POLICY PAPER

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

UN WOMEN

Produced by: UN Women Policy, Programme and Intergovernmental Division; Peace, Security and Resilience Section.

Author: Purba Tyagi

Overall coordination: Marie Doucey

UN Women reviewers: Tatyana Jiteneva, Kyra Luchtenberg, Christina Holland, Kawsar Abulfazil, and Natasha Lamoreux

UN Women thanks both the young women peacebuilders who agreed to speak with the core research team about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the reference group convened around this study: the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, Peace Direct, the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), Search for Common Ground (SFCG), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY Peacebuilders), who were all generous in lending their time and expertise.

Edition and design: Natalia Tuero

This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.

POLICY PAPER

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

PEACE, SECURITY AND RESILIENCE SECTION
UN WOMEN
New York, May 2023

UN WOMEN

ACRONYMS

CSO	Civil society organisation
GNWP	Global Network of Women Peacebuilders
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and/or questioning
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PBSO	Peacebuilding Support Office
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
UN WOMEN	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOY PEACEBUILDERS	United Network of Young Peacebuilders
WPS	Women, peace and security
YPS	Youth, peace and security

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Young Women Peacebuilders," developed by UN Women, is a study that seeks to contribute to the body of growing evidence around 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 in shaping effective pandemic response, "rebuilding better" and broadening peacebuilding efforts. It builds upon the youth, peace and security (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 respective communities.

The impact of COVID-19 on young women in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is of concern as, three years into the pandemic, many continue to seek access to education and essential services, like those for sexual and reproductive health and reduced livelihoods. The surge in domestic violence, gender-based violence and harmful practices further intensifies the age- and gender-differentiated impacts of the pandemic.

In the face of these challenges, movements and organisations led by young women have continued to safely mobilise and advocate. For example, in Colombia, peacebuilders have advocated for a cessation of hostilities and led sustained demonstrations to protest corruption and state-sanctioned violence; and in Bangladesh, 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 consulted peacebuilders.

Section 1 provides an overview of the rationale behind this study, complemented by analyses of the intersectional inequalities across age, gender, class and other social identity markers that have determined the risk, impact and needs of young women peacebuilders during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the introduction covers relevant YPS frameworks and a brief overview of the methodology used.

Section 2 provides policymakers with an analysis of how young women peacebuilders have been impacted by the pandemic. Findings are presented in two parts: a) challenges and barriers posed by pandemic impact; and b) opportunities that have arisen in this new paradigm. This section can also be used as a set of entry-points for YPS programming, which incorporates considerations brought on by the pandemic.

Section 3 proposes specific recommendations around participation, services, employment and more, which are targeted towards stakeholders and duty-bearers. These recommendations aim to drive investment in the expertise and capacities of young women peacebuilders to build and sustain peace during and beyond the pandemic.

This study will add to a common understanding of some of the ways that young women peacebuilders have been impacted by the pandemic and what their initiatives, movements and projects need from policymakers, multilaterals and other stakeholders to be successful moving forward.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Study Rationale

Young women peacebuilders, activists and local organisations led by young women are key actors in preventing conflicts, building and sustaining peace, providing humanitarian relief in their communities and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. They also do the time-consuming and difficult work of advancing gender equality in fragile contexts.[1]

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically shifted the environments in which these actors operate. Governments and institutions, including the United Nations (UN), are often unprepared to acknowledge and adequately respond to the specific risks and age-based discriminations these young women face. 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 open access to vaccines and therapeutics), it is critical to develop a common understanding of this new reality and what it means for young women peacebuilders—particularly in regard to their ways of working, driving movements and programmes and how they can continue to exercise their inalienable rights and freedoms.

Stakeholders must develop policy, programmes and response efforts from a common understanding of risks, vulnerabilities and needs—all of which should be defined by young women themselves. UN Women initiated this study into the impact of COVID-19 on the lives and work of young women in peacebuilding and/or conflict-affected settings given that their specific experiences remain understudied, and as such, not well understood. Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: First, it aims to begin to fill a critical evidentiary gap about the experiences of young women peacebuilders in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and second, it aims to provide decision-makers with information, analysis and recommendations on how best to support their initiatives in the future.

This report will inform practitioners on how to formulate policies and programmes that are better suited to the needs of young women by showcasing the personal experiences of young women human rights activists, peacebuilders and community mobilisers, as well as the dangers they face and the price they pay for their work (including monetary prices and physical safety), all of which are heightened by the economic and health emergency brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is intended to provide insights to practitioners within the UN system and inside other international and national organisations, youth-led organisations and women's coalitions and groups.

1.2 Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected most, if not every, society around the world. In many contexts, conflict dynamics and fragile governance and health systems have made tackling COVID-19 complex. The health crisis itself, coupled with ill-adapted response measures, threatens to deepen dividing lines and undermine peace, hindering effective health responses and driving longer-term instability.[2] Although many hoped that the pandemic would ease international tensions and lead to ceasefires around the world, conventional conflicts like those in Syria, Yemen, Ukraine and Afghanistan have continued to rage nearly three years into the crisis.[3] While the magnitude of the economic impact of the pandemic has differed widely across countries, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs finds that a country's exposure to COVID-19, along with the stringency of containment measures, are negatively correlated with its growth performance and conflict indicators.[4] Enhancing the impact of peace and security policies and peacebuilding programming amidst the paradigm shift brought on by the pandemic can be achieved only through a deep understanding of young women and men's particular lived experiences of violence, injustice and exclusion—both in situations of violent conflict, and in contexts of inequality, insecurity or uncertainty outside conflict settings.[5]

This section reflects on how the crisis has developed since March 2020 across several relevant domains in order to better understand the socioeconomic impacts on young women engaged in peacebuilding activities in conflict-affected settings. Their experiences are triangulated through multiple layers of intersecting identities and experiences. For example, women have experienced substantial economic losses, hugely amplified unpaid care burdens and a "shadow pandemic" of violence.[6] Girls have also been forced out of education during the pandemic, resulting in increased vulnerability to child marriage, abuse and early pregnancy; and out-of-school boys in fragile contexts have faced increased vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups and state-sanctioned violence.[7]

Intersectionality provides a theoretical framework through which the social determinants and socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic can be better understood. It elucidates how power structures, inequalities and other context-specific microstructures are having a multiplying effect, especially when these inequalities intersect in the same individual.[8] What has also become increasingly evident is the importance of locating the gender impacts of the pandemic within a broader landscape of socioeconomic inequalities. Approaches that recognise how gender intersects with economic status, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, geography, immigration status and religion or belief, as well as other factors such as employment, housing (and homelessness), and environmental and political factors, allow us to better understand how the pandemic has exacerbated and reinforced pre-existing inequalities, social norms and socioeconomic difference. For example, refugee youth experienced increased issues with legal recognition as government ministries shut down at the start of the pandemic. They are now dealing with months of backlog, lack of documentation, lack of freedom of movement, language barriers, discrimination, racism and xenophobia. Young women refugees may face additional protection issues and may have younger siblings or children to care for as they navigate bureaucracies in unfamiliar environments.

