Women, Peace and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age: Opportunities and risks to advance women's meaningful participation and protect their rights

Policy Brief

Advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) present both an extraordinary opportunity and an extraordinary threat for the fulfillment of women's rights and gender equality. On the one hand, new technologies can bring education and life-saving information to wide audiences. They can elevate women's voices and raise awareness about their priority issues. They can create more diverse spaces for civil society strategizing, activism, and participation in political processes and peace negotiations. On the other hand, ICTs can be used to perpetuate exclusion, misogyny, sexist violence, and harmful gender norms.

In the context of armed conflict and peacemaking, ICTs are still primarily perceived as a threat to international peace and security. However, mediators are increasingly utilizing ICTs to facilitate peace processes, from using instant messages to coordinate between negotiating parties and monitor ceasefires in Syria, to creating public online platforms to inform official peace talks in Colombia and Libya.[1]

Greater inclusion of historically marginalized groups – such as women – is considered a potential advantage of using ICTs in mediation. Yet, in practice, online spaces often "reproduce, and often amplify, the patriarchal structures, practices, and culture of contemporary life."[2] Women continue to face political, financial, technical, and cultural barriers that prevent them from using ICTs effectively for greater inclusion in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. At the same time, literature on ICTs and peacebuilding mostly focuses on how ICTs may be helpful to mediators.[3]

To complement existing analyses and resources, GNWP and the ICT4Peace Foundation conducted research on ICTs with a focus on women activists and peacebuilders. This research examines how women peacebuilders across 20 countries use ICTs to advance the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda[4] and demand a seat at the negotiating table. Interviews with women peacebuilders and analysis of existing legal and policy

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[1] Andreas Hirblinger, "Peaceworks: Digital Inclusion in Mediated Peace Processes. How Technology Can Enhance Participation", United States Institute of Peace, September 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/20200929-pw_168-digital_inclusion_in_mediated_peace_processes_how_technology_can_enhance_participation-pw.pdf.

[2] Louise Arimatsu, "Silencing Women in the Digital Age", *Cambridge International Law Journal* 8, no. 2 (December 1, 2019): 187–217, https://doi.org/10.4337/cilj.2019.02.02.

[3] For example, the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs created the "Peacemaker" – an online mediation support tool dedicated to peacemaking professionals, available here: https://peacemaker.un.org/.

[4] The WPS agenda provides a valuable framework for this analysis because it sets out clear obligations for Member States and other actors around four pillars: women's participation, protection, prevention and relief and recovery. The WPS agenda highlights the importance of *meaningful* participation – going beyond simply having women in the (virtual or physical) room.

framework on digitalization, cyber security, and WPS yielded the following key findings and recommendations, which are analyzed in greater detail in the research report, which will be published shortly.

Key Findings

What ICT tools do women peacebuilders use?

- **Accessibility and security are two primary concerns that guide women's choice of ICT tools and platforms.** They prefer tools that are accessible with limited internet connection, allow for the transmission of audio and visual messages, and have clear privacy settings. For example, they favor platforms such as WhatsApp, Signal, and Facebook because they require low bandwidth. Women are also increasingly using advanced security settings on existing platforms – for example, by creating "safe spaces" through password-protected, invitation-only Zoom meetings.

- **Women peacebuilders predominantly rely on conventional ICTs and platforms to support their work and often combine digital and non-digital tools.** They use platforms such as WhatsApp, Signal, and Facebook creatively, live-streaming events on Facebook, sharing information about threats and violence on WhatsApp, and organizing discussions on peacebuilding with grassroots women using the voice messaging function.

- **Most of the women peacebuilders interviewed did not use advanced technological solutions, such as artificial intelligence or big data mining in their work.** This is in contrast to the increasing use of these technologies by mediators and points to the need to better adapt these solutions to the needs of women peacebuilders, especially those who work directly with local communities.

