

COVID-19 AND THE IMPACT ON SOUTH SUDANESE WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS



A collaboration between sixteen South Sudanese women peacebuilders accompanied by the Unyoke Foundation

THE AUTHORS



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Ultimately, the greatest lesson that COVID-19 can teach humanity is that we are all in this together.

Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw,
South Sudanese women peacebuilder





pictures are provided by
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COVID-19 and the impact on South Sudanese women peacebuilders

The COVID-19 pandemic is much more than just a health crisis that has affected the progress in human development globally. As the world battles this novel corona virus and its impacts, South Sudan has been negatively affected more than any other country in the region! The youngest nation, besides her struggle with political, economic and civil strife, is threatened by catastrophes such as the corona virus, floods, poverty and death. These factors have a devastating impact on South Sudan's vulnerable population. In the midst of such a turmoil, she could not sustain the lockdown measures prescribed by the World Health Organization in the advent of the pandemic as one respondent articulated:

COVID-19 has brought South Sudan to a standstill! After a short lockdown of three weeks, borders had to be opened for imports particularly food and business had to resume because government could not bail out civilians

Ayak Chol Deng,
South Sudanese women peacebuilder

The South Sudanese women peacebuilders who were already fighting for their space in a patriarchal society, are now facing a double monster in the hands of men and the novel corona virus. In Juba and other parts of South Sudan, women peacebuilders are persistently trying to find and lift their voices through different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) where they work. Their biggest limitation, however, is underrepresentation in the government that is a geriatric space with no new faces. Six of the young women peacebuilders who share their challenges and recommendations here come from different refugee camps within Uganda and are students and volunteers with different local organizations. With the spread of the corona virus and its impact, their vulnerability is increasing.

In late May 2020, Unyoke Foundation requested the South Sudanese young women peacebuilders to share their contributions in regards to the challenges they face at the frontline of the virus and their suggestions to address these. The request was made in order to contribute to a virtual session focusing on women peacebuilders on the frontline of the COVID-19 crisis. The session was organized by the Executive Director of Conducive Space for Peace, Mie Roesdahl and attended virtually by members of the Nordic Women Mediators Network.

Thirteen out of the sixteen women who form part of three cohorts accompanied by the Unyoke Foundation in South Sudan and Uganda, shared the challenges they face, and the suggestions they believe would alleviate or lessen their burdens.

It is important to note that the women whose contributions are reflected here are ten young women from Juba and other parts of South Sudan and six from different refugee camps in Uganda. The key challenges and recommendations they share are presented in this report.

"Peacebuilding is more important than ever as government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic fuel existing conflict dynamics such as marginalization, inequality, unemployment, stigmatization, excessive use of force by the state institutions, human rights violation and misuse of power. Local peacebuilders working in communities in conflict affected countries are playing a key role in mitigating these conflicts. They are used to working in the nexus between peace, development and humanitarian needs, and they have legitimacy and relationships that allow them to engage even when it demands creative adaptations. But local peacebuilders and particularly women peacebuilders, are facing a lot of challenges in doing their crucial peacebuilding work at this time."

Mie Roesdahl,
executive director at Conducive Space for Peace

KEY CHALLENGES

INCREASING CASES OF GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN COMMUNITIES

Society says that it is alright for a woman to be strong with the stoic and stiff lip of an African woman when abused! Most women peacebuilders of all ages experience silent emotional and physical abuse like gang rape and battering that go unreported. Economic hardships coupled with the confinement measures imposed by the government have put the safety of women at risk in their own homes. More so, women's roles know no pandemic! Women continue to carry out the domestic work as men stay idle during this lockdown. This is so heavy especially on the women in the refugee camps who have to toil for food to supplement their reduced rations. It therefore, suffices to say that every burden that has been born by women prior to the pandemic, has increased multiple folds.

Gender based violence cases have risen especially within the refugee communities and women peacebuilders cannot go to solve these cases due to restrictive measures on social gathering.