Table 1

Socioeconomic Determinant	Pandemic-Related Impact
Young people	While primary health impacts on youth are generally not as serious in comparison to older age groups, young people have been severely impacted by the secondary ripple effects caused by disruption to the health, economic, financial and other sectors.[9] The Office of the United Nations Secretary-General has warned that the pandemic will have long-lasting effects on young people, citing impacts on education, training and employment, as well as rising mental and emotional distress.[10] Indeed, three years into the pandemic, the large-scale interruption of employment, formal and informal education and learning, and health and social services is having a tremendous effect on young people's lives, health and wellbeing. While the pandemic has brought immense challenges, it may also prove to be an opportunity to advance some areas by pushing governments and other rights-bearers to address the economic determinants of inequalities, fund social protection programmes that target young people and deliver information and services to the poorest communities through digital means. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and other UN entities have advocated for the need to respond to COVID-19 with measures that address and prevent age-based inequalities and development deficits, as stipulated in the UN system socioeconomic, health and humanitarian response pillars. However, young people increasingly have a lack of trust in the ability and willingness of institutions and leadership to meet the challenges thrown into sharp relief by the pandemic.[11] Some subgroups of young people have been particularly distrustful of national pandemic response efforts as a result of having experienced human rights violations, discrimination or lack of support from their governments (e.g., youth from certain religious groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or refugee and migrant youth in Iraq and Yemen).
Class and employment	Globally, class, income and education predict a disproportionate risk of lay-offs, loss of income, illness and mortality related to COVID-19. For decades, public health experts have understood that socioeconomic status is closely related to health outcomes and susceptibility to contagious diseases.[12] Evidence from a handful of countries—including the United States, England and France—show that COVID-19 has resulted in a higher death toll in lower-income communities and among some ethnic minorities. These gaps appear to largely be a result of exposures generated through work, rather than non-compliance with social distancing recommendations.[13] The negative relationship between class and COVID-19 is not inevitable, though—it doesn't exist in some nations in Europe and Asia with strong social safety nets, according to a global survey from Gallup, conducted from July 2020 to March 2021.[14] In the most economically equal nations (as measured by the Gini index for household income), workers with lower incomes and less education were protected from unemployment through national policies that aimed to prevent job loss and layoffs (e.g., furlough schemes, job retention schemes, etc.). In most countries, lockdown measures and social distancing disproportionately impacted low-income jobs requiring less or little education. In 103 of 117 countries in Gallup's World Poll data, workers in the bottom quintile of household income distribution experienced significantly higher job loss rates than those at the top.

	Workers without a college degree in low-income countries fared the worst out of any subgroup, despite living in demographically younger areas with much lower reported COVID-19 mortality rates.[15] Three years into the pandemic, employment and earnings for those in the lowest income brackets have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels.[16] Most young women in fragile contexts work in the informal sector—and no workers may be as vulnerable as those who work beyond government oversight and without labour protections or formal contracts. One young peacebuilder from Nigeria who works with women living in informal settlements noted how quickly work dried up when the pandemic struck. This decrease in paid work was also coupled with fear of infection and stigma associated with those who live in slums. The peacebuilder explained, "Women ages 25-35—it's been a struggle for them. They live in informal settlements, they don't have formal employment, they come to people's houses to wash clothes. The government limited their movements within cities. It became tough for women in informal settlements because they cannot not travel to the suburbs. Many reported that families [employers] turned them away, saying they might bring COVID-19 into the house." These young workers—who already live hand-to-mouth, with little savings and no social protections—are at greater risk of contracting the virus, working jobs that put them in contact with large numbers of people and resting in overcrowded homes at the end of their workday. In Liberia, the young director of a civil society organisation (CSO) noted that, "When COVID-19 came, our government didn't understand the value of a gender-responsive process in terms of managing [the virus]. They called for a lockdown, and that lockdown badly impacted young women. These young women were mostly day labourers who lost their business. There was no plan from the government to address the specific issues they faced." Young women may be stuck at home due to the threats of petty crime and violence, armed gangs and police harassment. In many cities, tens of thousands of refugee and internally displaced girls and young women are employed as domestic workers, where they say their rights are routinely trampled.[17]
Frontline workers	Many frontline jobs, now deemed essential, offer low pay, confer low social status and are occupied by marginalised young people of racial or ethnic minorities and women. As observed with the Ebola epidemic, many of these essential workers (doctors, nurses, midwives, ambulance drivers, etc.) experienced stigmatisation that was triggered by fear of infection within their own communities. As a result, not only are those affected by COVID-19 blamed as "spreaders," but healthcare staff—a large proportion of whom are young women—also face discrimination.[18] In the Kaiser Family Foundation and The Washington Post's 2021 "Frontline Healthcare Workers Survey," a majority of younger healthcare workers report that worries or stress related to COVID-19 have had additional negative impacts on their mental health, and seven of 10 report feeling "burnt out" at work. These feelings may also be correlated to the specificities of the tasks taken on by younger frontline workers, with more than half reporting assisting directly with patient care such as bathing patients, cleaning and housekeeping.[19]

LGBTIQ+ youth	For young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and/or questioning and others (LGBTIQ+), there are additional challenges and risks resulting from limited access to community support, lack of in-school counseling and, in some cases, the difficult circumstances of quarantining with unsupportive or abusive family members.[20] When it comes to political and civic participation, LGBTIQ+ people face numerous challenges: in addition to overcoming age-based exclusion from and stigmatisation in political and decision-making structures, they simultaneously have to tackle various cultural, legal, political and financial barriers that affect them in the exercise of their rights.[21] In the context of the pandemic, although the negative impacts of COVID-19 on young people's mental health are recognised, less attention has been paid to LGBTIQ+ youth, a historically neglected population in the health sector, in social protection policies and in research, despite decades of evidence around highly unmet mental health and psychosocial support needs.[22] Before the pandemic, LGBTIQ+ youth bore a disproportionate number of mental health problems, with their sexual and gender identities being risk factors for victimisation, trauma, discrimination and abuse.[23] In addition, LGBTIQ+ youth, especially non-binary and transgender youth, are at a higher risk for depression, suicide, substance abuse and anxiety.[24] COVID-19 containment measures disrupted mental health services at a time when the need for such services have increased, with school and university-based services being especially affected. Governments, CSOs and others have responded to decreased physical access to mental health resources amidst pandemic-related closures by putting in place remote support through telehealth, as well as phone and digital-based crisis services. However, clinical psychologists argue that while online support can act as a stopgap, they cannot replace in-person treatment and physical interaction with a community that accepts and validates their gender identities.
Young women	Young women continue to carry the double burden in society of being both young and female. They often face negative cultural attitudes and practices and gender-biased socio-political processes that limit their opportunities and undermine their understanding and expression of their rights. The pandemic has deepened these existing inequalities, meaning that for young women, the harmful impacts of gender inequality have been intensified. Gender inequality is pervasive in many fragile and conflict-affected areas where young women are disadvantaged, excluded from opportunities and left dependent on men, leading to highly inequitable economic, political, social and health outcomes. While all forms of gender-based violence are much more likely to affect young women than age-matched men, in a conflict, the incidence climbs sharply and often remains elevated for years afterward. Already bearing a greater share of the burden of domestic labour than boys and men, the pandemic has found young women more likely to be called upon to care for partners and family members and, in some contexts, this has raised the likelihood of young women staying out of schools and university.[25] Impacts on this demographic are far-reaching and range from the "shadow pandemic" (the increase of violence against women, in particular domestic violence during lockdowns) to the economic toll deeply affecting young women—all of which contribute to the widening gender-poverty gap. The age barrier, in addition to the gender barrier, creates hindrances in contributing to or leading peacebuilding activities. Young women peacebuilders consistently have to push back against authorities—including donors, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), civil society leaders and organisations, governments and UN agencies—who dismiss them as too inexperienced, or worse, treat them as passive beneficiaries rather than equal and active partners.[26]

