

How are Women Peacebuilders Responding to Covid-19?

On April 2, 2020 some 40+ members of Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) gathered for a two-hour virtual meeting on Zoom. The objective of this first virtual get-together was to share reflections and experiences as well as solidarity around how the Covid-19 pandemic is affecting local women peacebuilders around the globe. It is evident that the crisis is driving many to yet again step up and lead the charge against the pandemic in their communities.

While the WASL members represented a variety of contexts and countries, the issues and challenges identified were strikingly similar. Lack of awareness, confusion and fear is evident. One of the most pressing concerns is ensuring that messages are developed and disseminated in local languages, and that they reach all of society. In Cameroon, some women are working with WHO and UNICEF to develop messages and translating these into Cameroonian Pidgin English. Ensuring that messaging is accessible and understandable to people with visual or hearing impairments or who are otherwise differently abled has been a focus for a group of women in Kenya. When people were still moving around, our partners in Pakistan put up informational banners and posters in strategic public places as well as in public transportation.

Food insecurity was one of the major issues the women raised. In many communities staying home is not an option when food has to be put on the table and mouths fed. While the shortage of food has prompted the governments in Kenya and Uganda to provide food rations to people in need, the assistance is neither fast nor comprehensive enough. Women in Uganda are organizing to help other women with cash assistance. Women in Pakistan are storing food to distribute during Ramadan. Similar work is being done in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Kenya, and Palestine where committees have been formed to ensure food reaches differently abled people and others who are confined to their homes.

With lockdowns and curfews—at times brutally enforced by the authorities—and increased uncertainty, many communities are seeing a spike in domestic violence, and violence against women, youth, and the transgender community. In Albania a woman was killed by her husband because she works as a nurse and was accused of bringing corona back into the home. But women are stepping in and helping. In Sri Lanka, women's organizations are preventing domestic violence by telling men that if they hit their wives, the police will come and lock them up. In Kashmir, women have helped create a help line to respond to domestic violence calls and are setting up Zoom sessions/online classes to focus on self-expression and healing. In Maldives women are organizing to provide psycho-social support over the phone.

Many WASL members on the call emphasized the need to assist specifically marginalized and vulnerable communities, such as refugees, internally displaced people, informal workers, day laborers, the elderly, and the poor.

While one Yemeni partner has managed to train 150 young medics and boosted up laboratory capacities by providing extra batteries, etc. the reports of inadequate or complete lack of hospitals, health care facilities, access to tests, and equipment is dire everywhere—in Afghanistan, Albania, Indonesia, Sudan, and elsewhere. Partners in Afghanistan and Cameroon reported that as medical



workers become infected, facilities are shut down. In Yemen, many hospitals are now turning away people with Covid-19 symptoms, resulting in children dying. Fear of infection is preventing people in Uganda from seeking medical care for other ailments.

One message was clear. The rapid response to Covid-19 is necessary peacebuilding work. For communities already devastated by conflict and poverty, the pandemic will be brutal. The notion that it does not matter whether you die from poverty, war or Covid-19 was repeated by several partners. "Some people see corona as a mercy virus, they're ready to die," said a Yemeni partner. The UN Secretary General's call for a global ceasefire has been taken up by many WASL partners and should be heeded as a call to action by the world. Our Yemeni partners have published several statements and open letters calling for an immediate halt to the fighting. Furthermore, the appeal to immediately release all political detainees in places like Syria and Yemen, has never been more urgent.

The WASL calls are held weekly on Thursdays at 9am EST.

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