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# “DO OUR VOICES MATTER?”

An analysis of women civil society  
representatives’ meaningful participation at the  
UN Security Council

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## Authors

Caitilin McMillan, Duke-UNC Rotary Peace Fellow

Anna Tonelli, Oxfam International

Kristina Mader, NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security

## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the many people who took the time to work with us on this report. First and foremost, we would like to thank all of the women civil society briefers who gave interviews and other feedback. They shared their valuable experiences of briefing the UN Security Council and their expertise as activists, humanitarians, peacebuilders, and human rights defenders. These have contributed to making the insights in this report much richer. We would like to specifically thank Radhya Almutwakel, Wazhma Frogh, Jackline Nasiwa, Grace John Kenyi Geri, Angelina Nyajima Simon Jial, Muna Luqman, and Lydia Minagano. We also value the inputs of several Council members who contributed to this report through surveys and informal discussions. The report reflects a range of views from civil society and Council members and is stronger because of this.

This **research report** was written to share research results, to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on development and humanitarian policy and practice. It does not necessarily reflect the policy positions of the organizations jointly publishing it. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the individual organizations.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As we celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Women, Peace and Security agenda this year, there is frustration at the slow pace of change in and from the UN Security Council on upholding its role in implementing the agenda. This includes an ongoing reluctance to recognize the importance of regularly hearing diverse women's perspectives in country-specific briefings, meaningfully advancing women's perspectives through actionable commitments, and growing concern that when women do brief, it has become a box-checking exercise. For women's participation to be 'meaningful,' it requires not only including women from civil society in formal Council processes, but also allowing these processes and their outcomes to be shaped by the views of women civil society in all their diversity.

## WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AT THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

The UN Security Council (UNSC) was founded in the aftermath of World War II with the primary responsibility of maintaining international peace and security by "developing friendly relations among nations" and serving as "a center for harmonizing the actions of nations".<sup>1</sup> However, these two "purposes"<sup>2</sup> have not always matched the actions needed for ending international conflicts. The majority of protracted conflicts on the UNSC's agenda today have resulted from internal violence – between a government and its own citizens and/or non-state armed groups – rather than between nations.<sup>3</sup> This type of warfare expands stakeholders beyond governments and their militaries; in fact, civilians are more likely to be killed in today's wars than soldiers who take up arms.<sup>4</sup>

With complex and protracted conflicts more common, and the stakeholders directly impacted ever expanding, it has become clear that the solutions for realizing peace must evolve.<sup>5</sup> Women's perspectives in conflict resolution efforts – especially those who experience intersecting forms of exclusion because of race, disability, ethnicity, caste, age, sexuality, gender identity, or immigration status – are particularly important. In addition to women's participation being a fundamental right, women from marginalized communities are more often disproportionately impacted in these more complex conflicts.<sup>6</sup> This experience frequently affords women unique insight into the complex drivers that have caused conflict in the first place, as well as often requires them to develop creative conflict resolution methods.<sup>7</sup>

The UNSC first recognized the new reality of conflict and the importance of including women's perspectives in peace processes and peacebuilding through the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) on "women, peace and security" (WPS).<sup>8</sup> This resolution acknowledged the changed nature of warfare and its impact on women, as well as their critical role in addressing it. The UNSC called for women's equal participation and full involvement at all levels and all stages of peacebuilding, from prevention to reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction. Today, the WPS agenda comprises 10 resolutions adopted to ensure the protection and promotion of women's rights and their meaningful participation throughout the conflict cycle.<sup>9</sup>

As the foremost international body charged with the maintenance of international peace and security and the guardian of the WPS agenda, the UNSC is responsible for modeling, implementing, and enforcing its resolutions. There are many opportunities to do so, as the UNSC is responsible for setting mandates and priorities for both peacekeeping and political missions; sanctioning for violations of international law; and monitoring compliance with the decisions it has laid out. The UNSC can also request specific updates on how diverse women are being consulted in conflict resolutions efforts in-country;<sup>10</sup> request gender-sensitive conflict analyses from both special envoys to peace processes and heads of peacekeeping missions;<sup>11</sup> and invite diverse briefers to deliver reports on the thematic and country issues the UNSC covers. Nevertheless, the UNSC has fallen short over the years, particularly on mainstreaming gender analysis and WPS

commitments into its own outcome documents – presidential statements, resolutions, sanctions, and letters – as well as statements delivered in UNSC members’ national capacities.