	While young women are uniquely positioned to advance gender equality in their communities, many report difficulties with implementing projects aimed at women and girls' empowerment due to fears around social stigma, threats from men and elders in their communities, online harassment, harassment in the workplace, rape and other threats of violent reprisal, and lack of any confidential redress mechanisms.[27] In a global study surveying 700 feminist organisations across 118 countries, more than half of the respondents felt regularly unsafe because of the work that they do.[28]
Education	Already less likely to be enrolled in school, more young women have been kept at home and out of education since the onset of the pandemic. Learning loss and breaks in education, especially those that stretch into the long-term or become permanent, have serious consequences in young women's abilities to exercise their basic rights and reach their full potential. Schools and universities provide critical space and support that protect many young women from early marriage, unwanted pregnancy and gender-based violence.[29] Collectively, this generation of students now risks losing $17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value, or about 14 per cent of today's global GDP, as a result of pandemic-related school and university closures, according to a report published by the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).[30] The new projection reveals that the impact is more severe than previously thought, far exceeding the $10 trillion estimate released in 2020. While digitalisation and connecting students and learners to the internet has bridged learning continuity, emerging data shows that remote learning during school and university closures does not ensure full learning continuity.[31] And when it comes to access and uptake of digital tools, there is heterogeneity across countries and students' socioeconomic status, gender and level or year of university. Low-income families, students with disabilities and girls and young women have been less likely to access remote learning tools than their age-matched peers. Causes range from limited access to technological learning devices and electricity, as well as discrimination and pervasive gender norms that favour educational opportunities and access to devices for men and boys within a household. Initial evidence points to larger losses among women, who are quickly losing the protection that learning offers them in terms of their well-being and life chances.
Access to sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) information and services	As health resources have been directed away from routine services and put towards COVID-19 response, women and girls of reproductive age, including from the most marginalised populations, have faced significant obstacles in accessing SRH services.[32] These obstacles are layered on top of the many barriers that young women face in accessing and using health services in general. Restrictive laws and policies, parental or partner control, limited knowledge, distance, cost, lack of confidentiality and provider bias are all factors that limit young women's autonomy and prevent them from accessing and receiving the SRHR information and services they need. Meanwhile, data suggests that this pandemic will have long-term repercussions for young women's sexual and reproductive health outcomes and overall well-being. One study led by Rutgers University, which surveyed nearly 3,000 young people across Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, Nepal, Uganda and Zimbabwe, found that one third of young people were not able to access the family planning services that they needed since the start of the pandemic, and that over a third felt more vulnerable to harassment and sexual, physical, emotional and/or financial abuse than before COVID-19.[33] Disruptions in

education have hindered access to comprehensive sexuality education and, in some contexts, this has led to an uptick in HIV and other sexually transmitted infections detected in youth.[34] In complex emergencies and crises (e.g., Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh), young women have had little to no access to basic services—particularly gender-responsive humanitarian interventions—with economic empowerment programmes, SRH services and literacy classes having been put on hold since March 2020.[35]

Those requiring SRH services report anxiety about being exposed to the virus while seeking care—or they may forgo care entirely due to this anxiety. Others have lost access to care altogether due to movement restrictions and curbed health services. Many hospitals and health centres are reporting declines in the number of women and girls receiving critical sexual and reproductive healthcare, including antenatal services, safe delivery services and family planning.[36]

1.3 Youth, Peace and Security Frameworks

Since the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) in 2015, young people have been increasingly recognised as a positive force in preventing and responding to conflict and building sustainable peace.[37] The resolution marked a paradigmatic shift in acknowledging the positive role young women and young men play in peace and security and the importance of enabling their meaningful participation in decision-making that impacts them.[38] The YPS agenda has further developed with UNSCR 2419, passed in 2018, which calls for the meaningful inclusion of young women and men in the negotiation and implementation of peace agreements; and UNSCR 2535, passed in 2020, which underscores the role of youth in preventing and resolving conflict, as well as in building and maintaining peace, and encourages UN Member States to include young people in decision-making processes across these areas. This study builds upon the frameworks and approaches to youth inclusion laid out in the landmark study "The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security."[39] In this case, meaningful inclusion entails identifying the specific needs of young women in relation to peacebuilding during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The global prevalence of conflict was already extremely high before the pandemic emerged, and these elevated levels show no signs of abating. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program reported a slight increase in the number of conflicts worldwide in 2020, in line with recent upward trends.[40] Other forms of violence, for example, violence against women and children, are rising sharply. In a recent study, Peace Direct and Conducive Space for Peace reported that the COVID-19 crisis and the responses to it are exacerbating the underlying roots of conflict, particularly inequality.[41] In some places, this means violence is being reignited and peace processes threatened. In others, it is leading to the stigmatisation of certain groups and communities turning on their own identity circles. It's clear that, in many cases, national COVID-19 responses are not adequately conflict-sensitive nor adequately gender-sensitive. Young peacebuilders are struggling to sustain their work, and social distancing undermines many existing peacebuilding efforts. These measures are also having impacts on traditional and local mediation mechanisms, which are contingent on in-person interaction.[42]

The pandemic has made clear that humanitarian, development and peace challenges are interconnected, especially in protracted crises. Moreover, COVID-19 has exposed the artificial distinction between different types

of assistance, making an integrated "nexus" approach more relevant and urgent than ever.[43] Young women have unique expertise and insights to integrate the pillars of the nexus. Violent conflict affects young people by destroying sources of stability and belonging, as well as disrupting the processes of transition into adulthood through the interruption of young people's education and the destruction of social support structures and livelihood opportunities.[44] Even in non-violent contexts, inadequate education and the precarity of jobs and social services also prevent young people from fully enjoying the agency associated with adulthood. The multidimensional nature of young people's experiences naturally bridges the peace, development and human rights pillars of the multilateral system, presenting "a powerful transversal vehicle for integrated policy approaches."[45]

While it's not always easy to bring about change during a crisis, the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to transformative action. The young women who participated in key informant interviews were savvy in tackling the underlying causes of risks and vulnerabilities in order to reduce pandemic-related needs in their communities, while achieving peace outcomes in the middle and potentially into the long-term. Some progress towards recognising young women for their efforts is being made within the UN system: The Secretary-General, in his newly launched "Our Common Agenda" report, proposes a new agenda for peace, which notably places women and girls at the centre of all responses.[46] While young women are gradually gaining recognition in multilateral spaces as key actors, their contributions to both peacebuilding and humanitarian action (interlinked and overlapping in many contexts) are still grossly overlooked and undervalued.

1.4 Methods

The findings and recommendations in this study come from a mixed-methods evaluation approach that is used to increase the validity of evaluation findings. Data collection techniques included: a) a desk review from June to September 2021; b) key informant interviews held across a three-month period from July to September 2021; and c) interviews conducted from June to September 2021 with subject-matter experts. This approach was useful in the context of this study as relatively little peer-reviewed literature or open-source data on impacts of the pandemic on young women peacebuilders, including data disaggregated by different identities, is available.

The study was held entirely online due to safety considerations and travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to platforms like Zoom or WhatsApp were a prerequisite for participation, which means that the data collected is not fully representative of other groups who may not have such access. During the data collection phase of the study, vaccines were not widely available outside of middle and high-income countries. Although the stringent lockdown measures that had been put in place by many governments in the first two quarters of 2020 had been eased, new COVID-19 variants of concern continued to put pressure on health and social protection systems globally, and negative socio-economic impacts continued to be felt. For an overview of data limitations, please refer to the **annex**.

