ICAN
International Civil Society Action Network
For women's rights, peace and security

Strategizing for Peace: Recognizing Women Peacebuilders
High-Level Meeting
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Talking Points

Thank you to Norad, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and the Nordic Women's Mediators Network for the opportunity and space. On behalf of my team at ICAN and our partners in the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL), I want to express gratitude to the Norwegian government for supporting the ceasefire in Gaza.

This is a significant moment for the conversation.

It was a bold and important decision, especially considering the stance taken by other Western alliance countries. I believe it will have far-reaching implications for the future.

We are here to discuss strategies for effective peacemaking and crisis response, specifically exploring what we can do differently in a world where conflict, violence, and humanitarian crises are the norm.

The current state of affairs:

- In 2022, there were 55 conflicts involving state actors, compared to 51 in 2021.
- There were 86 conflicts involving non-state actors, up from 76 in 2021.
- 614 million women and girls live in conflict-affected countries, a 50% increase from 2017.
- Nearly 200 million children are living in the most dangerous war zones, the highest number in over a decade.
- The war in Gaza stands out as the first in history where children make up the majority of victims.
- The number of people in need of aid increased by 25% between 2021 and 2022.
- In the 6 months from December 2022 to July 2023, the number of people in need of emergency relief rose from 339 million to 363 million, with over 100 million being war refugees or internally displaced persons.
- OCHA aimed to reach 248 million (leaving 115 million people out) with a call for $56 billion, but only $18 billion was committed. 67% of it was not fulfilled. This is before Gaza.
- Meanwhile, in the name of peace, the U.S., Europe, India, China, and others increased military spending to an unprecedented $2 trillion.

Every year we are starting wars, but not stopping them.

Now with Israel's attack on Gaza and the unfolding genocide we see before our eyes —with its implications in the western world (if not elsewhere yet)—we are experiencing a geopolitical tsunami. Everything has changed. Everything is changing as we speak. While our instinct may be to plough on as usual, I believe it is actually a time for us to collectively pause and acknowledge the scale of change.

It is not the first time we have had such a massive event. Perhaps we should have stopped in 2003 when the U.S. invaded Iraq against the UNSC's vote, or in 2015 after the UNSC voted to allow Saudi to bomb Yemen, or in 2021 when the U.S. let the Taliban take over Afghanistan at the tables of negotiations, or in 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine.

Perhaps if we had stopped after each of these incidents, we could have fixed the existential cracks in our global order. But we didn't stop.

Then came October 7th, Hamas' heinous attacks on Israel, and Israel's brutal response on Gaza.

We are in the midst of that tsunami still. Much is unpredictable, but some things we can predict. Neither Israel nor Palestine will ever be the same—except that they will have to coexist somehow. Authoritarian political and private forces are rising in the U.S. and EU. North-south and east-west divides are growing, too. The UN and multilateralism as we know it will never be the same.

Crises aren't disappearing and interconnectivity is here to stay—what happens "over there" has implications at home.

I don't have easy answers, obviously, so I wanted to frame this discussion around three key questions:
1. What must we do? Immediate, urgent actions.
2. What can we salvage of the systems we have had, the ways we've worked, the rules, norms, laws, and agendas, and practices that we've collectively created and shown to have value?
3. What must we do differently? Each of us in our own sectors and together across our sectors.

I'll share my views, drawing from my own experience in mediation and Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) work, and the experience we have gained through our ICAN partners in WASL. This is a global alliance of independent, locally rooted women-led peacebuilding organizations in 42 countries affected by conflict and violent extremism.

Who and what are women peacebuilders, you may ask?

I can give a million stories – but examples include my Syrian partners who, in 2011, began teaching their polarized communities how to engage in dialogue and exchange points of view, despite political, ethnic, or religious differences, to coexist and find common ground. As they did this, they also responded to children's education needs, helped victims of torture, and provided humanitarian relief to IDPs. When COVID came, they were the first to share information about hygiene and to provide PPE, and then when the earthquake came, they were first responders in communities that neither the regime nor the opposition nor the UN could reach.

These and others of our ICAN partners are frontline, often the first responders taking on the responsibility to mitigate and prevent conflicts, address humanitarian needs, and negotiate security issues.

