overview

This paper summarizes the results of a virtual session on "**Women At The Frontline – Women, Peace and Security in times of COVID-19**" (30/06/2020). The participants shared their expertise and insights on women's participation in peace and security processes, discussed particular challenges that COVID-19 poses to women's participation on the ground and how to actively and successfully support women's full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership in aspects of peace and security during and beyond times of COVID-19.

Speakers were:
• **Chipo Bangira**, Feminist and Transformational Leadership Manager at Akina Mama wa Afrika, Uganda.
• **Mary Fatiya Joseph**, Deputy Executive Director at Young Women Christian Association, South Sudan.
• **Mara Marinaki**, European External Action Service's Principal advisor on Gender and on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 on WPS, Belgium.
• Introduction by: **Emma Naylor Ngugi**, Regional Director CARE East, Central and Southern Africa, Kenya.

Photo Credit: Tara Agaba. CARE Uganda

Learning from the past

Both in Uganda and South Sudan, women's peace coalitions and women's movements were at the forefront pushing for peace talks, mobilizing for social change, and advocating for issues affecting women and girls. Without them, many achievements would not have been made, many topics would not have been addressed during the peace processes.
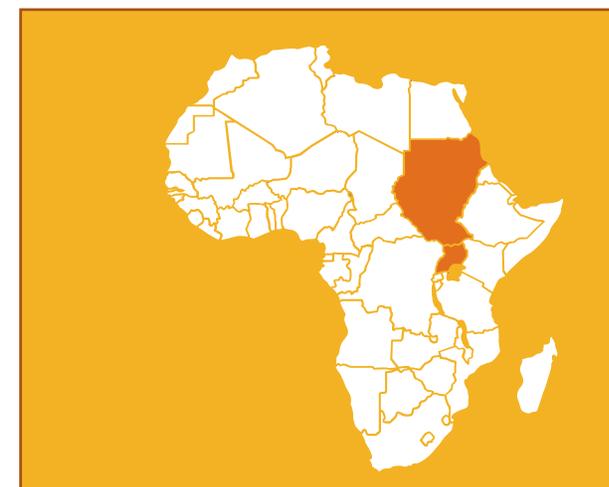
The panelists highlighted a few factors for success:

There is power in numbers – collective action yields bigger results. Women's movements managed to include women from diverse backgrounds, across political divides and from local to national level. In South Sudan, the introduction and subsequent increase of quotas helped to ensure that a growing number of women could participate in the talks.

By being inclusive, **women's movements and coalitions were able to create spaces that catered to the needs of all.** Effective networking was key within the women's coalitions and movements. Through collaboration and coordination, women jointly prepared and delivered impactful interventions and statements which reflected a variety of perspectives.

"Peace starts within you." Women promoted dialogue and informally mediated between parties. By encouraging individuals to talk to each other, they helped create a conducive environment for the talks. In South Sudan, the coalition invited all parties to a joint prayer.

Grassroots activists are a very reliable source of information for international actors as statistics alone do not show the whole picture. Women contributed their insights and local expertise and successfully lobbied international actors.

Current Challenges

"**The pandemic is adding to the perfect storm of impacts"** in East Africa as it affects a region that is already marked by poverty, precarious livelihoods, severe food insecurity, conflict, desert locusts spread and effects of climate change.

The coronavirus pandemic **increases risks to human security, in particular for women and girls**. Its impact is felt far beyond its public health implications alone. Most states in the region took very restrictive measures to stop the spread of the virus, with serious effects on education, the economy (in particular the informal sector), civic space, mental health and sexual and gender based violence, including female genital mutilation, early child marriage, early pregnancy and human trafficking. In some cases, security actors imposed restrictions by force. The measures taken typically affect the most vulnerable and marginalized such as girls and persons with disability, the most.

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Focus: Women's Full, Equal and Meaningful Participation

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Impacts of COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic increases challenges for full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership of women and girls. Participants of the virtual session noted their experiences of exclusion but also opportunities for decision making:

📱 The digital divide excludes women at the frontline

- Women's rights organizations and activists are often excluded from relevant meetings, conferences and conversations that take place online. This is due, for instance, to a lack of reliable internet access as well as restricted access to virtual spaces.
- Women's movements risk being less inclusive. Engaging women from diverse backgrounds, particularly from remote areas is challenging as many of them do not have access to the internet.
- It is more difficult to gather first-hand information from community-based organizations and activists on the ground.

⚠️ Restricted mobility prevents networking

- Dialogue with key stakeholders and access to information are limited because personal interactions and exchange are rare.
- Women's organisations' mobilization and networking efforts are affected as conferences, workshops and other gathering can only take place virtually.
- Capacity building has had to move to virtual spaces and these are not as effective as in-person trainings and exchanges.

💲 Scarce resources limit opportunities for impact

- Women's organizations are forced to allocate already scarce resources to emergency needs such as psychosocial support and gender based violence, thus reducing their capacities for other areas of intervention.
- In the current context, running for office or leadership positions requires more resources. Women often lack the necessary financial and logistical assets and face additional obstacles due to increased care burden.
- Gender based violence (GBV) is not sufficiently addressed by donors.

👪 Opportunities

- COVID-19 gives rise to solidarity actions and innovative programs of women's organizations.
- COVID-19 is exposing the extent of gender inequality around the world and the relevance of human security. Gender has been brought into focus, for example with regard to unpaid care work and its impact on the economy. Female heads of state have demonstrated effective and exemplary management of the pandemic. A return to traditional and patriarchal approaches is becoming more difficult.

Recommendations

- Support initiatives of a **Global Ceasefire** and of addressing the silent pandemic of violence against women and girls. Invest in programs addressing violence against women and girls in all its forms and **prioritize and adequately fund GBV** in COVID-19 response plans.

- The **transformation of harmful gender norms and mentalities** in societies and governments is a crucial foundation for women's full, equal and meaningful participation. Resist attempts to use COVID-19 as a reason to backtrack on gender equality and Women, Peace and Security commitments.

- Provide **technical support as well as accessible, flexible and long-term funding** to local women's organisations and women activists.

- Strengthen the humanitarian aspects in the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Ensure **gender-sensitive humanitarian action** and meaningful participation of women and girls from diverse backgrounds at all levels and at all stages of decision-making in humanitarian programmes.

- Make **participation of women and girls a mandatory requirement** in processes related to peace and security, e.g. by introducing quotas.

- Support a **safe and enabling environment** for civil society organisations and prevent reprisals when organisations and activists are holding states accountable for the implementation of existing policies and frameworks.

- Put a **specific focus on young women and girls**, for instance by
  - **Investing in capacity building and sensitization programs.** Young women and girls need to know their rights and how to participate in peace and security processes. Leadership, communication and negotiating skills, for instance, will allow them to prepare for and contribute to policy processes.
  - Creating **safe spaces and knowledge hubs** where girls can have critical conversations about issues that concern them.
  - **Deliberately involving** young women and girls in *all* platforms, capacity building and meetings.
  - **Creating initiatives** with a focus on girls and Women, Peace and Security
  - Always including young women and girls of **diverse backgrounds**. They are not a homogeneous group and will have different needs.