Table 2

Subjects	A total of 35 young women activists, peacebuilders and community organisers took part in key informant interviews, and 12 technical experts were additionally consulted, including from youth organisations, women's movements, UN agencies, INGOs and academia. Study participants hailed from 21 countries, including: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Georgia, Haiti, India (Kashmir), Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Palestine, Philippines, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Ukraine and Yemen. Study participants ranged in age from 18 to 35 years old. This relatively wide age bracket takes into account varying definitions of youth and young person across countries, cultures and organisations. In peacebuilding settings, where displacement or conflict have prolonged the period of transition to adulthood (e.g., by delaying education, employment or marriage), young people's lives are put on hold.
Selection criteria	Most participants of the focus groups were chosen in consultation with members of a reference group of experts and were selected based on their familiarity with conflict and peace processes, relationships with youth and women's groups and in-country peacebuilding and activism experience. The research team then relied on a "snowball sampling" method, with participants identifying and suggesting additional young women to consult and interview.[47]
Safeguarding and consent	The framework for developing and delivering the interviews that produced this study was based on a technical paper published by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action in the early months of the pandemic. This technical paper offers operational guidance on safe data collection with young people in the context of physical distancing measures.[48] This study did not include direct questions to participants about their experiences of gender-based violence or other traumatic incidents. If interviewees participate in online interviews and/or focus groups from home, it is unlikely that they can be interviewed separately, confidentially and privately in this context. These questions may harm participants, and any results will become unreliable because the researcher will not have had sufficient time to build up rapport with participants to ask sensitive questions.[49] Before each session, participants were read the following consent statement: "The responses you provide will be consolidated at the global level for a policy report. Please note that your responses will not affect any partnership with UN Women, and all responses are anonymous and confidential and no identifying information will be used in any way. Note that interviews will be recorded. Data will only be presented globally and not by your country or organisation to ensure protection of you, your organisation and of the populations you work with. We hope that you will respond openly so that the information reflects your reality and can serve to support young women working in conflict-affected settings globally. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you can choose to discontinue at any time." The researcher then opened the floor to respond to any questions or concerns. While all quotes taken from key informant interviews are verbatim, informants remain anonymous to ensure that their participation in this study does not have negative ramifications on their work, or protection implications on their person, family or community. The logic behind anonymous interviews is straightforward: participants who feel safe telling the truth provide honest answers and paint a more authentic picture of realities on the ground.

Interview structure	Interviews were largely bilateral as individual conversations provide a more nuanced understanding of personal experiences around socioeconomic phenomena than would be obtained from collective calls and purely quantitative methods, such as online surveys of which there has been a proliferation during the pandemic. In preparation for the interviews, study participants were given a short paper explaining the objectives and rationale of the study. The interview groups then discussed their perspectives and personal experiences over one or several Zoom calls. Many submitted WhatsApp voice messages or written statements when Zoom was inaccessible or their schedules or other obligations made meeting unfeasible. The research team chose to use semi-structured interviews that start with a number of key questions that help to define the scope of the areas to be explored, but that also allow the interviewer and/or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail. This interview format provides participants with some guidance on what to talk about, which many found helpful. The flexibility of this approach, particularly compared to structured interviews, also allows for the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as relevant.

2. FINDINGS

The following section provides policymakers with an analysis of how young women peacebuilders have been impacted by the pandemic. Findings are categorised as either challenges or opportunities. Overall, COVID-19 containment measures are having a persistent impact on the work of local peacebuilders around the globe. This section covers dynamics around restrictions on civic space, digitalisation, employment, protection concerns and more. Findings may also be used as a set of thematic entry-points for YPS programming.

2.1 Challenges

Restrictions on civic space

The secondary impacts of the pandemic have limited civil society's space to operate in, thus shrinking key opportunities for participation. In addition, civil society is being undermined by other long-term trends, like political repression in illiberal regimes. For example, some governments are purposefully using pandemic-related restrictions to reduce civic space, silence critics and activists and to centralise and consolidate power.[50] Many peacebuilding, civic or social accountability 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 raising public attention to flag civic violations has become more difficult as most media channels are predominantly focused on the pandemic, vaccination schemes, mask mandates and new variants.[51] Conversely, as physical civic space has been retracting, virtual civic space has expanded and the pandemic has seen an increase in online activism, peacebuilding and advocacy.

Digitalisation

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. In addition, the digitalisation of YPS initiatives has been uneven, often not taking into account the gendered digital divide[52] or differing access to technology and electricity in urban versus rural settings.

All participants in this study struggled with the politics and financing around connectivity, as peacebuilding activities seem to move permanently online. Pre-pandemic, in-person activities were critical spaces for networking, socialising, collaboration and brainstorming.[53] In some cases, meals, childcare and stipends were provided, which were vital for ensuring the participation of as many young women as possible. A young woman working at a peacebuilding CSO in Kenya remarked that the move to online spaces was not easy for her, especially given the in-person nature of grassroots peacebuilding: "My experience was a shock, coming from a background of peacebuilding, which was totally in-person and done through community organising. Negotiating online spaces is not my area and I have intense self-doubt."

It's clear that linkages to global and regional development institutions, think-tanks, conferences, etc. offer opportunities to network, learn from each other, advance their careers and feel seen and heard by those in positions of influence. In-person events allowed young women—many of whom live more rigid, supervised lives in their communities—the opportunity to travel and see parts of the world that they might not have otherwise and to feel more in control over their own futures. Peacebuilders who participated in this study who tapped into international YPS conferences and lecture circuits expressed disappointment over their cancellation or of seeing them move permanently online. A peacebuilder from Yemen said she felt isolated from the world after her speaking arrangements dried up during the pandemic. Another young woman from Liberia,

who saw an in-person fellowship in Geneva go online, knew that a potential inflection point in her career and life became suddenly less impactful.

> **"There was poor internet connectivity so we delivered the training by repeating sessions for those who had poor internet connection. Most of this wasn't in the original budget, but we had to take that [financial] hit because the content of our work was important [for these young women]."**
>
> — Young Woman Peacebuilder from Niger

Digital violence

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 has left many of these peacebuilders vulnerable to violence in the digital realm and the 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 sexualised bodies without permission and share them widely over social media, for years to come. 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.

Additional dynamics that complicate narratives around digitalisation and the pandemic include a widening and gendered "digital divide" that has left young women excluded from opportunities for socialising, networking, civic engagement and, in some cases, access to protection and essential services. Several participants in this study have observed national governments using pandemic response measures to restrict civic spaces online by limiting access to certain websites, deleting popular or relevant posts, etc. Additionally, digital spaces are becoming increasingly politically polarised due to algorithmic bias, which in many contexts has resulted in a proliferation of myths and misconceptions around the virus. One myth circulating online, and aimed at young women specifically, is the false claim that COVID-19 inoculation leads to infertility and/or birth defects.[54]

Earmarked funding and financing

Donors are diverting key funding and financing streams away from long-term peacebuilding initiatives 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 with some adapting to new funding trends by incorporating COVID-19 response in their programmes and initiatives.

Many young peacebuilders in this study expressed frustration over the international community's short attention span. They feel as though multilaterals, INGOs and donors are solely focused on COVID-19 response and ignore their longer-term work on conflict resolution. This funding and financing dynamic is complicated by the fact that a majority of youth-led organisations already operate with limited funding, with 49 per cent operating with under $5,000 per year. Primary sources of income for youth-led peace organisations come from local donations and membership contributions.[55] The shift in funding from peacebuilding and adjacent sectors to health response, cuts this budget down even further. Additionally, the economic impact of the pandemic restricts smaller but critical donations and activities from community members due to other priorities and constraints caused by the pandemic.

While this funding and financing dynamic has certainly marked the three years of the pandemic, some in the peacebuilding sector are observing a convergence in

COVID-19 response and ongoing peacebuilding work, as well as humanitarian action and development initiatives. Certainly, this is mirrored in global-level processes as the United Nations Development System is winding down its socioeconomic response to the pandemic and integrating it into its quotidian analytical, programming and reporting processes.

"COVID-19 impacted the organisation so much it resulted in the cancellation of a four-year grant that we had with [donor name redacted], which we had implemented for only one year. The pandemic struck and the remaining three years [of the] grant were canceled. It affected not only my organisation, but several other domestic organisations in the country. Our four-year strategic plan has been totally ruined."

