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Women, peace and security in the time of corona

*With over [70% of the global healthcare workforce made up of women](#) and many more shouldering caregiving roles, women are at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19. But the consequences and new realities of our world have [gendered implications that need to be understood](#). **Sanam Naraghi Anderlini (LSE)** examines these impacts, the reality for women living through this pandemic, and the relevance of the women, peace and security agenda.*

2020 was always going to be a big year for the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda; 20 years since the UN Security Council's adoption of [resolution 1325](#), the first of the [ten UN resolutions](#) that put women front and centre of the global peace and security agenda; 20 years of activism and advocacy, of evolving academic scholarship and advances – albeit incremental – in diplomatic and development practices; 20 years of fighting against a mix of ad-hoc practices, apathy, and amnesia to get gendered analyses of crises and gender responsiveness in programming, to get systematic inclusion of women peacebuilders in peace processes, and to amplify the different perspectives, redefinitions, and priorities that women can bring to the very essence of the terms 'peace' and 'security.'



Finland's Prime Minister, Sanna Marin, and senior ministers at a press conference on the COVID-19 outbreak, 27 February 2020. Photo: [Finnish Government](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

The year is here, but so is the coronavirus pandemic. As it engulfs us across continents, forcing not only cancellations of events and stagnation in activities, but also the prioritisation of humanitarian efforts, many may question the relevance of WPS work in the time of corona.

Interestingly, this pandemic – with its multifaceted security dimensions – is demonstrating the centrality and prescience of the WPS agenda to contemporary global peace and security challenges. In 2000 when a global movement of women's rights and peace activists mobilised to nudge the Security Council towards [Resolution 1325](#), their rationale was clear. The Bosnian war and Rwandan genocide demonstrated the inadequacy of the existing global peace and security systems to tackle emerging civil and transnational wars. The scepter of rising global organised crime, climate-induced struggles over natural resources, and other 'nontraditional threats' was looming over the horizon. Before the advent of anti-retroviral drugs, diseases like HIV/AIDS and the devastation it could pose to the social and economic fabric of societies, were chief among those threats.

The text of SCR 1325 may not reflect many of these issues in detail, but in calling for human security that is people-centric and a gendered lens, the resolution and the agenda that has developed does convey the paradigm shift needed in understanding and tackling contemporary global peace and security issues. The issues that are so often called for by the WPS community are profoundly relevant to this pandemic too.

Gendered analysis

Pragmatically speaking, the WPS agenda calls for a gendered analysis of the causes and consequences of crises, and the mapping of stakeholders and actors. This analysis is crucial to ensuring adequate preparation, mitigation, response and recovery from crises. It is deeply relevant to the pandemic too.

Sex-disaggregated data is crucial to understanding the impact of the virus. Thus far, data from China, Italy, South Korea and Iran reveal a stark difference between male and female fatalities. In South Korea, [more women than men contract the disease, but more men are dying](#). In Italy, [80% of the fatalities have been male](#), meanwhile studies from China's Center for Disease Control show that 64% of deaths in China have been male (up to February 2020).

The reasons, according to medical experts, are not entirely clear. Hypotheses so far point to two factors, lifestyle and biology, although there should be some [caution here until current sex-disaggregated data is complete](#).

In terms of lifestyles, men make up the majority of smokers and are more prone to related illnesses than women. Meanwhile, as the [Washington Post reports](#), the biological dimensions are notable:

“Years of research have found that [women generally have stronger immune systems](#) than men and are better able to fend off infections. The X chromosome contains a large number of immune-related genes, and because women have two of them, they [gain an advantage in fighting disease](#), according to a recent study in the journal Human Genomics.”

Gender analysis is also useful for the prevention and mitigation of diseases in the long term. Perhaps there is still time and a need to develop messaging tailored to men. These statistics should also inform the response and recovery strategies needed. The prospect of emerging from the crisis with new female-headed households, or a higher ratio of elderly women living alone, has profound socio-economic implications. The scenarios need to be considered to reduce longer-term and further insecurity.

Gender sensitivity – understanding the differential implications on men and women of policies – is also relevant. In the immediate term, as the lockdown and work at home rules come into force, the absence of childcare for women or couples involved in essential services is a key challenge. Who stays home? What if a parent contracts the virus? What support systems can and should be in place to enable and assist people, rather than increasing stress and hampering them?