- **The COVID-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on how women peacebuilders engage with ICTs.** Prior to the pandemic, many of the women peacebuilders who had access to digital tools were reluctant to use them. The pandemic forced these women to make use of the available technology. As a result, they uncovered unexpected advantages to using ICTs. For example, their ability to grow and strengthen women's networks and movements at the local, national, regional and global levels. The pandemic also shed light on the gaps and barriers women face when it comes to safe access to technology, making this a critical time to make ICT policies more inclusive and gender-responsive.

How do women peacebuilders use ICTs?

- **Women peacebuilders overwhelmingly use ICTs to amplify their communications' reach.** They use ICTs to strengthen their advocacy and gain access to decision-makers, to demand meaningful participation and respect for their rights. They also use it to communicate with their communities and promote the values of peace and non-violent conflict resolution. Finally, one of the most appreciated uses of ICTs was the ability to strengthen cross-border and intergenerational women's networks and build international solidarity.

- **Using ICTs to collect data, document violations, and manage information is an emerging trend.** Increasingly, women use ICTs to document human rights violations. Solutions that allow anyone to submit reports of violations using both digital and non-digital means (e.g., text messages) are becoming more popular.[5] This information is critical in demanding accountability. It is also essential in reconciliation and transitional justice

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[5] The Ushahidi platform, which allows to collect and organize reports of violent incidents from text messages, emails, and Twitter, is one such example.

processes. Women also use ICTs to collect and analyze information about safety and security in their communities such as in monitoring levels of violence.

- **Women use ICTs to provide services that promote women's empowerment, health, and safety.** For example, women-led organizations deliver life-saving services online, such as psychosocial counseling and livelihood support. In the Philippines, women used online learning systems to provide educational opportunities to women and men who are former combatants to support their demobilization. Women across the world used ICT platforms with a wide reach – in particular Facebook and Whatsapp – to disseminate educational materials on different issues, as well as reliable information, for example, about COVID-19.

- **ICTs are crucial tools for women peacebuilders to raise, access, and manage funds.** Women peacebuilders have used crowdfunding platforms to support their work. A woman peacebuilder shared that greater online visibility helped her attract donors. Given the chronic underfunding of women-led peacebuilding organizations, the use of ICTs to fundraise should be further explored and supported.

- **In peace negotiations, women's use of ICTs is still limited and does not live up to its potential.** Women peacebuilders rely on basic ICTs – including radio, text messages, WhatsApp, and social media – to share information and raise awareness about peace processes. While mediators have used online consultation platforms – such as the *Mesa de Conversaciones* in Colombia – to promote a more inclusive and human rights-based approach to peace processes, further reflection is needed to make such consultations meaningful. In Colombia, the sheer volume of submissions (including fake and "spam" messages) made it difficult to analyze and meaningfully include them.

- **In peace agreement implementation, women have used ICTs to build broad-based support for the agreements and hold governments and all parties to the agreement accountable for their implementation.** Young women in the Philippines have organized massive social media campaigns to encourage young people to vote and support the Bangsamoro Organic Law, which institutionalized the peace agreement between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. In South Sudan, women are using social media to pressure the government to implement the peace agreement – in particular, the 35 per cent quota for women in all elected and appointed positions.

What challenges do women face when using ICTs?

- **Internet access and connectivity continue to be a major problem for women, especially in rural and conflict-affected communities.** Globally, there are 200 million fewer women than men online.[6] In many conflict-affected countries, the cost of access to ICTs is extremely high, which is more prohibitive for women due to their financial dependency on men and the chronic underfunding of their work. Women peacebuilders stress that costs are often inflated by government policies and excessive taxing, which limits free speech and shrinks civic space. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1GB of mobile data costs over 20 per cent of the average monthly national income.[7]

- **High illiteracy rates and lack of ICT training among women and girls, especially in conflict-affected contexts, is a persistent barrier.** Women often do not know how to