— Young Woman Peacebuilder from Nigeria

Employment

Young women have been hard-hit in the jobs sector with many losing work 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 combined with the fact that this demographic has been hard-hit in the jobs sector, it is clear that, for many, continuing valuable work in their communities is becoming less and less feasible. Participation in YPS projects must be fairly paid, with basic levels of protection and security ensured.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious impact on young workers and those transitioning to employment, particularly young women. Too many are settling for work in the informal sector or obtain jobs for which they are overqualified and underpaid, which ultimately means that these young women will not meet their aspirations or full potential. For example, in Palestine, where young women graduates generally find it difficult to get hired, a study participant noted that this number has "doubled or tripled during the pandemic."

One young woman peacebuilder from Colombia shared: "[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."

Care burdens

Young women peacebuilders with children and families are finding that balancing increasing care responsibilities with their YPS work and activism is extremely challenging. Some find the shift to remote work with INGOs and other partners to be less feasible in intergenerational households or in more fragile contexts where connectivity challenges are common.

A young peacebuilder in Yemen participated in the interview with a six-month-old baby in tow and grew audibly embarrassed and stressed when the baby made noise in the background. On the other hand, another young peacebuilder and new mother from Uganda, when asked about how the pandemic has changed her relationship to her peacebuilding activities, responded, "The negative impact [of COVID-19] is that there is no one for me to give my children to when I go volunteer. I have to improvise. I pay women that might be struggling with finding work [women who were formerly employed in the informal sector] to watch my kids while I volunteer."

A young activist in Kenya remarks that she is struggling to work and organise her activities while working from home, a modality that she finds culturally incompatible and practically unfeasible; however, the INGO she was employed by found that moving online has been cheaper for them. Another peacebuilder from Georgia noted the prohibitive impact lockdowns and school closures have had on her engagement in Women, Peace and Security (WPS) initiatives: "Before I even take care of my WPS work, I have children to take care of. Before COVID-19, I went to work and the children were in school. Now we are home every day, together. The negative impact is that there is no one for me to give my children to when I volunteer."

In addition, some peacebuilding and development programmes that have tried to extend their reach to

women and girls confined at home are having unintended results by keeping young women in their homes and confining their work to the domestic sphere. One young woman peacebuilder from Kenya noted: "I respect all types of work. But to only give opportunities for women to do cooking from their homes because of the pandemic, instead of [having them come] outside for opportunities in other sectors—agriculture, industry, education, arts, health—is a huge problem, and it's because of the pandemic."

Social isolation and mental health

The mental health impacts of the pandemic have been far-reaching, with many young women burdened by fear of infection, social isolation, worry over economic fallout and grief over personal loss. Peacebuilders from Bangladesh to Colombia to Liberia and Palestine are all reporting a heavy toll on their mental well-being.

Participants in the study reported feelings of fatigue, burnout and other mental health issues that interfered with their peacebuilding activities. In some cases, as active members of their communities, they observed worsening health outcomes among the young women that they worked with, including increases in drug use, rates of anxiety/depression and, in some cases, self-harm or suicide. Studies of past pandemics and epidemics, such as the Ebola outbreak of 2018, have outlined the negative psychological impacts of contagion and the resulting socioeconomic fallout and disease prevention measures.[56] A longitudinal study covering six conflict-affected settings has shown that social isolation has been a bigger issue for women than for men.[57]

In Palestine, where suicide rates among young women in Gaza have spiked during the pandemic, one interviewee noted that, as families see all activities move online, they become empowered to keep girls and young women in the home: "Because there is no good reason to go out, they tell you to stay at home. It limits the freedom to go out and have their own lives. Families control more of their rights of participating in real social life, and this has a massive impact on mental health."

"We need protection. We are doing this work, but it's not safe for us, and it's not safe for our minds. It's tough when you're an activist and everyone looks up to you and wants to talk about their challenges, but you have your own."

— Young Woman Peacebuilder from Liberia

Protection

Young women are a subgroup within youth that are particularly affected by and vulnerable to threats because of their distinct identity and belonging. Exclusion from political and civic decision-making increases this vulnerability to threats and harm. Every participant expressed rising safety and protection concerns linked to the pandemic without prompt and despite the fact that the research team did not ask any direct questions about protection issues or violence due to safeguarding reasons (see **Methods** for more information).

Lockdowns and other pandemic containment measures have made women's peacebuilding work more difficult and, in many cases, more dangerous. In some instances where peacebuilders refused to comply with government-mandated COVID-19 lockdowns or curfews in order to deal with more immediate needs in their communities or with their ongoing peacebuilding initiatives, the young women were put in dangerous opposition to police or other state forces.

One participant from Colombia who is a teacher insisted on continuing to teach comprehensive sexuality education as her school transitioned to online teaching: "My superiors in school, the principal in school and other colleagues don't understand what I'm doing with the girls. They think that it surpasses my function as a teacher. I got a death threat and had to move to a different school."

2.2 Opportunities

Digitalisation

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 to civic space by digitising it much more extensively.

Several young people also found opportunities in this new digital world by changing their work patterns and relying more heavily on technology, which resulted in their work becoming easier, cheaper, faster and, overall, more efficient. They learned to use social media and to network in broader and more strategic ways with many managing to reinvent their activities and tapping into new audiences. Youth reported exercising their right to freedom of opinion and expression by hosting online discussions on important issues like racism and xenophobia. The pandemic also opened new and exciting opportunities for fundraising where local mutual aid campaigns could receive international attention.

In addition, some grassroots organisations are capitalising on new funding streams released for COVID-19 response. For example, a youth-led CSO from Haiti received additional funding from donors to put towards pandemic-related projects. They noted the advantage that youth-led organisations had in-country as many young people were "less afraid" of infection and thus could work on the frontline in hard-to-reach communities.

Protest and civic engagement[58]

Data indicate variance in young women's political participation during the pandemic. In some contexts, a dissolution of the old paradigm has pushed more young women towards civic engagement, and, in others, governments are curtailing participation. Speaking to the peacebuilders interviewed for this study, it is clear that 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—especially where young women make up a significant demographic—may not necessarily be a marker of unrest, but a sign that young women are increasingly aware of their rights and more willing to fight for them in the public sphere.

On the other hand, a young activist from the Sahel described the impact on women's political participation, noting, "The government has curtailed women activists who have been vocal on women's rights. Now they cannot convene, meet or lobby. The young women activists I work with have taken to Zoom and WhatsApp groups to continue their advocacy." When asked about how the move to online spaces has impacted the effectiveness and outcomes of their actions, she responded, "Women's rights activists have a massive following, but due to restrictions, they can only convene ten at a time, which reduces their impact."

2.3 Forecasting peacebuilding activities led by young women

The research team understands the importance of exploring future trends, and, as such, allotted time during each interview to focus on informants' forecasting of peacebuilding activities led by young women. At the individual level, each participant was asked to talk about her concerns, hopes or fears for the future to help policymakers understand what drives members of this demographic to participate in and lead activities that may produce protection concerns for them and their communities. On a macro-level, with a rise in youth-led protest movements globally—driven by distrust towards political classes, institutions and donors, and a desire for engagement in decision-making processes and having a stake in the future—it is useful for policymakers to understand the sources of disconnect between people and institutions, as well as those factors that are specific in driving initiatives led by young women.