Ayoo Irene,
South Sudanese women peacebuilder

Male leaders exercise inequality that prevent women to exercise their capacities and strive for potentialities in their communities.

Rose Achindhel,
South Sudanese women peacebuilder

INTENSIFICATION OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

The prevailing gender inequality is a big threat to women peacebuilders in South Sudan as the impacts of COVID-19 are not gender friendly at all. Owing to the social norms, women besides the huge responsibilities they bear, have limited participation in decision-making of the policies that affect their wellbeing during such a hard time of the pandemic. These have intensified the pre-existing gaps that undermine the role of women in the community as the societal expectations of them only glorify child bearing, rearing and domestic work.

LOW LEVEL OF TECHNOLOGY AND POOR INTERNET COVERAGE

Much of the peacebuilding work is mainly done in remote areas among the illiterate population in different parts of South Sudan. With limited technology and poor internet coverage, the connectivity and relevance of the peacebuilders to the people at the grassroots is challenged. It is evident that women have the least access and ability to afford existing technology, not just in South Sudan but in other parts of the globe. The gap is made more salient in the presence of this global pandemic, exposing the educational and connectivity gaps both in South Sudan and in the refugee camps. This is leaving children with grave disadvantages as they are forced to drop out of school as home-schooling is only a dream in these places.

South Sudan still has 2G internet that is patchy and weak, not everyone has the access to this internet that is also quite expensive. This technological gap has kept South Sudanese women particularly the politicians, activists and academia in semi isolation. So, time isn't capitalized on because things have to stop until COVID-19 is no longer a serious threat.

Ayak Chol,
South Sudanese women peacebuilder



INACCESSIBILITY OF RURAL AREAS EXPERIENCING CONFLICT

In a bid to curb down the spread of the virus, most neighboring countries hosting millions of South Sudanese refugees instituted lockdowns. South Sudan initially attempted to impose shutdown measures which could not be sustained. Such lockdowns have greatly affected the implementation of the peacebuilding activities both in South Sudan and in the refugee camps due to restricted movement. Consequently, women peacebuilders have been hindered from reaching to areas with on-going conflict, frustrating their efforts because the actors at the grass-roots are not plugged into technology to allow engagement digitally.

There is no access to rural communities where the communal conflict is on-going. The government has restricted movements to states yet there's limited access to COVID-19 testing which is a requirement before travelling outside Juba.

Alice Jino,
South Sudanese women peacebuilder

Such worsened economic constraints not only increase the vulnerability of women who are greatest beneficiaries of peacebuilding work, but also greatly reduce the impact of the priceless work of women peacebuilders themselves.

Emmily Koiti,
South Sudanese women peacebuilder

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP AMONG THE WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

Lack of financial sustainability is a stumbling block towards effective implementation of peacebuilding activities by the women. With the shocking increase in the spread of COVID-19, most governments have imposed lockdown measures to contain the virus, a policy that has cost most employees their paying jobs. As a result, there is lack of salaries or incentives which has made the provision for basic needs challenging to most families. Moreover, the struggles have drastically increased especially on the refugee's women whose food ratio was recently reduced from 100 to 80 percent on a monthly basis. Impacts of such decisions are exacerbating the pre-existing vulnerability and dependence of refugees on the humanitarian assistance yet the international community and guarantors have other priorities as well.

LIMITED PERSONAL PROTECTIVE HEALTH EQUIPMENT FOR THE WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS AT THE FRONTLINE OF CORONA VIRUS

The recommended personal protective health equipment by the World Health Organization like face masks, information, hand sanitizers and soap are costly for some women to regularly afford. Besides, there is inadequate access to COVID-19 testing in South Sudan yet, it is a mandatory requirement prior to travelling out of Juba city. More so, misinformation about the virus and its management has left the lay population in a dilemma of either following the COVID-19 guidelines or their tradition beliefs about the virus. With the communal living and the nature of the South Sudanese extended family context, practicing social distancing is only a myth in homes. This all together, puts the lives of women peacebuilders and that of their families at a risk of contracting the virus.