We have to anticipate and assume that as in other crisis context, the risks of men perpetrating violence against women increase with the stresses of unemployment and cramped living conditions. In China at the height of the quarantine, there was a threefold [increase in calls to women's shelters regarding violence](#) at home. [For those in already abusive relationships, the situation is particularly dire](#), if quarantines and lockdowns are long term or they become unemployed in the meantime.

This, too, requires responses, including the option of ensuring shelters are open and able to receive people. Other strategies, including direct engagement with and messaging targeting men and women who are abusers is also essential with a view to preventing the violence and warning them of the consequences.

The world's conflicts continue

Second, there is a political and geopolitical dimension to this unfolding tale. [Daesh may have ordered its supporters to stay](#) home and the Saudis have restricted air travel, but they are still conducting aerial bombings in Yemen, while Houthi forces have gained valuable ground. In Syria, Russian and Turkish proxies are still fighting. In Libya, the broken state continues to break further. It would seem obvious that if so many other industries are pausing, war would too. The coronavirus should and could be an effective catalyst for containing the violence by calling for immediate ceasefires globally, [as the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres did on 23 March](#).

In the past famines and other health epidemics have prompted ceasefires, to enable the passage of humanitarian aid. Similarly, corona-related aid could be an incentive now to stop the fighting. The provision of assistance and the need for cooperation across territories could help humanise relations and build confidence to pursue more sustainable peace.

Syrian and [Yemeni women peacebuilders are already advocating for such measures](#). But with major powers dealing with their domestic challenges and confinements at home, few are paying attention to the ongoing conflicts in the world. Women peacebuilders are among those few. They remind us that if the violence continues and the displaced have no safe shelter and are forced to flee, the virus will continue to migrate and spread.

The humanitarian community is already faced with this daunting task of containing the coronavirus in war-affected settings, be it among the millions of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh or the displaced Syrians sheltering in bombed out buildings and olive groves. UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), WHO and other agencies are doing their best to prepare and mitigate the impact, but given the lack of basic health and hygiene care and the density of refugee or internally displaced person (IDP) settings, the crisis will hit those populations with more devastating consequences.

Even if there is access, corona prevention messages have to be contextualised. There is no point in telling people to wash their hands with soap and water if there is neither soap nor water. If people believe that witchcraft or minority groups are the source of the virus, it requires local cultural knowledge to frame social distancing and hygiene messaging such that it is effective, does not do harm, and helps mitigate the harm against those accused.

Women's participation

This brings in a third dimension of the WPS agenda; the call for supporting women's participation and agency in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding. As with conflicts, during this pandemic in places where governments are overwhelmed or simply unable to provide the care needed, local citizens, often women, are at the frontlines of this crisis. This mirrors the experiences of women who are often the invisible first responders and peacebuilders in war zones, and who were the spirit and the inspiration for SCR 1325 in the 1990s.

Women not only comprise 70% of the global health care workforce, they also dominate the community social work and civil society sectors, and they too are stepping up to the threats. In Iraq, for example, Fatima Al Bahadly, teacher, peacebuilder and founder of the Ferdows Foundation is leading the charge in community awareness-raising and care about corona. Al Bahadly has spent 20 years addressing the impact of wars, sanctions, occupation and violent extremists. Despite threats and accusations from the state to the shadow state, she has persisted. Now that corona is seeping in, Fatima and her team are already organised, mobilised and serving their community.

She is not alone. In Liberia, Cerue Garlo, a veteran of the 2003 women's peace movement, is also gearing up to tackle the impending coronavirus threat, with public warning and hygiene messaging on community radio. While in Pakistan, Mossarat Qadeem of [Paiman Trust](#) is drawing on her network of volunteer women who usually work on preventing violent extremism, to spread awareness about mitigating the impact of corona in communities that are already affected but rarely served by the state. "We are producing home made hand sanitisers," said Qadeem on a Skype call, "and providing women with material to produce masks."

In Yemen too, Muna Luqman, founder of the [Food for Humanity Foundation](#) and advocate for inclusive peace talks, is also pivoting her peacebuilding work towards mitigating corona.

In each instance, they bring a unique set of skills and resources. They are experts in allaying fears and finding practical solutions, in building community and reaching the most vulnerable, in reminding people of the gendered aspects of this pandemic while raising awareness and working to prevent a rise in violence against women. They are also sensitive to racism and hatred that might arise. They have established local networks and structures and they have access and trust among the people and the authorities. Given their familiarity with local contexts and cultures, they are able to tailor messaging to their local audiences both through online platforms and local media.

These local actors are essential to the response and recovery process. Their knowledge can inform and improve interventions. So their participation and inclusion in the assessment of each context, decision making, design and delivery of interventions is crucial.