### **Box 1: A short history of women, peace and security**

Women have long advocated for their inclusion in peace and security decision-making – even before the UN was founded. For example, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom formed to advocate for women’s right to participate in preventing and addressing conflict in response to World War I. Once the UN formed, it took until 1974 for the General Assembly to formally recognize the impact of conflict on women.<sup>12</sup> At the first World Conference on Women in 1975 – which brought together the UN, states, and civil society activists – “the first demands for greater women’s participation in security were formally presented”.<sup>13</sup> Twenty years later, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) included a chapter on women in conflict, and committed states and the UN to promoting equal participation of women in all peace forums and activities, particularly decision-making.<sup>14</sup> It took another five years of civil society advocacy for the UNSC – the highest international peace and security decision-making body – to pass UNSCR 1325 (2000). The landmark policy has since expanded into the WPS agenda, encompassing nine additional resolutions.

In addition to UN resolutions, treaties were negotiated that recognized and formally placed women’s rights in conflict within the international human rights legal framework. The 1981 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) guarantees women the right to participate in public life.<sup>15</sup> Further, General Recommendation 30 (GR 30), passed in 2013, confirms women’s right to meaningfully participate in the prevention and resolution of conflict, which states party to the treaty are legally obligated to ensure.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, these resolutions and treaties have not sufficed. Thus, over the last decade in particular, a strong evidence base has developed to further prove how diverse women’s inclusion in peace and security decision-making can have significant impact:<sup>17</sup> women are more likely to bridge divides, keep peace negotiations on track,<sup>18</sup> expand peace agendas by raising issues such as development and human rights,<sup>19</sup> and have different access to information and spaces that can provide early warnings helpful in conflict prevention.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, research shows that when diverse women are able to bring forward issues, perspectives, and proposals throughout the different phases of a peace process in a way that *impacts* decisions, there is a greater likelihood of agreements being reached and implemented.<sup>21</sup>

## **WOMEN CIVIL SOCIETY BRIEFERS**

Between 2010 and 2015, momentum increased for the UNSC to be more accountable to its obligations under the WPS agenda, culminating in the adoption of resolutions 2122 (2013) and 2242 (2015), which laid out, in more detail, what implementation of the WPS agenda should look like within the UNSC (See Box 2).

### **Box 2: Women, Peace and Security Resolutions**

Resolution 2122 (2013) directs the Council on “the need for consistent implementation of resolution 1325 (2000) in its own work”, and lays out the intention to monitor “progress in implementation, and addressing challenges linked to the lack and quality of information and analysis on the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, the role of women in peacebuilding and the gender dimensions of peace processes and conflict resolution.”<sup>22</sup> In 2015, the UNSC passed resolution 2242, **committing to “invit[ing] civil society, including women’s organizations, to brief the Council in country-specific considerations and relevant thematic areas.”**<sup>23</sup>

The articulation of its intent to invite women civil society representatives to brief the UNSC in Resolution 2242 (2015) was a particularly monumental development which considerably advanced the WPS agenda, but also civil society participation more broadly. Prior to 2015, all civil society representatives<sup>24</sup> – regardless

of gender – were excluded from country-specific discussions,<sup>25</sup> and only invited to debates held on thematic agenda items, Arria Formula meetings, and official side events.<sup>26</sup> Resolution 2242 (2015) ensured that civil society representatives – with a particular emphasis on women’s organizations – had the opportunity to deliver their concerns and WPS priorities directly to the UNSC in formal meetings addressing their national contexts.

As ‘civil society briefers’, these women – who are human rights defenders, peacebuilders, humanitarians, and community leaders – bear a huge responsibility to tell leaders about the conditions for people living in their countries and to call out perpetrators for their rights violations. This is not a role taken lightly, as the high-profile nature of the meetings can attract harassment and demand personal sacrifice. Since 2015, more than 108 women from 26 countries have been invited to brief the UNSC during formal meetings as representatives of civil society.<sup>27</sup>

Despite its own commitment to hearing from women civil society briefers, and despite the generally positive trend of increasing numbers of women briefers on a monthly basis, 2020 illuminated how easy it is for the UNSC to ignore its WPS obligations when challenges to its own operations emerge. As a demonstration of this, the number of women civil society briefers at UNSC meetings has decreased since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic: between January and July 2020, there was a 38.9% drop compared to the previous year.<sup>28</sup> Although the limitations posed by the UNSC in the context of the pandemic would have been expected to have some impact on briefers, it has become clear that these challenges were not merely technical, but linked to a lack of political will and “a deprioritization of the voices of independent civil society despite UNSC members’ claims of women’s critical role in ensuring peace and security”.<sup>29</sup> This sharp downward trend in the face of a crisis has demonstrated how fragile and easily ignored the structures supporting women’s participation actually are.