Women peacebuilders who are health personnel are prone to the COVID-19 infection as they work day and night to save lives in poorly equipped hospitals.

Mercy Ali,
South Sudanese women peacebuilder

Women peacebuilders are expected to provide relief services while juggling domestic roles such as child and family care that South Sudan culture demands.

Juan Jackline,
South Sudanese women peacebuilder

A RISE IN TRAUMA AND EMOTIONAL INSTABILITY AMONG THE WOMEN

As a result of COVID-19 and its consequences, there has been a rise in traumatic experiences among the women peacebuilders. Some members have been cut off from their families especially those at the refugee camps and students. With closure of schools, women single handedly, are shouldering the responsibility of the children, something that the society glorifies. More so, some of their abusive male partners who are stuck with them at home are greatly contributing to physical, emotional, sexual and financial trauma of women peacebuilders which, consequently, takes an emotional toll. This explains why there is an increase in divorce and suicide related deaths among married couples.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the novel virus continues to globally wreak havoc on the lives of the people, the South Sudanese women peacebuilders have suggested the following possible ways of responding to the challenges they face at the frontline of the pandemic.

ADVOCATE FOR INTERNET ACCESS AND SUBSIDIZED DIGITAL EQUIPMENT FOR WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

The government should ensure that internet access is guaranteed in the same measure as electricity and water. The pandemic has changed the conduct of business and showed that the world needs to have access to internet and affordable digital gadgets in order to survive and carry on with important aspects of development such as education, access to health care and peacebuilding. With women lagging behind economically, it means that they are least likely to be able to afford digital equipment and have access to data. Advocacy that aims at ensuring that prices of digital gadgets are subsidized especially for rural populations should be encouraged and supported. This would remove barriers that hinder women peacebuilders from digitally accessing the local communities.

ENCOURAGE INCREASED MONITORING AND ADVOCACY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Protection and safety of vulnerable people is now needed more than ever! Apparently, there is a shrinking civic space to hold women's voices and rights. The civil society members and the peacebuilding organizations operating especially in the settlement camps should educate the refugees on their rights and policies of the host country, and monitor and report violations of human rights that may come disguised as implementation of the lockdown measures by those in authority. This is a common vice with some of the police of Uganda who brutalize people in the name of implementing the lockdown measures. Therefore, the stakeholders should scrutinize all measures by the authorities and ensure that those implementing do not violate human rights when executing them.

ADVOCATE FOR MOVEMENT WAIVERS FOR PEACEBUILDERS DURING LOCKDOWNS

While lockdowns are essential to curbing the spread of the pandemic and flattening the curve, they do not guarantee the mitigation of inter-communal conflicts. This is made worse when life-saving peacebuilding work is curtailed from reaching the needy communities in different parts of South Sudan and the refugee camps. Peacebuilders should be categorized among the essential workers especially in conflict ravaged countries like South Sudan. A call towards this inclusion would galvanize the UN Secretary General's advocacy for a global ceasefire.

CREATION OF DIVERSE NETWORKS FOR WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

Local and international platforms should be availed and supported to foster continuous growth and development of women during this time. This should be done through creating safe spaces both offline and online to amplify the voices of women. This would encourage developmental discussions, sharing experiences and generation of sustainable ideas and solutions to the current issues that women peacebuilders face at the frontline of the pandemic. Investment in such spaces that enable women peacebuilders to look out for and support each other, cultivate resilience, shielding and sustaining the movement for greater peacebuilding challenges that may arise in the future.

Women peace builders in spaces of influence should advocate for women peace builders at the grassroots or vulnerable communities to be in empowered and be able to do their advocacy work with ease.

