



IN BRIEF



ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

Photo: UN Women/Marie Doucey

Introduction

This thematic paper is a UN Women contribution to the 2022 Report of the Secretary-General on youth, peace and security (YPS). When the Secretary-General presented his first report on YPS to the Security Council in 2020 (S/2020/167), the world had just been shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic. Two years later, the effect of the pandemic on young people's lives and prospects remains "systematic, deep and disproportionate"¹ – with disrupted access to education and services, massive growth in youth unemployment and an aggravated mental health crisis.

This paper seeks to contribute to the body of growing evidence on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted young women peacebuilders and their work to build and sustain peace in complex contexts.

The study addresses the importance of young women's meaningful participation to effective pandemic response, to 'building back better,' and to broader peacebuilding efforts. It builds upon the YPS agenda as a unifying framework for more sustainable solutions and long-lasting peacebuilding efforts. The study was developed in consultation with a reference group of experts and draws from key informant interviews with 35 young women peacebuilders who, throughout the pandemic, have remained key actors in building and sustaining peace, advancing gender equality, and pivoting their efforts to respond to the impacts of the pandemic in their communities.

Rationale

Young women peacebuilders, activists and local organizations led by young women are key actors in building and sustaining peace, providing humanitarian relief in their communities, responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and preventing conflicts. They are engaged in the oftentimes time-consuming and difficult work of advancing gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

The pandemic has radically shifted the environments where these actors operate. Governments and institutions, including the UN, are often unprepared to deal with and adequately respond to the gender-specific risks and age-based discriminations this group faces. As the pandemic stretches into its third year, and new variants continue to emerge and cycle through the global population (especially in countries that have been denied equitable access to vaccines and therapeutics), it is critical to develop a common understanding of this new environment and how it impacts young women peacebuilders, especially as it pertains to their ways of working, driving movements and programmes, and continuing to enjoy their rights and freedoms.

Methods

The findings and recommendations in this study come from a mixed method evaluation approach. Data collection was carried out between June to September 2021 and included a desk review, key informant interviews, and interviews with subject-matter experts. This approach was useful in the context of this study as relatively little peer-reviewed literature around impacts of the pandemic on young women peacebuilders, including open-source data disaggregated by different identities, is available. The study was held entirely online due to safety considerations and travel restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Access to platforms like Zoom or WhatsApp was a prerequisite for participation, which means that the data collected is not fully representative of other groups who may not have similar access. During the data collection phase of the study, vaccines were not widely available outside of middle- and high- income countries. The stringent lockdown measures that had been put in place by many governments in Q1 and Q2 of 2020 had been eased; however, variants continued to put pressure on health and social protection systems globally, and negative socio-economic impacts continued to be felt by the demographic of interest.



Key Findings:

Challenges and Opportunities for Young Women Peacebuilders

Overall, COVID-19 containment measures are having a persistent impact on the work of local peacebuilders around the globe. This chapter covers dynamics around shrinking civic space, digitalisation, employment, protection concerns and more. Findings may also be taken as a set of thematic entry-points for YPS programming and are categorized as either challenges or opportunities for young women peacebuilders.

Challenges

CIVIC PARTICIPATION:

The secondary impacts of the pandemic has shrunk civil society space. Civil society is being undermined by both the pandemic and other long-term trends, like political repression in authoritarian regimes. Many peacebuilding initiatives depend on communities physically coming together and participating in meetings, demonstrations and protests, all of which came to a halt in the early stages of the pandemic and have yet to return in full force. Some argue that gaining public attention to flag and make visible civic violations has become more difficult as most media channels are predominantly focused on the pandemic, vaccination schemes, mask mandates and new variants². Conversely, as physical civic space has been decreasing, virtual civic space has expanded; the pandemic has seen an increase in online activism, peacebuilding, and advocacy.

DIGITALIZATION:

While multilaterals, INGOs and donors find that moving programming, advocacy and resources online is cheaper and more accessible to some, many young women peacebuilders prefer in-person activities, programmes and events. Digitalization of YPS initiatives has been uneven, often not considering the gendered digital divide or differing access to technology and electricity in urban versus rural settings. The pandemic has pushed young women peacebuilders towards using digital spaces to develop their civic identities, express political stances, and demand accountability from those in power. However, this reliance on the digital space leaves many of these peacebuilders open to violence in the digital realm and challenges emanating from online restrictions, privacy issues and state surveillance.