### **Box 3: The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security**

The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (NGOWG) is the only UNSC-recognized civil society coalition working on WPS issues at UN headquarters. As of October 2020, the coalition comprises 18 international NGOs (INGOs), including Oxfam, with experience in every region of the world, and expertise across the WPS agenda. Since 2004, the NGOWG has been invited to facilitate the civil society statement at the UN’s WPS open debates in October, as well as the open debates on sexual violence in conflict in the spring.

With the adoption of Resolution 2242 (2015), the NGOWG began engaging with UNSC members to ensure the Council was upholding its commitment to invite women’s civil society representatives. The NGOWG, along with its members, assists selected briefers with logistical and advocacy support. Between 2015 and 2019, the NGOWG facilitated 25 of the 45 women activists invited to deliver statements at such meetings.

## CONTENTS OF THIS REPORT

This report, jointly published by Oxfam and the NGOWG, explores the practice of inviting women civil society representatives to brief the UNSC. It intends to push beyond the idea of participation as a checkbox exercise and analyzes the extent to which women’s voices form part of UNSC deliberations, and which conditions ensure women civil society briefers’ participation has the greatest impact. We have collected data in partnership with UNSC members and women from conflict-affected countries who have briefed the UNSC. This data sheds light on the opportunities and barriers that exist to meaningfully integrating civil society priorities into UNSC decision-making processes and commitments to building peace. Readers should also note that this report builds on a wealth of evidence developed around the WPS agenda. Connections to this wider body of research are discussed in Chapter II: Research Design.

We bring the insights discussed here to light as they are central to today’s global peace agenda, which demands inclusive problem-solving and innovative approaches to addressing conflict and deep-seated

injustices. The learning in this report draws from three countries about which women have regularly briefed the UNSC in recent years: South Sudan, Yemen, and Afghanistan. It draws on textual analysis of UNSC meetings, survey responses from UNSC members between 2017 and 2020, as well as in-depth interviews with women civil society briefers. Our evidence adds to the many studies and research that confirm UNSC members must prioritize diverse women's meaningful participation to improve the UNSC's efficacy and respect for women's rights,<sup>30</sup> **even if this means fundamentally changing the ways in which the UNSC works.**

## Themes

Several themes emerge from the analysis of this report. All UNSC members who responded to our survey said they believe including women from conflict-affected areas as briefers in country-specific meetings was either highly important (85%) or important (15%). The majority of responses (70%) also advocated for women from conflict-affected areas to be included in UNSC meetings more frequently. Briefers were overwhelmingly appreciated as providing trustworthy, direct, and new insights on local conditions and the impacts of conflict. Women civil society briefers' multifaceted reports were said to contrast helpfully with the UNSC's tendency to separate and isolate conflict-related issues.

Women civil society briefers themselves also saw the opportunity as a critical bridge for grassroots civil society concerns to be able to reach decision-makers at the highest level. As one brifer shared with us, "I wanted to do anything to go to the highest level, because when you have a war in your country you just want to do anything to stop it any way, by any means." In several instances, women also reported that the briefings had created new opportunities to form relationships and partnerships with allied governments. In addition, briefers shared that where political pressure was applied consistently by the UNSC, it had the capacity to defend civic space and achieve tangible outcomes to reduce violence, such as supporting ceasefires. The UNSC's inclusion of women civil society representatives also seems to lend credibility to civil society voices, encouraging other high-level stakeholders to include their views in decision-making processes.

There are, however, a number of missed opportunities for UNSC leadership and action. Inconsistencies between UNSC members on how they engage and listen to women civil society briefers risks undermining the UNSC's ability to benefit from briefers' perspectives and sets back the possibilities for meaningful action and sustainable peace. For these briefers' participation to be meaningful, they must not only be included in formal UNSC processes, but these processes and their outcomes must be shaped by the views of women civil society briefers in all their diversity.

Though women civil society briefers are reaching new spaces, their recommendations often go unheeded by the UNSC in its discussions and adopted outcomes, which can frustrate early conflict warnings or locally owned peace efforts. The dissonance between briefers' messages and the actions taken by the UNSC suggests that women's participation is not being fully and urgently considered in decisions, despite resolutions to the contrary.<sup>31</sup> For example, in 2019, "only 1% of the Security Council's discussion of country-specific situations included mention of women's meaningful participation in peace and security processes", despite nearly all briefers devoting significant attention to the issue in their statements.<sup>32</sup> There are also low levels of UNSC members acting on local women's expertise, such as in the case of releasing civilian detainees in Yemen (see page 15).