In the week following the markedly chaotic withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the research team interviewed a young local peacebuilder.[59] Her small, youth-run organisation worked in the Eastern provinces to provide humanitarian aid, largely in the form of food parcels and dignity kits to internally displaced persons. It also provided local girls' schools and universities

training on life skills, communication and leadership. When asked about her perception of the future for peacebuilders in the country, she described how, in the days since the Taliban takeover, friends, colleagues and community members went "dark" or disabled their internet presence. She worried for their safety, noting that, "I can't see the future right now. I don't know what will happen to young women in Afghanistan. The Taliban will be divided into groups: One considers women's rights, but the other side has very, very extreme views about women." She also expressed concerns about the lack of political representation and the need for inclusivity in the formation of a new government: "We have no one in the government representing us [young women]. We need the UN to focus on practical issues on the ground in developing an inclusive government."

In Liberia, for 14 years between 1989 and 2003, a brutal civil war led to the death of approximately 250,000 people. The country remains vulnerable to cross-border conflict and the spillover of violence driven by the political alliances of elites. A young woman peacebuilder from Liberia, who runs a mutual aid network and connects young women leaders and activities from across the country with each other, found that the future success of her peacebuilding and conflict prevention work was dependent on recognition: "Young women have the ability and qualifications to take up leadership positions, so we demand credit for what we already do." She also stressed the importance of recognition at all levels—from the UN to donors and organisations working at the global level, to the safety and protection of young women working on the ground, adding that, "If we have policies in place that ensure and protect our leadership, it would provide much needed security for me and others [like me]." She found that the pandemic had sharply increased competition among local organisations vying for donor support and recognition, making the dynamics of recognition, protection and safety increasingly fraught.

A young journalist and activist from the West Bank outlined how taxing the last year (at the time of the interview) had been: ''We've been through a lot here this year, not just with COVID-19, [but also] politically—the war in Gaza, the [tussle over] Jerusalem and Sheik-Jarrah. It has been too much." She went on to say that hope was her source of optimism, sharing that, "If we lose hope, we will not be able to continue our struggle. Hopefully by 2022, we will have an easier life." On the other side of the world, in Colombia, an activist, comprehensive sexuality education trainer and high schoolteacher echoed this sentiment, saying that, "I feel now that hope is the last thing you lose." She referenced that the 2021 mass protests over taxation and the national COVID-19 response made her feel "optimistic that we have shown a strength that I haven't seen before in my country. Finally, I can openly say that I am a feminist in my own country." As she looks towards the future, she feels fear and hope: "I guess it is important for us to understand that what we are doing right now, we might not be able to see the results, but the thought that my students might be able to enjoy a better world keeps me going."

Despite feelings of exclusion, exhaustion and the political pushback that young women peacebuilders have experienced since the start of the pandemic, many expressed a sense of optimism for the future. What drives them forward isn't necessarily distrust in the system, or solely that, but rather the understanding that they have a significant role to play in supporting their communities. As a young woman peacebuilder from Liberia said, "We are in the community, we understand their challenges, because their problems are our problems."

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the findings from this study, this section proposes specific recommendations directly addressed at policymakers and practitioners—namely, the UN System, INGOS, 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 and needs.
- Young women's participation in YPS projects must be fairly remunerated, with basic levels of protection and security ensured.
- Develop trainings, workshops and learning initiatives for young women peacebuilders to strengthen their capacity to a) access funding and financing; b) interface with donors; c) organise more effectively; d) build relationships and networks with other peacebuilders and relevant organisations; e) understand and leverage YPS frameworks in their contexts. Ensure that all trainings, workshops, and 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 for peacebuilders and activists facing protection issues and threats. 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 organisations and civil society organisations:

- Participation in YPS projects must be fairly remunerated, with basic levels of protection and security ensured.
- Ensure that digitisation initiatives that aim to connect young peacebuilders provide high-speed internet bundles, remote work stipends to improve working conditions (these can be used to buy new office equipment, like chairs, or cushions or they can be used to buy food, tea or coffee, etc.) and needed 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 organisers 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, organise, 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, including COVID-19 response.
- Distinguish between youth/young women-led organisations and those who take a thematic focus on youth and young women when releasing funding intended for youth-led initiatives.
- Review funding policies, practices and requirements, including eligibility criteria and reporting expectations, and consider at least temporarily relaxing some of these to make funding more accessible to young women-led organisations.

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 protect young women's economic security (including workers in the informal sector) and fund social programmes that address greater burdens of unpaid care work on this demographic.
- Governments should proiritise universal health coverage, and sexual and reproductive health services—including comprehensive sexuality education—should be classified by governments as essential with continuity of services ensured if variant-related lockdown measures close healthcare facilities in the future.
- Those young women who occupy jobs in the health sector, and specifically in the protection and sexual and reproductive health sectors, should be counted as essential workers (e.g., 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. While lockdowns have mitigated the effects of the virus, they have also increased violence and heightened protection concerns in some contexts.[60] 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 improving 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 manner.
- Tech companies should also 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.

4. CONCLUSION

COVID-19 response measures and broader socioeconomic impacts are reshaping the environments in which young women peacebuilders operate. As a result, they are forced to adapt and increasingly rely on digital technologies. In some cases, pandemic measures have increased governmental repression and illegitimate uses of force, creating societal mistrust and decreasing political transparency. Aid and financial assistance have been diverted from local organisations, causing further strain on young women peacebuilders working at the grassroots level. Meanwhile, the socio-political and economic tensions of poverty, conflict and gender-based violence in vulnerable communities have been exacerbated by the pandemic along gendered lines. These dynamics lend the crucial work of local peacebuilders and civil society activists even more urgency.

The young women interviewed in this study were savvy in tackling the underlying causes of risks and vulnerabilities in order to reduce needs in their communities while achieving peace outcomes in the middle- and potentially into the long-term. Some progress towards recognising young women for their efforts is being made within the UN system with the Secretary-General, in his newly launched "Our Common Agenda" report, proposing a new agenda for peace that is notably focused on putting women and girls at the centre of all responses.[61] While young women are gradually gaining recognition in multilateral spaces as key actors, their contributions to peacebuilding efforts and needs in the contexts of transitional justice—economic, security and educational reforms, humanitarian action and COVID-19 response efforts remain overlooked and undervalued.

The increased rights violations and impacts on the lives of young women will not necessarily recede after the peak of the pandemic is over. And, even if they did, many of the young women interviewed in this study balked at the prospect of returning to pre-COVID levels of inequality. Instead, there is a need for multilaterals, donors INGOs and national governments to work in good faith with young women-led movements and organisations and that they invest in a feminist vision of a world where young women—in all their diversity—are free and equipped to choose their own futures.

ANNEX: DATA LIMITATIONS

This section lists the limitations and weaknesses of the study. Some basic limitations included limited sample size due to the qualitative and time-consuming nature of bilateral interviews, issues that arose from translation and survey fatigue. Future researchers and practitioners may find this list informative while planning their own research.

Youth participation:

Although the global YPS agenda fostered knowledge production about youth participation in peace and security processes, young people have rarely had the opportunity to produce or own this knowledge. Consultations, focus group discussions, interviews and online discussions have been popular methods among peacebuilding institutions and scholars to study peace and security concerns and priorities of young people. These methods are valuable in their amplification of the voices of young people, yet these methodologies limit the participation of young people in knowledge production processes, as they mostly restrict young people shaping research outcomes to data collection processes. This study, authored by a young woman, dealt with this limitation by offering participants the opportunity to review and contribute to the conclusive findings and recommendations.

Translation:

The lead researcher used translators where logistics and budget allowed. While translators certainly extended the conversational depth and diversity of the interviewees, they also created a barrier between the enumerator and interviewee. For example, in the case of a young woman journalist and peacebuilder from Sudan, she responded to questions in Arabic while an older, English-speaking man contracted by UN Women, whom she had not met prior, translated her responses in real time. The presence of an intermediary, especially of the opposite sex and/or gender, meant that the primary enumerator and participant couldn't organically build a rapport and, as such, any questions surrounding personal experiences or observations were not deemed appropriate for this study.

