. In Yemen, women peacebuilders have been among the first responders to the pandemic, mobilising awareness campaigns, issuing statements, calling for prisoner releases and submitting roadmaps for a cessation of hostilities two weeks before the UN issued its

⁸ UN Security Council, *Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security*, 31 October 2000, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1325\(2000\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1325(2000)).

⁹ Joan Johnson-Freese, *Women, Peace and Security. An Introduction*, London/New York, Routledge, 2019.

¹⁰ Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, "Women Peace and Security in the Time of Corona", in *LSE Blog*, 25 March 2020, <https://wp.me/p81Y1x-RL>.

¹¹ Jonathan Harlander (ed.), "Peacemaking and New Technologies. Dilemmas & Options for Mediators", in *Mediation Practice Series*, No. 8 (December 2018), p. 27, <https://www.hdcentre.org/publications/mediation-practice-series-peacemaking-and-new-technologies>.

¹² Author interview with female civil society activists from CAR.



global ceasefire call.¹³

This is not the first time that Yemeni women have been deeply involved in seeking to de-escalate the conflict. Since the beginning of war, women organisations such as “The Women Solidarity Network” have been working extensively to end conflicts over water and land resources, to evacuate schools from armed groups, negotiate the opening of humanitarian corridors and the release of prisoners, advocating for ceasefire campaigns and seeking to revitalise the economy through small income-generating projects.¹⁴

Despite being the true “everyday heroes”,¹⁵ Yemeni women have consistently been excluded from formal peace talks. While they have engaged in local level peace initiatives, they lack the resources and visibility to maximise their positive impact.

Progress in the implementation of UNSC resolution 1325 has been slow. Despite the initial good will – over the past twenty years 80 UN member States have adopted a national action plan (NAP) for the implementation of the resolution –, women continue to be side-lined in peace-processes.

The establishment of a series of initiatives within the UN system – such as the new Informal Expert Group (IEG)

mechanism on WPS within the Security Council – is a welcome development, but requires further action and follow-up. Indeed, between 1992 and 2018, women constituted only 13 per cent of negotiators, 3 per cent of mediators and 4 per cent of signatories in major peace deals.¹⁶

The reasons for these failures are diverse. Most relate to a lack of political will and limited financial resources within the UN system, multilateral and regional organisations and formal and informal mediators. Many WPS national action plans that are meant to translate UNSC resolution 1325 at the national level are not comprehensive in their approach, neglecting important areas such as disarmament.¹⁷

Within the UN, Security Council mandates for peace operations still lack consistent gender expertise and analysis, and funding for gender experts and civil society organisations tend to be insufficient.¹⁸ Formal and informal mediators also share a degree of responsibility, however, as in most peace negotiations they tend to prioritise dialogue with warring parties rather than create a more inclusive peace process, including through engagements with women peacebuilders and young leaders.

¹³ Author interview with a Yemeni woman peacebuilder.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Muna Luqman, “The Role of Yemeni Women in the Peace Process”, in *MWMN Reports*, No. 1 (5 June 2020), p. 2, https://womenmediators.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/MWMN_report_1-2.pdf.

¹⁶ UN Women website: *Facts and Figures: Peace and Security*, last updated in October 2019, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/facts-and-figures>.

¹⁷ Sarah Taylor and Gretchen Baldwin, “Focus on 2020: Opportunities for the Twentieth Anniversary of Resolution 1325”, in *IPI Issue Briefs*, October 2019, p. 3, <https://www.ipinst.org/?p=25989>.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

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A growing body of evidence has proven that women's participation increases the longevity of peace agreements. An analysis of 182 signed peace agreements between 1989 and 2011 showed that agreements that included women were 35 per cent more likely to last at least 15 years.¹⁹ This is mostly explained by the fact that women negotiators tend to raise issues that are vital for sustainable peace, expanding peace agendas by advocating for excluded groups and the need to address underlying causes of conflict, such as development.

In the Liberia peace process, where female civil society leaders served as observers and represented 17 per cent of witnesses to the signing of the agreement, their presence made a difference. The fact that women were included in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) efforts had demonstrable effects, helping to ease tensions, maintain dialogue with combatants and protect children.²⁰ Liberia is not an outlying case. Countries like Angola or Northern Ireland have proven that women peacebuilders are agents of security that can make a difference.

To make this happen, regional women mediator networks – such as the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network – can play a critical role by working and liaising with international

mediators to ensure that women involvement is given priority, providing names of senior mediators and helping to bridge various mediation approaches across the track I, II and III levels.

Yet, without a strong political and financial commitment to support women-led initiatives by international organisations and the UN Security Council, as well as state actors and the private sector, women will likely still be excluded from negotiations because “there are not enough chairs”.

Now more than ever is the time to overcome this shortcoming and redouble international efforts to fully implement UNSC resolution 1325 and push for a more active participation of women mediators in conflict zones and peace-building efforts. The UN and other international organisations called to mediate in conflict zones should add specific conditionality for engagement, not only ensuring that women have a seat at the table but are also considered full participants in negotiations for a post-conflict future.

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¹⁹ Marie O'Reilly, “Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies”, in *Inclusive Security Reports*, October 2015, p. 6, <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/?p=12964>.

²⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, “Liberia – 2003 Peace Agreement”, in *Women's Roles in Peace Processes*, <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/liberia>.

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