Finally, the extent to which women civil society's inclusion at the UNSC is meaningful also hinges on the UNSC's ability to create a hospitable environment in which to brief. This requires working in sustained partnership with diverse women civil society to prevent and address intimidation before, during, and after a briefing; aligning political commitments more closely with women civil society briefers' priorities; and, where action is committed to, ensuring it delivers tangible improvements locally. Our interviews with briefers suggest much more must be done by UNSC members to apply sustained political pressure and monitor the implementation of their commitments. This was highlighted as an issue across our three country contexts, for example, in the case of unmet gender inclusion quotas in political and peace processes, as well as frustrated efforts to deliver justice and accountability.

## Call to action

We hope that this report inspires swift and positive changes in how we support women in all their diversity to take part in the highest levels of peace and security decision-making. While our analysis only offers a snapshot of the experiences of civil society briefers, rich interview and survey data illustrate the timeliness and interest in better understanding women civil society briefers' experience and impact. This serves as an initial sharing of insights to spark discussion about how to address the ongoing struggles women from conflict-affected countries face to secure their place and influence within the UNSC.

We also hope it reinforces to the UNSC the importance of not just listening to, but acting on, inputs from women civil society representatives. Our findings show that these briefings are useful to both UNSC members and the briefers themselves; however, there are still huge strides to be made to ensure women's expertise and recommendations are included in decision-making. We are calling for the international community to learn together based on this evidence. Next steps must include open and honest dialogue between civil society briefers, international NGOs, and UNSC members about overcoming the barriers to achieving meaningful participation and inclusive decision-making. It also requires forming partnerships with women locally and combining formal and informal channels of engagement to allow for a deeper consideration of root causes and solutions.

Ultimately, this report contributes to the growing recognition that peace will only ever be sustainable if it is inclusive of diverse perspectives.<sup>33</sup> This can only be achieved if engagement with stakeholders – especially women civil society – outside of the UNSC is systematic and sustained; if approaches to peace are open to co-construction; and if there is accountability for UNSC members to see through their commitments. If the UNSC truly listened to and acted on the calls of women civil society briefers, this would not only be a step in the right direction for gender equality but would also contribute to the conditions needed for sustainable peace.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In practice, some combination of the suggestions throughout this research report are needed to ensure more meaningful participation opportunities for women civil society briefers. This could include elements of better advance briefee planning and approval, more consistent expectations for a president's engagement in fulfilling the UNSC's WPS responsibilities, and ensuring that working processes can extend their timelines to ensure women civil society briefers are given as much time to prepare as possible.

The UN Security Council should:

1. In line with Resolution 2242 (2015), ensure women civil society briefers are invited to brief the Security Council regularly during country-specific meetings, including during open video conferences, and not limited to briefing only during thematic open debates, informal briefings, or side events.
2. Maintain the foundational principle of independence by ensuring that civil society briefers are selected and supported by civil society, and not only hand-picked by Security Council members.
3. Ensure that the recommendations put forth by civil society briefers are acted upon in all outcome documents and statements delivered by Security Council members, and track and follow implementation of these recommendations, as called for by the UN Secretary-General in 2019, as one of six immediate actions to be taken by Security Council members.<sup>34</sup>
4. Work with the NGOWG, other INGOs who support women civil society briefers, and past briefers themselves to develop good practices that ensure diverse women's meaningful participation in Council briefings. This includes developing a shared understanding of concepts and key terms to support better listening and dialogue practices.
5. Use its power to hold states to account on their commitments to the WPS agenda, as well as to protect civic space – especially freedom of association, assembly, and speech – to allow women's human rights defenders to carry out their work without hindrance.

6. Prevent reprisals – including harassment and intimidation of women civil society briefers – as well as isolated targeting of briefers, by amplifying their role and work as human rights defenders and peacebuilders, as well as reiterating their messages and recommendations across Council products and statements.
7. Form and sustain partnerships with women civil society briefers to ensure effective implementation of their recommendations and further guarantee their protection.

Member states and UN entities more broadly should:

1. Protect and amplify the right of women to participate in peace and security decision-making, rather than only employ their participation when it is politically relevant.
2. Push for process reform within the Council, including building more opportunities for dialogue and increasing the space to hear from civil society through both informal and formal channels.
3. Make available core, flexible, and long-term funding to local organizations providing services and advocating for peace, women and girls' rights, and gender equality at local levels. This funding should be aimed at program delivery, as well as supporting the infrastructure of women's rights organizations. Ensure funding responds to local women and gender equality organizations' needs, not to donor interests.

# NOTES AND REFERENCES

All links last accessed 1 November 2020 unless otherwise specified.

