

Triple Threat: New Research Highlights Three Key Sources of Insecurity for Women Peacebuilders

The Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ) recently conducted research to better understand its Women Waging Peace Network and the current challenges faced by its 1000+ members from 56 countries. One finding from this research that stood out, is: that rising insecurity, increased violence and closing civil society space are hindering women's inclusion in peacebuilding processes. This has to change if we are to realize the promise of UN Security Council Resolution 1325--mandating meaningful participation of women in all peace and security decision-making processes--now in its 20th year.

Women's continued exclusion from formal peace processes has been the focus of a significant number of interventions by the international community in recent years. Many of these initiatives, however, are focused on peace processes themselves and don't address the risks, threats and backlash women peacebuilders from all levels of society face from their communities when they seek to participate in peacebuilding processes.

In our research, women peacebuilders who are part of the Women Waging Peace Network describe three main sources of insecurity: the state, non-state actors and even their homes and families.

THE STATE

State-sanctioned threats and violence against women peacebuilders are not new but appear to be spreading and strengthening. For instance, new data on political violence released in May 2019 shows that women face unprecedented levels of targeted political violence.

Women peacebuilders who participated in our research indicated this insecurity takes many forms: threats or actual use of violence, intimidation or public shaming by officials, arrests, political interference especially leading up to elections and increasing cyber surveillance.



A Women Waging Peace Member engaging in her democratic process.

One Syrian woman we interviewed noted that being arrested can have devastating consequences for women if it is suspected that they may have been raped while in custody, as this has honor implications for their families. This was seen as a deliberate tactic used by the regime to undermine women's peace activism. Women peacebuilders in Uganda, Afghanistan and Kenya described increased threats and violence against women in public roles and women political candidates ahead of electoral processes. Women peacebuilders and journalists, spanning from Burundi, Moldova, South Sudan and Sri Lanka, are now also taking cautionary steps to protect themselves and their organizations from cyber surveillance, citing this as a new form of state-sanctioned insecurity.



East African Women Waging Peace Members gather to march for the protection of women's rights.

NON-STATE ACTORS

Non-state actors are the second major area of insecurity that our research revealed. In particular, women peacebuilders across the Middle East and North Africa region, as well as from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, recounted how extremist groups are deliberately targeting women's organizations, women in public roles and women activists who are considered to be working to subvert strict, ideologically defined gender norms. A woman

peacebuilder in Syria described these attacks as efforts by extremist groups to fight women's empowerment.

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Women peacebuilders in Sri Lanka fear a return of sectarian violence that gripped the country and a re-emergence of sexual insults and attacks by hard-line Sinhalese Buddhists, including monks, leveled against women activists thought not to conform with traditional Sinhalese Buddhist values. In Colombia, women peacebuilders, especially Indigenous peacebuilders, are increasingly being targeted by ex-combatants, as well as other paramilitary groups and narco traffickers, for their campaigning on disarmament and on the implementation of the peace accord.

HOMES AND FAMILIES

Women peacebuilders' own homes and families are the third area of insecurity that emerged in our research. Our research revealed that challenging traditional gender norms by participating in peacebuilding work is putting women at heightened risk of domestic violence, as they can be accused by their family members of abandoning their family duties, putting their families at risk, or bringing shame on them via their work.

“ One Afghan woman peacebuilder shared that household-level resistance and insecurity embody the first major obstacles for women’s formal participation in peace and political processes in her country. She recounted how her peacebuilding and women’s rights campaigning work was only initially possible as her father, a prominent regional figure, supported her work and protected her from any possible violent backlash from other family members.”

Our research revealed that this issue affects both women in prominent public-facing roles and those working at the grassroots levels.

For example, one Afghan woman peacebuilder shared that household-level resistance and insecurity embody the first major obstacles for women’s formal participation in peace and political processes in her country. She recounted how her peacebuilding and women’s rights campaigning work was only initially possible as her father, a prominent regional figure, supported her work and protected her from any possible violent backlash from other family members. Some of her colleagues were not as fortunate and had severe restrictions placed on their mobility by male family members. A woman peacebuilder in Rwanda attributes the rise in domestic violence in her country to women becoming more empowered, which then causes tensions within the family. Furthermore, our women peacebuilders from the Middle East shared that anti-women’s-empowerment messages are seeping into households and that sexual, gender-

based and domestic violence against women peacebuilders are pervasive across the region.

While the first two sources of insecurity women peacebuilders face have been well documented, the home and family dynamics creating insecurity for women peacebuilders are less well understood.

To address this gap in our knowledge, more research is needed, especially research that analyzes the interplay between women’s participation in peacebuilding, activism and human rights work, the impact on domestic relationships between women, men and family members, and the security implications for women. Additional research is also required to examine how to foster positive, enabling family environments that support women peacebuilders’ ability to engage in peacebuilding without suffering backlash within the home and family.

It is not possible to separate formal efforts aimed at achieving women’s political representation and meaningful participation in peacebuilding from the gender-based violence and discrimination women experience in their own homes. While this fundamental source of insecurity for women peacebuilders remains, equal participation in formal processes will continue to elude women.



A Women Waging Peace Member building literacy in her local community in South East Asia

CONCLUSION

With the 20th anniversary of the women, peace and security agenda coming soon, the international community must focus on the barriers hindering women's inclusion in peacebuilding at all levels and in all spaces of society. Our research indicates that efforts aimed at increasing women's participation in peace processes need to be linked with broader strategies promoting women's rights and gender equality. Such strategies include continued and strengthened support for women's organizations working at both the elite and the grassroots levels to change entrenched attitudes, challenge traditional notions of masculinity, and engage with men and

boys on the promotion of gender equality. As is clear from the experiences of peacebuilders in the Women Waging Peace Network, women's inclusion in peacebuilding cannot be separated from this broader struggle.



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In the coming months, the Kroc IPJ will be sharing further results from its wider Women Waging Peace Network research project. This research captures key insights on the current landscape women peacebuilders are navigating, ways forward for such global networks, and how the international community can strengthen its support for women peacebuilders around the world.

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