They sit at—they *are*—the nexus of peace/development/humanitarian work. Their approaches are anchored in cultural, traditional, faith-based practices, as well as human rights and international law.

They are the raison d'être and the driving force of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.

I will focus on two interrelated areas of work to offer some answers, raise some difficult issues, and in this bleak scenario, also offer practical steps and opportunities for what we can do and must do.

1. **Stopping Wars, Preventing Wars: The Mediation, Negotiations and Peacemaking Spaces**

Why do we have so many ongoing wars?

Exclusive peace processes don't work. We are starting wars but not stopping them. We are still only bringing in the political and security actors, who don't hurt, so they don't ever reach a stalemate. They want power, but not responsibility. We are rewarding and legitimating violence.

Let's not assume any longer that technical or rational solutions are sufficient. Wars are replete with emotional and psycho-social fear and trauma. These emotions are always present in negotiations, so trust and transforming the relationships are critical; technical solutions will never hold if the underlying fear is still alive.

We have substantial evidence of how to do things differently.

Political will is essential for effective peacemaking but is not sufficient—what makes a key difference is inclusivity—the participation of civil society, especially women peacebuilders and movements as negotiators, contributors to the negotiations, to address root causes, to focus on the future and solutions, and to holding parties accountable to agreements they reach.

We have precedence of good practices. Yet, 23.5 years since UNSCR 1325 on WPS, women peacebuilders are still sidelined. We are suffering from the triple A syndrome of Adhockery, Amnesia, and Apathy—good practices are being forgotten, and there is apathy and inertia among mediation experts to change their ways.

There is a misalignment between international understanding of mediation versus local understanding of mediation: high-level secret dialogues versus locally led community-level dialogues.

Local actors are initiating humanitarian, security, and confidence-building measures, but are excluded from internationally led processes.

For example, in Yemen, one of our partners—the Abductees' Mothers Association—was negotiating the release of detainees using tribal connections and cultural methods. They got over 900 people released when the UN was still struggling to get one. Meanwhile, the release of detainees was meant to be a key confidence-building measure, yet our partners were never included or recognized by the UN to participate in their processes. We see this happen repeatedly.

Humanitarian, political, and security and WPS dialogues remain siloed: the minute a war breaks out, there are siloed spaces for addressing the humanitarian, security, and political issues. But for people impacted, these issues are intertwined.

This siloing normalizes the conflicts, instead of putting the urgency and pressure on ending the violence and addressing the disputes. For example, in Afghanistan, we need a comprehensive strategy that is both political and humanitarian—not just one or the other and each pulling in different directions.

We know that when local constituents—especially women—are brought into these spaces, they inject a reality check, an urgency and focus on the humanity and pain of ordinary people. They change the dynamics and put the pressure on to find solutions.

We saw this with victims' delegations in Colombia and women's peace coalitions in Liberia and elsewhere. Yet instead of bringing a small delegation of Sudanese women from the heart of the conflict to Jeddah to interrupt and disrupt the "baby step style" of ceasefire negotiations, we let the armed groups enjoy their 5-star treatment while they wage their war on innocent civilians.

Every issue is gendered, even ceasefire and security matters: we need diplomats and mediators to take this on.

So how can do this differently? We need to rethink and redesign mediation work to an "ecosystem" model, whereby different sectors and stakeholders are recognized and included.

These wars are societal, so let the peace process be a microcosm of the war itself. Bring the representatives of women peacebuilders and the doctors and the teachers and other cross-sections of society to negotiate the peace alongside the warring parties. Let the civilians hold their violent actors accountable.

In effect, if we are serious about ending wars, we need to recognize and bring the peace actors to the peace tables.

We, as existing global alliances (ICAN/WASL, Karama, WILPF) and the regional women's networks can be key to providing peacebuilders with the requisite knowledge of the issues at hand and mediation skills, combined with knowledge and access.

We also need rapid response mediation teams and deployments for conflict prevention. This again can come from the women in the mediation networks: the Commonwealth, the Mediterranean, the African, Pacific, and of course, the Nordic network.

These are just some immediate actions and changes we can make. We already have so much of it in place; we just need to put the ideas into practice.