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[6] Louise Arimatsu, "Silencing Women in the Digital Age*," *Cambridge International Law Journal* 8, no. 2 (December 1, 2019): 187–217, https://doi.org/10.4337/cilj.2019.02.02.
[7] Alliance for Affordable Internet, "Mobile Broadband Pricing. Data for 2020", https://a4ai.org/extra/baskets/A4AI/2020/mobile_broadband_pricing_gni

use the Internet and online tools. Even those with basic digital literacy do not know how to access the Internet *safely*, which is particularly important when discussing conflict and security. The lack of digital literacy is compounded by the lack of basic literacy and language skills among women, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas. As a result, women from ethnic minorities, who do not speak the majority language, are often marginalized in online discussions.

- **In addition to infrastructural and financial barriers, patriarchal gender norms prevent many women from accessing the Internet.** Women often do not own their own mobile phones or laptops and use their husbands' or children's devices. They also spend more time providing unpaid domestic and care labor, leaving them less time for online engagement. Some of the activists interviewed noted that women might face criticism or even violence from spouses and in-laws if they discuss peace and security online.

- **Even when women and young women have access to the Internet, their ability to pursue their goals is limited by the security threats and human rights violations they face.** Women peacebuilders provided numerous examples of abuse, ranging from abusive comments and messages to smear campaigns and death threats targeted at women activists. Such threats are aggravated in conflict-affected contexts, where women speaking out against conflict are often regarded as enemies or troublemakers. One woman activist noted, "*it is so easy to be targeted on social media. You just need to write something healthy and anti-war*'". Women also fear surveillance and retaliation for their peacebuilding work from their own governments. Some interviewees also expressed concern that online surveillance may translate into physical harm and violations of their human rights. They cited examples of activists whose profiles were surveilled by the government, which resulted in warnings, threats, or being placed on government blacklists

- **There are no adequate, gender-responsive, and functioning accountability mechanisms for gender-based violence and violations of women's rights online.** Most often, there is no legislation criminalizing online abuse. If it exists it is in many instances gender-blind and not implemented. Social media platforms themselves ignore women's complaints and rarely if ever, respond to instances of sexist abuse online. This is in line with the findings of the report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women on online abuse. The report emphasized that "human rights, including women's human rights, protected offline should be protected online." It particularly called attention to the range of forms of gender-based violence, which women face online, and which violate their human rights, and called to "apply a gender perspective to all online forms of violence, which are usually criminalized in a gender-neutral manner."[8]

- **Many women peacebuilders believe that, in their current form, ICTs are not well-suited to achieving their peacebuilding goals due to the lack of "human connection."** Women peacebuilders highlighted that building trust and peacebuilding dialogue is more difficult online, due to the shorter duration of online meetings (to avoid "Zoom fatigue") and the less direct contact between online participants. A woman activist also noted that the radicalization of discourse online makes it more difficult to discuss sensitive issues in a constructive manner. **The lack of personal connection also contributed to women feeling that they were not taken seriously by decision-makers in online spaces.** They

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[8] Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, "38th session of the Human Rights Council, Statement by Ms. Ms. Dubravka Šimonović, Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences", 21 June 2018. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23235&LangID=E

lacked the space "around" the negotiating room, in which they could build personal relationships, advance their advocacy, and influence peacebuilding outcomes over time.

How do normative frameworks on ICTs integrate gender and women's perspectives?

- **In response to the new threats and opportunities created by advances in ICT, legal and normative frameworks have emerged. However, they most often lack a gender lens.** As discussed in more detail in the research report, the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly have adopted a number of resolutions on the impact of technologies on human rights and sustainable development. In spite of some references to the specific impact on women and women's access to ICTs in these resolutions, most discussions of ICTs in the context of peace and security at the UN Security Council are not gender-responsive.[9] When gender-responsive provisions are included, they are largely focused on emerging vulnerabilities and risks posed to women and girls. Barriers to access and use are not consistently addressed, although more recent documents do consider lack of adequate infrastructure, particularly in rural or remote areas. Positive and productive uses of ICTs by women appear least commonly. Overall, considerations of gender as related to ICTs lack both *consistency* and *depth.*

- **This** is similarly the case for the 2021 reports by both the Open-Ended Working Group on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security and the Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International security.