Survey fatigue:

The pandemic has caused a surge in research activity while restricting data collection methods, leading to a rise in online and survey-based studies. Evidence suggests that this increase in survey dissemination has led to survey fatigue, which is characterized by decreased response rates and reduced data quality. To avoid overburdening respondents and asking duplicative questions, an extensive desk review was held before any data collection took place.

Geographic spread:

This global study sought to interview peacebuilders from conflict-affected areas in a manner that ensured balanced regional representation. While all regions are represented, significantly more interviews were conducted with peacebuilders from Africa and Asia, compared to the number of interviews conducted with peacebuilders from Latin America and Eastern Europe. This regional imbalance can be attributed to a fault in the "snowball sampling" method, as well as lower response rates to inquiries to participate in informant interviews.

ENDNOTES

1 The young women we spoke to would sometimes self-identify as a human rights defender, peacebuilder, activist, environmental defender or a community mobiliser. Young people often use fluid terms to describe their work and/or volunteering. Throughout the study we will use "peacebuilder" as an umbrella term; and when quoting an individual, we will use the term that they use to self-identify during our interviews.

2 While civilian targeting and civilian fatalities decreased on the aggregate level from 2019 to 2020, civilian targeting events increased, with the greatest increases being recorded in Brazil, Nigeria, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cameroon.

3 ACLED 2021; Wise et al. 2021.

4 Pitterle and Niermann 2021.

5 UNFPA 2021.

6 UN Women 2020.

7 Birchall 2021.

8 Crenshaw 2005.

9 UNOY Peacebuilders 2021b-c; Hoodh 2021; United Nations Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth 2021; UNFPA 2020.

10 UN 2020.

11 OHCHR 2020.

12 Marmot, Kogevinas and Elston 1987.

13 Rothwell and Smith 2021.

14 Gallup 2021.

15 Ibid.

16 WIEGO 2022; Agrawal et al. 2021.

17 IASC 2020.

18 Forgione 2020.

19 Kaiser Family Foundation and The Washington Post 2021.

20 The Trevor Project 2020b;

21 For additional resources on LGBTIQ+ youth and COVID-19 see: The Trevor Project 2020a, 2021a-b; Malpas, Pellicane and Glaeser 2022; and McCann 2019.

22 Sachdeva et al. 2021; Malpas 2016.

23 For comprehensive lists of international suicide prevention resources, see: befrienders.org and suicide.org

24 Reisner et al. 2015.

25 UN Women 2021.

26 ILO 2020.

27 UNOY Peacebuilders 2021.

28 FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund and AWID 2016.

29 Abreh et al. 2021; Amaro et al. 2020; Azevedo 2020.

30 World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF 2021.

31 Ibid.

32 Access to sexual and reproductive health services is central to an individual's wellbeing and their enjoyment of several overlapping and interlinked human rights, including the right to life, the right to be free from torture, the right to health, the right to privacy, the right to education and the prohibition of discrimination. See: IPPF 2020 and 2021; UNFPA 2020a; UNFPA and UNICEF 2020; and Luchsinger 2021.

33 Rutgers University 2021.

34 UNFPA 2021.

35 GiHA WG 2020.

36 UNFPA 2020e.

37 United Nations Security Council 2015.

38 UNFPA and Folke Bernadotte Academy 2021

39 Simpson 2018.

40 Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2022.

41 Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation et al. 2021; Peace Direct, Conducive Space for Peace and Humanity United 2020.

42 Search for Common Ground 2021.

43 Damian 2020.

44 UNFPA and Folke Bernadotte Academy 2020.

45 Simpson 2018.

46 United Nations 2021.

47 This approach is used where potential participants are hard to find, including due to protection concerns. It is called "snowball sampling" because, in theory, once you have the ball rolling, it picks up more "snow" along the way and becomes larger and larger.

48 UNFPA 2020c and 2020d.

49 Ibid.

50 United Nations Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth 2021.

51 Gros and Eisen 2021.

52 The digital divide, or technology gap, is the difference between groups with access to technology and the internet and those without. Girls and women often have less access to technology and the internet compared to boys and men. Particularly in developing countries, girls

and women struggle to afford technology and internet access. In addition, stereotypes around technology being "for boys" and fear of being discriminated against stop girls from using digital tools. Without equal access to technology and the internet, girls and women are not able to equally participate in our evermore digital societies. Holding back girls and women in this area affects every aspect of their lives, including their ability to speak out and campaign on issues that affect them. Moreover, if girls and women are not involved in creating digital tools and online content, existing inequalities may be exacerbated. The gender technology gap also negatively impacts countries' potential for economic growth and development.

53 Plan International 2022.

54 Dwoskin 2021; Global Witness 2021.

55 UNOY Peacebuilders and Search for Common Ground 2017.

56 Bah et al. 2020.

57 Search for Common Ground 2021.

58 Some countries have created opportunities for younger generations to have a voice in decisions that affect them, through youth councils, parliaments and ministries. However, these solutions have not always avoided tokenism, often remaining peripheral to core political processes and pandemic response at the national level. Youth-led protest movements are frequently driven by deep distrust in today's political classes and desire for proper engagement in decision-making. Other authorities have clamped down on peaceful protest, dismissed young people as too inexperienced and treated them as beneficiaries or, worse, as threats rather than equal partners. At the global level, young people have been formally recognised as critical actors within intergovernmental frameworks on peace and security, sustainable development, climate change, human rights and humanitarian action. Yet, here too, engagement is not always meaningful, nor does it guarantee geographical, gender, income and other forms of diversity.

59 It is worth noting that although the violence of the Taliban's takeover has overshadowed Afghanistan's concerns about COVID-19, the Taliban did respond in an unprecedented manner by facilitating public health workshops and giving permission to healthcare workers to administer vaccines in areas under its control. However, it is debatable whether this action was meant as part of a larger strategy to gain legitimacy rather than true concerns for the public health of the population.

60 Yayboke, Staguhn and Graff 2021.

61 United Nations 2021.

REFERENCES

Abreh, M.K., W.K. Agbevanu, A.J. Alhassan, F. Ansah, R.S. Bosu, L. Crawfurd, C.A. Mills, A.L. Minardi and G. Nyame. 2021. "How Did Students Recover Learning Loss During COVID-19 School Closures in Ghana?" Center for Global Development.

ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project). 2021. "ACLED 2020: The Year in Review."

Agrawal, S., A. Cojocaru, V. Montalva, A. Narayan, T. Bundervoet and A. Ten. 2021. "COVID-19 and Inequality: How Unequal Was the Recovery From the Initial Shock?" World Bank.

Amaro, D., L. Pandolfelli, I. Sanchez-Tapia and M. Brossard. 2020. "COVID-19 and Education: The Digital Gender Divide Among Adolescents in Sub-Saharan Africa." UNICEF.

Azevedo, J.P. 2020. "Learning Poverty: Measures and Simulations." World Bank.

Bah, A.J., P.B. James, N. Bah, A.B. Sesay, S. Sevalie and J.S. Kanu. 2020. "Prevalence of Anxiety, Depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Among Ebola Survivors in Northern Sierra Leone: A Cross-Sectional Study." BMC Public Health.

Birchall, J. 2021. "COVID-19, Gender and Intersectionality." Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

Crenshaw, K. 2005. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color (1994)." In R. K. Bergen, J. L. Edleson, and C. M. Renzetti. Violence Against Women: Classic Papers, pp. 282–313.

Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, Peace Direct and the Peacebuilding Support Office in the United Nations Department of Political and Peacekeeping Affairs. 2021. "Reflecting on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace: A Summary of a Global Online Consultation With Civil Society."