Digital violence against young women takes many forms. For example, perpetrators may threaten and stalk women online. They may also attach pictures of faces to sexualized bodies

without permission and share them widely over social media, for years. Vicious online campaigns of hate speech and abuse target women with public roles, especially peacebuilders, journalists and women's rights activists. Due to the amorphous nature of the internet – which is not linked to any one state/government or subject to international law – when women face threats online, there is limited accountability for digital violence. This lack of accountability may have long term impacts and lead to the exclusion of young women's voices from critical political and civic spaces.

JOBS AND LIVELIHOODS:

Young women have been hard-hit in the jobs sector, where many lost their sources of income early in the pandemic and at a greater proportion than age-matched men. Too much YPS work, at all levels, is underpaid or not paid at all. When considering the fact that this demographic has been hard-hit in the jobs sector, it is clear that, for many, continuing valuable but unpaid work in their communities is becoming less and less feasible. Many study participants also noted a marked shift in donor funding and financing. Donors are diverting key funding and financing streams away from long-term peacebuilding initiatives and towards COVID-19 response. Young women peacebuilders, who already operate on extremely limited budgets, are finding it difficult to continue their long-term conflict resolution work. Some have adapted to new funding trends by tacking on COVID-19 response in their programmes and initiatives.

Young women peacebuilders with children and families find balancing the increasing care responsibilities with their YPS work and activism extremely challenging. Some find the shift to remote work with INGOs and other partners less feasible in intergenerational households, especially when faced with connectivity challenges common in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

“I need more opportunities to earn an income. People don't see peacebuilding as a real job, or as something serious. It's challenging to have to struggle to survive, while fighting for other people's survival...”

Young woman peacebuilder, Colombia

Opportunities

PROTESTS AND ACTIVISM:

Data indicates variance in young women's political participation during the pandemic. In some contexts, dissolution of the old paradigm has pushed more young women towards civic engagement and, in others, governments are curtailing participation. For study participants their participation in demonstrations and protests was a point of pride, as well as a practice that built confidence and grew networks. Therefore, the proliferation of protest movements since 2019, of which young women make up a significant demographic, may not necessarily be a marker of social unrest, but a sign that young women are increasingly aware of their rights and make their demands heard in the public sphere.

“The government has curtailed women activists who have been vocal on women’s rights, and now they cannot convene, meet, or lobby. The young women activists I work with, because they cannot convene, I have seen them take it to Zoom, to WhatsApp groups to make their advocacy.”

Young woman activist, Sahel

Positive developments in activism and advocacy in the civic space hold promise for the post-pandemic future. The COVID-19 crisis may provide an opportunity to connect those without access and digitize civic spaces much more extensively. Some grassroots organizations are capitalizing on new funding streams released for COVID-19 response; a young women-led CSO from Haiti received additional funding from donors to put towards pandemic related projects. They noted the advantage that youth-led organizations had in-country as many young people were “less afraid” of infection and thus could work on the frontline in hard-to-reach communities.



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

Recommendations

Given the findings from this study, this section proposes specific recommendations directly addressed at policymakers and practitioners (namely the UN System, NGOs, Donors, national Governments, and the private sector) on how to better support young women peacebuilders.

Recommendations are drawn from findings and in some cases, directly from interviews. Recommendations complement and build upon existing guidance and fill gaps by responding to the specific needs of the target demographic.

TO UN AGENCIES, FUNDS AND PROGRAMMES:

- **UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes should ensure the meaningful inclusion of young women peacebuilders** in the design and delivery of conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives. They should maintain regular consultations with diverse groups of young women to identify their expertise along with their concerns and needs.
- **Young women's participation in YPS projects must be fairly paid**, with basic levels of protection and security provided.
- **Develop trainings/ workshops/ learning initiatives** for young women peacebuilders to strengthen their capacity to a) access funding and financing, b) directly engage with donors, c) organize more effectively, d) build relationships and networks with other peacebuilders and relevant organizations, and e) understand and leverage YPS frameworks in their contexts. Ensure that all trainings/ workshops/ learning initiatives are accessible, age- and gender-sensitive, and where possible, done in-person.
- **Offer assistance to governments** to help ensure more vigorous protection and redress measures for peacebuilders and activists facing different types of violence and threats, including in the digital space. Develop international human rights frameworks to address horizon issues like violence against women and girls in digital spaces.
- **Engage young women peacebuilders** in knowledge production about their own experiences.