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7 For example, in Liberia, women tirelessly conducted sit-ins, nonviolent demonstrations in white T-shirts, and finally launched a sex strike until the violence and civil strife ended. They also held conflict parties in a conference room in Ghana until those inside came to an agreement. See: K. Lister. (2020, August 24). *Yes, sex strikes have been successful. But not because women simply withheld sex*. I News. <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/comment/sex-strikes-georgia-abortion-heartbeat-law-alyssa-milano-291127>; and A. Enkhsaikhan, L. Gyatso, and M. Vandergriff. (2017). *Understanding Local Peace Agreements and Conflict Prevention: Case Studies on Liberia, Nicaragua and Somalia*. Center for International Human Rights John Jay College of Criminal Justice. [https://www.jjay.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/contentgroups/center\\_international\\_human\\_rights/DLP%20Report%20on%20Local%20Peace%20Agreements.pdf](https://www.jjay.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/contentgroups/center_international_human_rights/DLP%20Report%20on%20Local%20Peace%20Agreements.pdf)

8 S/RES/1325. (2000). [http://undocs.org/S/RES/1325\(2000\)](http://undocs.org/S/RES/1325(2000))

9 The Security Council has adopted 10 resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (WPS): Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2008), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019), and 2493 (2019). These resolutions are legally binding, meaning that all member states, UN agencies, and relevant parties to conflict are required to adhere to them. For a useful overview of the details of each of the 10 resolutions on WPS, please visit: <http://peacewomen.org/security-council/WPS-in-SC-Council>

10 In 2013, through UNSC resolution 2212, the Council requested “the Secretary-General and his Special Envoys and Special Representatives to United Nations missions, as part of their regular briefings, to update the Council on progress in inviting women to participate, including through consultations with civil society, including women’s organizations, in discussions pertinent to the prevention and resolution of conflict, the maintenance of peace and security and post-conflict peacebuilding”. <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2122>

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16 Ibid, p.9.

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- 24 There were briefers who spoke on behalf of INGOs or as senior UN officials, but invitations for civil society representatives from the country contexts under discussion did not start until 2016.
- 25 Country-specific briefings are particularly important as they are meetings dedicated to a specific conflict context, not a thematic issue, affording an opportunity to address national issues in-depth. For example, a meeting on Yemen would ensure a minimum of three hours' briefing on the country's most pressing issues, during which time UNSC member states would offer their critiques and concerns. In some cases, they may vote on resolutions or presidential statements that contain specific instructions for the parties to Yemen's conflict and/or the UN entities responsible for conflict resolution efforts. See here for an example of the UNSC's schedule of meetings: [https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil/files/programme\\_of\\_work.pdf](https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil/files/programme_of_work.pdf)
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31 Resolution 1325 (2000), PP 5, PP 10, OP 2; Resolution 1820 (2008), PP 10, PP 11, OP 12; Resolution 1888 (2009), PP 14; Resolution 1889 (2009), PP 6, PPs 8–12, OP 1, OP 4, OP 6, OP 11, OP 14; Resolution 2106 (2013), OP 1, OP 5, OP 16; Resolution 2122 (2013), PPs 4–5, OP 1, OP 2(c), OPs 7–8; Resolution 2242 (2015), PPs 11–12, PP 14, OP 1, OP 7; Resolution 2467 (2019), PP 1, PP 9, PPs 11–12.

32 Ibid.

33 This point has been regularly reinforced by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, such as in his 2018 UN General Assembly speech: “Sustaining peace will only be realized through committed, inclusive national ownership that considers the needs of the most marginalized, including women, young people, minorities and people with disabilities.” For the full speech visit: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2018-04-24/peacebuilding-and-sustaining-peace-remarks-general-assembly>

34 UN Security Council. (2019). *Women and peace and security: Report of the Secretary-General*. S/2019/800. <https://undocs.org/S/2019/800>

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For more information, or to comment on this report, email [anna.tonelli@oxfam.org](mailto:anna.tonelli@oxfam.org) or [kmader@womenpeacesecurity.org](mailto:kmader@womenpeacesecurity.org)

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International and the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security under ISBN 978-1-78748-712-3 in December 2020. DOI: 10.21201/2020.7116  
Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

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The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (NGOWG), a project of Tides Center, is a coalition of 18 international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to advance the Women, Peace and Security agenda at the United Nations and around the world. Since 2000, we have been working to bring the voices of women's rights defenders and local peacebuilders into the New York peace and security discussions. We serve as a bridge between women's human rights defenders and peacebuilders working in conflict-affected situations and senior policymakers at UN Headquarters.