Recommendations to policy-makers, ICT companies, and other stakeholders

1. **Significantly increase investment in universal and affordable access to the Internet, in line with target 9.C of the Sustainable Development Goals, and take proactive measures to guarantee internet access for women and girls, in particular women and girls refugees, internally displaced persons, and those living in conflict-affected and rural areas.**

    1.1. **Member States** should ensure affordable rates for Internet and mobile use by (1) negotiating favorable rates with mobile operators and ICT companies; (2) removing high taxes imposed on internet accessibility; and (3) ensure access to the Internet for the most excluded and vulnerable groups, including those affected by conflicts, as well as refugees and internally displaced persons, for example by subsidizing internet fees.

    1.2. **Member States** should include ICT financing for women peacebuilders and activists in their budgets and policies.

    1.3. **Member States** should also address underlying gender norms that prevent women's meaningful access and use of the ICTs, such as the unequal burden of unpaid care work and exclusion of young women from education. This should be done through adoption and implementation of gender-responsive legal and policy frameworks.

    1.4. **Member States, ICT companies and donors** should pro-actively reach out to and work with local leaders, indigenous communities, grassroots women and youth peacebuilders, and other groups that have been marginalized or excluded from access to the Internet to identify and implement the appropriate solution for their inclusion.

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[9] This includes the three Arria Formula meetings and the June 2021 Open Debate on maintaining international peace and security in cyberspace held by the UN Security Council.

1.5. **ICT companies** should provide free phone and internet access for women peacebuilders, mediators, advocates, and people affected by conflicts, recognizing their critical roles in society.

1.6. **ICT companies** should make access to knowledge-sharing platforms and software free of charge for civil society organizations and activists.

1.7. **Civil society** should continue and expand their advocacy for the provision of accessible internet, and innovative initiatives to provide internet access to diverse women, such as running women-only internet cafés, to give equal opportunities to those without mobile phones.

1.8. **Donors, including the UN, Member States, regional organizations, and international NGOs,** should increase their investment in the use of ICTs in humanitarian and peace processes – including by providing dedicated budget lines for purchase of necessary equipment, phone and mobile credit, the establishment of safe spaces for internet use, such as internet cafés dedicated for women, etc.

2. **Promote and facilitate inclusive design and development of ICT products and services, including by encouraging and supporting diverse women and girls to pursue careers in the ICT sector and by conducting consultations with diverse groups of end-users of ICT products, including women and girls living in conflict-affected communities.**

   2.1. **ICT companies** should implement proactive measures to attract and employ more diverse women and ensure their inclusion in the design, creation and testing of products and tools. They should also collect gender-disaggregated data about the use of their products, their accessibility, and risks they may create.

   2.2. **Universities and educational institutions** should implement proactive measures to promote the recruitment of women in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics departments, and provide female students with support to enter the ICT industry, to ensure new technologies can be created equitably and with women in mind.

   2.3. **Civil society** working on ICTs should cultivate solidarity, cooperation, and exchange of experiences among themselves, as well as with women-led peacebuilding organizations. For example, they should create digital hubs to share information, and make resources on issues related to cyber-security and effective use of ICTs available in diverse local languages.

   2.4. **Donors, including the UN, Member States and international NGOs** should support civil society to create their own ICT platforms and products, including safe spaces for dialogue and data collection platforms.

3. **Strengthen the protection of women's rights in the under-regulated online space, by adopting concrete laws, policies and protocols to ensure their safety, in line with existing legal frameworks to protect women's and girls' rights.**

   3.1. **Member States, international and regional organizations** should review and update existing laws and commitments related to the international and regional frameworks on women's rights to make sure they adequately address the new forms of threats and violence faced by women online. This includes commitments made under: the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, National Action Plans on WPS, and Maputo Protocol, among others. The review should be conducted in consultation with civil society, including diverse women and youth organizations.