TO NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS:

- **Participation in YPS projects must be paid**, with basic levels of protection and security.
- **Ensure that digitization initiatives** that aim to connect young peacebuilders provide high-speed internet bundles, remote work stipends to improve working conditions (e.g., new office equipment, like chairs or cushions, or they can be used to buy food, tea or coffee etc.) hardware and technology like laptops, tablets and smartphones. These initiatives should include a plan to bridge the gendered digital divide within households and communities.

- When young women peacebuilders or organizers work from home due to COVID-19 restrictions, **consider flexible working arrangements** that take into account increased responsibilities or obligations in other areas of their lives. These arrangements could look like flexible working hours, or a compressed working schedule.
- **Where possible, plan in-person or hybrid events** to ensure peacebuilders have safe spaces to network, organize, learn from one another and plan for the future.

TO DONORS:

- **Maintain and increase investment in young women-led** peacebuilding in recognition of peacebuilding as a component of a sustainable and long-term solution to any crisis as well as COVID-19 response.
- **Distinguish between youth/young women-led organizations** and those who take a thematic focus on youth when releasing funding intended for youth-led initiatives.
- **Review their funding policies, practices and requirements**, including eligibility criteria and reporting expectations, and consider at least temporarily relaxing some of them to make funding more accessible to young women-led organizations.

TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS:

- **Ensure young women peacebuilders** are meaningfully included in the design and delivery of conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives.
- **Ensure funded schemes** to increase and protect young women's economic security (taking into account workers in the informal sector) and fund social programmes that address greater burdens of unpaid care work on this demographic.
- **Governments should prioritize universal health coverage**, sexual and reproductive health services, including comprehensive sexuality education. These should be classified by governments as essential with continuity of services ensured if variant-related lockdown measures close healthcare facilities in the future.
- **Young women who occupy jobs** in the health and specifically in the protection and sexual and reproductive health sectors should be counted as essential workers (eg. midwives, mental health counselors, nurses, cleaners etc.)
- **National and local governments** should establish clear prevention and accountability measures against police brutality and abuses of power, especially when it comes to the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions and response measures. Police brutality and violations must be reported, and victims of abuse must have clear and accessible pathways to seek redress.
- **National governments should conduct a thorough gender- and conflict-sensitive analysis** of their COVID-19 responses, including lockdown measures and fiscal support packages. Specific protection measures should address the impact of

heightened domestic violence caused by lockdowns. Peacebuilding and interventions that contribute to lowering such risks should be considered a necessity amidst any containment measures, especially as new variants continue to emerge.

- **Place value upon the care economy** by investing in quality paid care as part of essential public services and social protection arrangements, including by improved pay and working conditions for young mothers.

TO THE PRIVATE SECTOR:

- **Tech companies that have benefited from a free, open and borderless internet** must now contribute to connecting those who remain offline in a gender and age sensitive manner³. They should collaborate with regulators, other firms, digital activists and women's rights advocates to ensure platforms are safe for young women and that users, especially young women have the information and the means to protect themselves when using online spaces for peacebuilding and activism.

Conclusion

The impact of COVID-19 on young women peacebuilders in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is of concern, almost two years into the pandemic many continue to see access to education and essential services, like sexual and reproductive health, and livelihoods diminished. The surge in domestic violence, gender-based violence and harmful practices drives home the age- and gender-differentiated impacts of the pandemic.

In the face of these challenges, movements and organizations led by young women have continued to safely mobilize and advocate, from Colombia where peacebuilders have advocated for a cessation of hostilities and led sustained demonstrations to protest corruption and state-sanctioned violence, to Bangladesh, where young women are working to provide support to refugee communities in an increasingly fraught environment. At the core of this study remain the voices, analyses and recommendations of the young women peacebuilders consulted.

Stakeholders must develop policy, programmes and responses from a common understanding of risks, vulnerabilities and needs - all defined by young women themselves. This study will begin to fill a critical evidentiary gap about the experiences of young women and, in particular, young women peacebuilders. It should provide decision-makers with information, analysis and recommendations on how best to support their initiatives into the future.

¹ Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth and all, *Global survey on youth and COVID-19* (2020).

² Brookings, "Digitizing civic spaces amid the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond" (2021).

³ Our Common Agenda, 2020.