Damian, L. 2020. "What Happened to the Nexus Approach in the COVID-19 Response?" IPI: Global Observatory.

Dwoskin, E. 2021. "Massive Facebook Study on Users' Doubt in Vaccines Finds a Small Group Appears to Play a Big Role in Pushing the Skepticism." The Washington Post.

Forgione, P. 2020. "'Please, Don't Tell Anyone!': Healthcare Stigma in the COVID-19 Era." International Committee of the Red Cross.

FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund and AWID's (Association for Women's Rights in Development) Young Feminist Activism Program. 2016. "Brave, Creative, Resilient: The Global State of Young Feminist Organizing."

Gallup. 2021. "Gallup World Poll: The Pandemic Changed Life Around the Planet."

GiHA WG (Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group). 2020. "Urgent Call for Gender Actions in the COVID-19 Response in Cox's Bazar."

Global Witness. 2021. "Report: Last Line of Defense."

Gros, M. and N. Eisen. 2021. "Digitizing Civic Spaces Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond." Brookings.

Hoodh, I. 2021. "Transformative Resilience of Young People During the COVID-19 Pandemic." Journal of Youth, Peace and Security 1 (1).

IASC (Inter-Agency Standing Committee). 2020. "With Us and for Us: Working With and for Young People in Humanitarian and Protracted Crises." UNICEF and NRC for the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action.

ILO (International Labour Organization). 2020. "Global Report: Youth and COVID-19: Impacts on Jobs, Education, Rights and Mental Well-Being."

IPPF (International Planned Parenthood Federation). 2020. "Advocacy, Good Practices and Lessons Learned: Ensuring Sexual and Reproductive Safety During COVID-19."

_____. 2021. "Technical Brief on Comprehensive Sexuality Education for Adolescents in Protracted Humanitarian Settings."

Kaiser Family Foundation and The Washington Post. 2021. "Frontline Health Care Workers Survey."

Luchsinger, G. 2021. "No Exceptions, No Exclusions: Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Health, Rights and Justice for All." Report of the High-Level Commission on the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 Follow-up.

Malpas, J. 2016. "The Transgender Journey: What Role Should Therapists Play?" Psychotherapy Networker.

Malpas, J., M.J. Pellicane and E. Glaeser. 2022. "Family-Based Interventions With Transgender and Gender Expansive Youth: Systematic Review and Best Practice Recommendations." Transgender Health 7 (1), pp. 7-29.

Marmot, M.G., M. Kogevinas and M.A. Elston. 1987. "Social/Economic Status and Disease." Annual Review of Public Health 8 (1), pp. 111-135.

McCann, E. and M. Brown. 2019. "Homelessness Among Youth Who Identify as LGBTQ+: A Systematic Review." Journal of Clinical Nursing 28 (11-12), pp. 2061-2072.

OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights). 2020. "COVID-19 Human Rights Guidance Note."

Peace Direct, Conducive Space for Peace and Humanity United. 2020. "COVID-19 and Local Peacebuilding."

Pitterle, I. and L. Niermann. 2021. "The COVID-19 Crisis: What Explains Cross-Country Differences in the Pandemic's Short-Term Economic Impact?" United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Plan International. 2022. "Bridging the Digital Gender Divide."

Reisner, Sari L., R. Vetters, M. Leclerc, S. Zaslow, S. Wolfrum, D. Shumer and M.J. Mimiaga. 2015. "Mental Health of Transgender Youth in Care at an Adolescent Urban Community Health Center: A Matched Retrospective Cohort Study." Journal of Adolescent Health 56 (3), pp. 274-279.

Rothwell, J. and E. Smith. 2021. "Socioeconomic Status as a Risk Factor in Economic and Physical Harm from COVID-19: Evidence from the United States." The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 698 (1), pp. 12–38.

Rutgers University. 2021. "Rutgers Study: COVID-19 Measures Have Huge Impact on All Aspects of Young People's Lives."

Sachdeva, I., S. Aithal, W. Yu, P. Toor and J.C.H Tan. 2021. "The Disparities Faced by the LGBTQ+ Community in Times of COVID-19." Psychiatry Res, 297, 113725.

Search for Common Ground. 2021. "A Story of Resilience and Fragilities: The Impact of COVID-19 on Horizontal Cohesion in Conflict-Affected Countries."

Simpson, G. 2018. "The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security." UNFPA.

The Trevor Project. 2020a. "How LGBTQ Youth Can Cope with Anxiety and Stress during COVID-19."

_____. 2020b. "Implications of COVID-19 for LGBTQ Youth Mental Health and Suicide Prevention."

_____. 2021a. "Black & LGBTQ: Approaching Intersectional Conversations."

_____. 2021b. "Resources for International LGBTQ Youth."

UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2020. "The Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During COVID-19."

_____. 2021. "New Report Sounds the Alarm on the Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in East and Southern Africa."

UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund). 2020a. "Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Maternal and Newborn Health & COVID-19."

_____. 2020b. "Free Transport Helps Pregnant Women in Madagascar Safely Deliver Amid COVID-19 Lockdown."

_____. 2020c. "My Body, My Life, My World Through a COVID-19 Lens."

_____. 2020d. "Surveys and Assessments on Young People and COVID-19: Domains, Questions and Resources."

_____. 2020e. "Pregnant Indigenous Women in Panama Face COVID-19 Fears, Lack of Transport."

_____. 2021. "Studies Show Severe Toll of COVID-19 on Sexual and Reproductive Health, Rights around the World."

UNFPA, Folke Bernadotte Academy. 2021. "Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook."

UNFPA, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). 2020. "Resilience in Action: Lessons Learned from the Joint Programme During the COVID-19 Crisis."

United Nations. 2020. "United Nations Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space."

_____. 2021. "Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General."

United Nations Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth. 2021. "First-Ever Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space Highlights Need for Stronger Global Protection Mechanisms."

United Nations Security Council. 2015. "Resolution 2250 (2015)."

UNOY Peacebuilders (United Network of Young Peacebuilders) and Search for Common Ground. 2017. "Mapping a Sector: Bridging the Evidence Gap on Youth-Driven Peacebuilding."

UNOY Peacebuilders. 2021a. "If I disappear: Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space."

_____. 2021b. "New Frontiers in YPS at its 5th Anniversary: From Youth Voices to Youth Agency." Journal of Youth, Peace and Security 1 (1).

_____. 2021c. "Youth, Peace and Security Research Network."

Uppsala Conflict Data Program. 2022. "UCDP Charts, Graphs and Maps."

WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing). 2022. "The COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy – Global Study."

Wise, P., A. Shiel, N. Southard, E. Bendavid, J. Welsh, S. Stedman, T. Fazal, V. Felbab-Brown, D. Polatty, R.J. Waldman, P.B. Spiegel, K. Blanchet, R. Dayoub, A. Zakayo, M. Barry, D. Martinez Garcia, H. Pagano, R. Black, M.F. Gaffey and Z.A. Bhutta. 2021. "The Political and Security Dimensions of the Humanitarian Health Response to Violent Conflict." The Lancet 397 (10273), pp. 511-521.

World Bank, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization) and UNICEF. 2021. "The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery."

Yayboke, E., J. Staguhn and C. Graff. 2021. "Beyond Emergency Pandemic Response: The Case for Prioritizing Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention." Center for Strategic and International Studies.

UN WOMEN IS THE UN ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN. A GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, UN WOMEN WAS ESTABLISHED TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.

UN WOMEN

220 East 42nd Street
New York, New York 10017, USA

www.unwomen.org
www.facebook.com/unwomen
www.twitter.com/un_women
www.youtube.com/unwomen
www.flickr.com/unwomen