

The Ever-Present Cycle of Conflict and Peace Making

By Morgan Mitchell

In the 14th virtual WASL call, peacebuilders discussed the 'cycle of conflict' and how it affects their work on conflict prevention, de-escalation, and peacebuilding.

Around the world, women peacebuilders are working within their communities to de-escalate violent conflict and prevent the recurrence of conflict in post-conflict or transitional environments. However, their work is made increasingly more difficult by the framing of conflict resolution as a linear process. As one women peacebuilder from the UK explained, "Most governments see peace processes as a linear approach. The linear approach is seen as a 'get out clause' – as soon as one stage of the process breaks down the government reverts back to the beginning of the process. This pattern is used as an excuse to not move on." In contrast to this common idea, WASL partners suggest that conflict is actually a cycle and that most countries will experience multiple phases of the cycle, simultaneously. Governments must understand this dynamic in order to enable sustainable peace. The issue of institutional misframing has been exacerbated by COVID-19. A women peacebuilder from Colombia noted, "many of the resources that were originally dedicated to peace negotiations have now been redirected to COVID prevention." As a result, violent conflict has re-emerged.

Despite these challenges, women peacebuilders have seized opportunities to continue their work during COVID. The pandemic has created an occasion for communities to consider conflict prevention and, more specifically, how to address the fundamental elements of conflict within their communities. A woman peacebuilder from Afghanistan stated, "Conflict prevention requires us to tackle the root causes of conflict – poverty, lack of access to education, inequality, unemployment, lack of security and even the role of the international community in the country." This viewpoint was echoed by the experiences of a woman peacebuilder from Egypt when she added, "the pandemic is creating a rebuilding moment for all of our institutions by driving the underlying factors of extremism to the fore of dialogue within the society," emphasizing that COVID has offered communities an opportunity to rebuild better by engaging in dialogues focused on understanding the root causes of conflict and how to mitigate them.

As communities start to rebuild and systems and institutions begin to re-establish themselves, we will enter into a particularly salient moment where we will be called to adamantly promote women in every aspect of the cycle of conflict prevention and conflict resolution. A peacebuilder from Afghanistan marked the importance of this promotion by identifying women's political participation in all stages of conflict prevention and resolution as the primary focus of women peacebuilders post-COVID. A second pertinent idea is the concept of peacebuilding as a constant, ongoing process. A woman peacebuilder from Colombia commented on the increasing tension and conflict in the region resulting from the worsening economic situation due to COVID. Despite the clear need for COVID relief, this woman

peacebuilder emphasized that peacebuilding efforts cannot be sacrificed or diminished for any other cause. “In peace agreements, deep transformation with security forces must be discussed all the time,” she stated. Her sentiment was reiterated by a woman peacebuilder from the UK who emphasized that peace negotiations need to be “consistently sustained” in order to be successful.

During COVID WASL partners have been using various technologies to continue building peace and making impactful change in their communities. One woman peacebuilder from the UK explained that she had been using interactive messaging to spread informational health and safety messages to women in remote locations across multiple regions in Pakistan and Afghanistan. While this method has been slow, it has been instrumental in facilitating conversations between various groups of women between these two countries. Similarly, women peacebuilders in Afghanistan are using text messaging, mail outs and conventional letter writing to reach the communities they serve. Globally, women peacebuilders are increasing access to technology for other women while remaining healthy and safe and are advocating for flexible funding that can be directed towards a range of technologies and bolster programmatic success.

The pandemic has put pressures on women peacebuilders and the local and national environments that they work within, to reframe their view of conflict resolution and prevention and address the enabling factors of violent conflict at every level. The struggle for sustainable peace can never be relaxed. Governments must integrate a systematic, adaptable approach to de-escalation and conflict prevention as they recover from COVID for peace to be actualized and sustained and it is crucial that women be involved in every aspect of these processes. Additionally, as women peacebuilders continue to work in spaces of conflict prevention, it is critical to involve communities in identifying early warning signs of conflict and extremism. As one woman peacebuilder from Turkey pointed out, “communities can see conflict forming early on, so conversations with these communities will inform us of conflicts brewing and how to transform them.”