2. The Humanitarian and Development Spaces: Getting Aid and Support to People Most in Need

As I said at the top, the demands for humanitarian and development aid are so high globally— we're facing multiple crises, limited resources, international fatigue, and right-wing disinterest. No single entity, local or international, can do it alone.

Local actors are the first and last responders, but they need internationals. So here, too, we need an ecosystem approach and equitable sharing of resources.

To give some context: in 2019, the OECD reported that local civil society organizations (CSOs) in Africa receive 2.1% of direct funds allocated for development and humanitarian aid. The remaining 97.9% is allocated to INGOs that subcontract 87% to local organizations to deliver the services.

A 2016 report from Syria showed how local CSOs delivered 75% of the aid in 2014 but often didn't get their basic costs covered. High salaries paid by the UN and INGOs hampered the ability of Syrian organizations to retain their staff. This is a story repeated everywhere.

When the internationals leave, they leave behind a weak local CSO infrastructure instead of a strong network of small organizations that could have scaled across and continued to serve their communities effectively.

Women, Peace, and Security in the humanitarian world means gender responsiveness in all aspects of operations as the norm, not the exception. This includes food, health, and sanitation supplies that meet differential needs of men and women, as well as having local women-led organizations as partners in delivery of aid.

It also means the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a key priority in the design and delivery of services and shelter, safe refuge, and camp design for women and children, and health services that have SGBV expertise.

Solutions exist but they aren't supported.

"Triple Nexus" funding: There are different funding streams for peacebuilding and humanitarian work, yet the problems are occurring in the same locale and the responders are often the same people.

For example, in Pakistan, our partner PAIMAN discovered women who were sewing suicide jackets. They brought them out, helped deradicalize them, provided economic literacy, and brought them into their social networks. During COVID, and then during last year's floods, these same women mobilized to do relief-work and flood warnings in remote areas.

We need flexible funding or to allocate 20% of budgets for emergency response to local organizations in fragile contexts.

Why? If peacebuilding organizations are unable to respond to immediate crises, the cost and implications are substantially more. They will lose trust from their communities. At times of great need, the vacuum is too often filled by extremist or militant movements who know they can buy loyalty, long-term.

But if peacebuilders who have community access and trust can step in to address people's needs in times of crises, it enhances their standing. It can push away violent extremist groups, and model leadership and good governance.

To conclude, the simple point is this: everything around us is changing.

We can give up and turn our back to the crises, or step in and face the new reality. Multilateralism may be waning, but interconnectivity remains. We can salvage the ideas, policies, and laws that we have already and build from them. We can build genuine equitable partnerships in a global ecosystem of civil society, governments, the UN, local and international organizations; each stakeholder has a strength to bring to the table.

We must not forget the urgency of the need for ceasefires now. Wars are entirely in our human control. While some profit from war, most do not. We cannot let might become right and wars become the norm.

I'm going to end with quotes from two very dear and brave feminist peace activists: a Palestinian and an Israeli-American who spoke at the UN Security Council 21 years ago.

Palestinian Maha Abu-Dayyeh Shamas said:

"Peace is made between peoples and not between leaders…If we leave it only to men, we get Israeli generals and Palestinians—who will not be defeated. There is no room to negotiate. The participation of women in any future peace process is essential to maintain connection to the realities of the relevant societies…Women have proven themselves to be more dedicated to the process of reaching out…We want to approach peacebuilding in a way that will promote long-term stability, to develop transparent procedures so that any peace will be one between individuals and not politicians."

And Israeli/American Terry Greenblatt said:

"We as women have developed the courage to cross the lines of difference drawn between us, which are also the lines drawn inside our heads. And the intelligence to do it safely, without a gun or a bomb, and to do it productively.

Most importantly, we are learning to shift our positions, finding ourselves moving towards each other, without tearing out our roots in the process. Even when we are women whose very existence and narrative contradicts each other, we will talk. We will not shoot…

We are willing to sit together—on the same side of the table—and together look at our complex joint history, with the commitment and intention of not getting up until —in respect and reciprocity—we can get up together and begin our new history and fulfill our joint destiny."

Imagine if we had heeded their advice then. Or now.

Thank you.