Women in politics

The WPS agenda also calls for greater participation of women in politics and matters of peace and security. The corona crisis is revealing the relevance of this call. “Across the world,” [writes Jessie Tu for Women’s Agenda](#), an Australian news site, “more than ever people are looking for strong, inspiring leadership. Three incredible Prime Ministers are demonstrating particularly heartening excellent resolve during this pandemic. Oh, and they just happen to be women.”

From Norway and Germany to Iceland, New Zealand and Colombia, it is notable how female leaders at national and regional levels have been the first to take proactive, preventive measures, with compassion and empathy. These women have been the first leaders to introduce containment policies to reduce the spread of the virus, significant budget allocations for health and social welfare and comprehensive financial packages to reduce economic hardships.

Finland’s Prime Minister [Sanna Marin triggered an Emergency Powers Act](#) to take control of the country’s pharmaceutical and medical equipment production and deploy it in the fight against coronavirus. [Norway’s Erna Solberg held a press conference for children](#) to answer their questions and allay their fears. While in Colombia, Bogota’s Mayor Claudia Lopez has been a leading figure in South America. She initiated social isolation policies, restricted travel into the city, and [has widened Bogota’s bicycle paths to reduce congestion](#) on public transport and improve air quality to mitigate respiratory diseases.

Redefining security and resources for peace

Women peacebuilders (WPBs) and human rights defenders (WHRDs), feminist activists and scholars have long been at the forefront of challenging traditional concepts of state and national security that are overly dependent on militarisation, while advocating for human security approaches. The recent rise of the ‘[feminist foreign policy](#)’ as an extension of the WPS agenda, has captured some of these ideas. But the WPS agenda is not simply about equal rights in the status quo. It calls for transformative equality and paradigmatic shifts in concepts of security, by simply asking questions such as ‘what makes us feel secure? How do traditional national security concepts relate to our lives?’ It is a means of democratising the discourse of national security to align with new realities.

These discussions imply significant shifts in priorities, values, resource allocation, and skill sets that put the public’s wellbeing at the core of national security. Here the pandemic and the traditional WPS agenda merge.

Corona is revealing the rotten state of our states. Economically for forty years we have witnessed our health and education and social welfare systems being decimated in the name of ‘small government’ and the magic of privatisation. We have undervalued public service and overvalued private wealth.

Meanwhile, since 9/11, we have become immersed in securitised and militarised societies. The gods of national security can never be questioned. Their budgets are bottomless, while those for social welfare are thinned out. Yet in this perfect and horrific storm of the corona pandemic, the military and their high-tech equipment are irrelevant to the frontline fight against this threat. It is our doctors, nurses, and caregivers who are fighting this fight. Yet the gap in resources is chilling. In mid-March, for example, as the pandemic dominated world news, [the Pentagon unveiled its £844 million hypersonic, unmanned missile](#).

At the same time, the US federal government was unable to produce or provide enough masks for healthcare workers treating patients. It is a stark example of the gap between actual unfunded national security needs and the overly resourced imagined ones. It is also rich in irony, for the rhetoric of war is being used, yet none of the urgency or resources dedicated to fighting wars offensively or defensively are being deployed to fight this actual threat.

The pandemic is also revitalising criticism of the ballooning military budgets and the cost and carnage of the forever wars, while calling for investment in health, education and public infrastructures. As it ravages our healthcare systems and governments race to stem the resultant economic and social devastation, those questions are even more pertinent. Will defence budgets be requisitioned and reallocated to support the frontline health care system and unemployed or will they remain intact as other services are slashed? Why are we awash in weapons and military equipment, but short on medics and masks?

If anything corona is a warning shot to humanity, signalling that as we globalise and urbanise even more, the risk of new strains of virulent and deadly viruses will grow. Meanwhile, the impact of climate change and extreme weather patterns will also still affect us. These security issues do not need weapons of mass destruction. They require investing in human security priorities ranging from our health and social welfare systems, to revitalised civil society and community organisations able to cope with and mitigate these risks.

This is also a time to reimagine public service. Instead of military service we could be establishing national social service, so that future generations have skills ranging from emergency response to health care provision. We need to be flexible and agile, yet resilient.

Or as Sri Lankan peacebuilder, Visaka Dharmadasa says, “It is time for governments to stop putting so much into taking lives, and focus on saving lives.” This is the goal in fighting the corona pandemic. After all is said and done, it is also the essence of the WPS agenda.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE. It first appeared at the [Women, Peace and Security blog](#).