3.2. **Member States, international and regional organizations** should – based on the above-mentioned review – adopt new protocols, policies or strategies to explicitly address online hate speech, harassment, and abuse, especially against women activists and peacebuilders.

3.3. **Member States** should ensure transparency in their negotiations and contracts with technology companies, and ensure that these are in the interest of the population, and do not leave space for discrimination or abuse against the most vulnerable, including conflict-affected women and communities.

3.4. **Member States** should ensure that digital security laws are not used to criminalize opposition, censor critical voices, or foster a culture of censorship. They should also introduce clear transparency and accountability laws to reduce the government powers of surveillance, especially of civil society.

3.5. **Member States, international and regional organizations** should show support for women who face major repercussions for active participation using ICTs, by publicly condemning instances of attacks and hate speech against women activists online.

3.6. **Member States, international and regional organizations** should join civil society in putting pressure on ICT and social media companies to adopt more robust policies to prevent the spread of hateful narratives and misinformation, which incite and promote violence. This also includes reforms to user engagement and algorithmic recommendation engines that currently facilitate connections between extremist users.

3.7. **ICT companies and social media platforms** should increase content regulation and review their policies to ensure strict zero-tolerance for hate speech, abuse, and incitement to violence, including sexual and gender-based violence.

3.8. **ICT companies and social media platforms** should conduct gender-responsive training on preventing online abuse, including sexual and gender-based abuse and harassment, for their staff. The training should be mandatory for staff and management at all levels.

3.9. **ICT companies and social media platforms** should work with governments, the UN and civil society to create safe and effective mechanisms for reporting online risks and threats, and ensuring accountability of the perpetrators.

3.10. **ICT companies and social media platforms and Member States** should collaborate through formal private-public partnerships, to create guidelines for safe ICT use that are region- and context-specific, and have a particular focus on women's safety online.

3.11. **Women's organizations, journalists, women activists, and civil society** should continue and amplify their efforts to build an international solidarity movement to highlight and demand accountability for hate speech and violence and harassment against women online.

3.12. **Women's organizations, journalists, women activists, and civil society** should form pressure groups and advocate on the issue of respecting women's rights online and introducing stronger restrictions and content control to prevent hate speech and abuse.

3.13. **Civil society** should continue their efforts to educate women about their rights online and the right to access to the Internet. Civil society should also continue to provide free legal assistance to women via legal support centers to hear and claim their rights through ICT access and online safety.

4. Invest in programs to strengthen the capacities of women and youth to access and effectively use online spaces, especially given the online nature of the new normal in the context of COVID-19.

4.1. **Member States** should develop concrete strategies for translating policy processes (including peace negotiations) to online spaces. These should clearly outline the norms for the use of online spaces to ensure their safety, and be accompanied by the creation of gender-sensitive infrastructure to enable broad-base access and capacity-building for conflict-affected women and youth and increase their participation in online spaces effectively.

4.2. **Member States, civil society and international organizations** should provide capacity building on the use of online platforms to marginalized and conflict-affected groups, in particular women living in conflict-affected areas, women refugees and internally displaced persons. These should include dedicated courses on the use of technologies for advocacy, communications and campaigning, research, monitoring, mediation, and participation in peace processes. These could also include dedicated training for women activists and women's rights organizations to use more advanced technologies, including blockchain and artificial intelligence.

4.3. **Member States** should ensure access to digital literacy education in communities, including through integrating it in school curricula, and allocating national budget into capacity-building programs for women. This will also strengthen the economic empowerment of women, often linked to their access to online tools.

4.4. **Donors, including the UN, Member States and international NGOs** should encourage and support the inclusion of ICT use and capacity-building components in peacebuilding programs. They should also support the creation of ICT specialist positions within peacebuilding organizations, especially those operating at the national and local level, to build their organizational capacity.