Chara Nyaura Bol

SUPPORT INCREASED PUBLIC AWARENESS ON

- I. Factual information about the corona virus, its spread and avoidance.
The community-based organizations, government and its partners should embrace and support sensitization programs on this pandemic. This should be done through identifying and supporting viable ideas and initiatives that aim at addressing the corona virus-related challenges. This would benefit the women and the community at large with the rightful information about the virus so as to mitigate panic and its spread in the communities.
- II. Public role of women during the COVID-19 pandemic.
The hostile political space for women peacebuilders in South Sudan should be paid attention to. The community-based organizations, the government and the NGOs through the media like community radios, should sensitize the public on the important roles that women could play during this tragic time. This should be done by advocating for co-leadership with male counterparts in the fight against the pandemic. This would consequently open opportunities for women's involvement as well as strengthen their confidence in decision-making related to the policies that affect them as well.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

- I. Developmental partners, donors and international organizations should earmark resources to support women business start-ups that could thrive during this pandemic.
The provision of sustainable financial support for women's entrepreneurial ideas would enable them to earn money to provide for the much-needed basic needs of their families as they battle the virus. The government should be encouraged to have specific resources allocated to women's economic needs with any economic recovery measures in place such as stimulus packages. Some of the refugee women peacebuilders renting land for cultivation from the host communities should be supported with tools for cultivation and seeds. This would address the challenges of food insecurity and hunger among the women peacebuilders both in Juba and in the refugee camps.
- II. Support the facilitation of transferable skills development, communications and leadership during this pandemic.
The non-governmental organizations, donors and the community-based organizations should help the women peacebuilders unleash their potential in various fields by offering skills training. This would enable them to utilize their skills to meet basic costs like the personal protective equipment, get access to and spread factual information about the virus. This would also strengthen their confidence and leadership roles during these unprecedented times. This would go a long way in ensuring that their focus on peacebuilding activities does not waver.

SUPPORT THE ADOPTION OF CONFLICT SENSITIVE APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

The peacebuilding international organizations and the government should adopt ways of conflict resolution that cover areas such as gender, mental health and other sources of conflict within communities. This should be done through the identification of the early warning systems and the involvement of voluntary peace ambassadors to report or address the challenges on time. Equally, the impact of COVID-19 on communities should be periodically assessed and subsequently met with remedial measures.

ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES OF COMMUNITY CONFLICTS DURING THIS PANDEMIC

The peacebuilding actors, donors, international organizations and the government should initiate constructive approaches to handling structural causes of conflict such as pre-existing tribal differences and discrimination that is experienced both in South Sudan and among the South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. Additionally, cultural practices that endanger the lives of women, such as forced marriages, should be addressed. These conflicts should be addressed through community dialogues that observe COVID-19 safety guidelines. This would enhance understanding and harmonious co-existence among the South Sudanese.

SUPPORT THE PROVISION OF COUNSELING AND TRAUMA HEALING SERVICES

Mental health disorders are silent killers women face in the community.. Women should be encouraged to open up to people they trust within their communities like the counselors and elders.. With adherence to the COVID-19 guidelines provided by the World Health Organization, workshops on mental health should be organized both online and offline. This would encourage the women to learn about the basic ways to identify and manage mental health disorders such as depression. It would further equip them with transferable knowledge and skills to help other community members improve their emotional stability as they fight the corona virus.

Conclusively, while this article only presents the voices of South Sudanese women peacebuilders on COVID-19 and its impact, it must be noted that other women and the country as a whole, have adversely been affected too. The corona virus is threatening to cause a "pandemic of poverty" among the South Sudanese. This is escalating the pre-existing gaps in education, food, water, employment, security and connectivity both in South Sudan and in the refugee camps yet, "women are the spiderwebs that hold these fragile communities together." Therefore, there is need for us all to rethink and forge alliances with NGOs, individuals, donors, innovators, refugee delegates and the government and its partners to address the huge impacts of the corona virus crisis.



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