

Building Feminist Futures for Women, Peace and Security

SUSTAINING THE WPS AGENDA: 5 LESSONS FROM WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINES

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The world is experiencing a collective backslide of women's already-meager gains in equality, exacerbated by the uptick in wars and conflicts that have put countless women in unsafe and precarious situations. Globally, 600 million women and girls are affected by war yet, the percentage of women peace negotiators remain abysmally low at below 10%, proving that efforts to meaningfully include women in peacebuilding processes have not been successful. This is against a backdrop of an apparent chasm between local and grassroots women's organizations and donors even though the latter have proven instrumental for the women peace and security (WPS) agenda. Still, projects like the Women of Courage, Women Peace and Security Project (WOC) are a reminder of the indisputable impact local organizations can have in WPS.

WOC was brought to life by 6 local organizations: Organización Femenina Popular (OFP) in Colombia; Héritiers de la Justice (HJ) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); Wi'am: Palestinian Conflict Transformation Centre in Palestine; and the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) in South Sudan. The project was implemented in partnership with KAIROS, a Canadian ecumenical association, and with the support of Global Affairs Canada (GAC). WOC impacted the lives of over 36,000 women supporting them through healing from gender-based violence, political instability and harmful patriarchal norms. Reflecting on the factors behind the project's success, Rachel Warden, Partnerships Manager at KAIROS, identifies several core strategies that proved decisive: foregrounding local knowledge; providing long-term core funding for local organizations; recognizing the crucial role of survivors; and strategically engaging male allies. In this zeitgeist of spirited arbitrations on the protraction of policies and programs that promote women's rights, this article highlights the voices of women at the front lines and serves as a reminder of the indispensability of WPS. These approaches offer a model for a WPS agenda that seeks not merely to meet participation targets, but to produce lasting structural and systemic change:

1. Foreground Local Knowledge and Feminism(s)

When given the opportunity, women at the grassroots have proven to be the most effective advocates for peacebuilding. Their contextual knowledge and affiliations become instrumental in supporting and ensuring women's safety and security even in the most precarious situations. Therefore, local epistemologies of wellbeing, empowerment, and feminism should not only be included in WPS programming but serve as its basis. Foregrounding local knowledge will ensure funding and other technical support go where it is most needed, and where it will likely make the

most impact. WOC operationalized this concept by employing an intersectional approach in their programming and by acknowledging the leadership of their partner local agencies. KAIROS credits the leadership of their partners for the project's advancement despite obstacles like the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened socio-political volatility. For instance, seeing that their beneficiaries had lost access to care providers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, OFP developed a Purple Tents strategy to ensure safe spaces for women to access psychosocial support. Hence, centering local knowledge puts the best women on the job, especially those who can utilize this knowledge to persevere through setbacks.

1. Funding the grassroots long-term is crucial

Even well-meaning WPS strategies tend to make grassroots funding a footnote. Impactful grassroots organizations sometimes miss out on crucial funding either because they are in precarious contexts, or they may not necessarily have the administrative infrastructure to meet donor requirements. When grassroots organizations do gain access to funds, they are often tied to singular projects and not for long-term organizing and sustainability. Recognizing this, KAIROS advocated for flexible funding requirements for their partner grassroots organizations and ensured that core funding was sustained even at times when contextual precarity affected operations. For instance, when COVID-19 pandemic restrictions made program implementation difficult, core funding from GAC through KAIROS sustained WOC grassroots organizations, supporting their transition to safer means of project execution and organizational sustainability. Furthermore, KAIROS has continued their partnership with the local organizations through the Women Peacebuilders at the Nexus of Climate, Conflict and Gender project, which was launched in 2025, further extending crucial support for the organizations.

1. Survivors are leaders

Despite suffering some of the most horrendous atrocities in times of crises, when provided the needed support, women become vital advocates for WPS. Some of them go on to become avid human rights defenders and even sometimes lead peace processes and negotiations. Evidently, survivors should not be an afterthought in grassroots engagements towards WPS. Aside from their rich contextual knowledge, their standpoint is an inevitable starting point for rigorous post-crises rebuilding. The participants and partners of the WOC project are a testament to the fact that survivors can become a powerful force for WPS. Empowered by the psychosocial support provided by WOC, beneficiaries in DRC and Colombia became mobilizers of women and advocates for women's rights. Some beneficiaries and participants of SSCC's Women's Link initiative in South Sudan credit the organizations empowerment for their taking up of leadership roles in governance and conflict resolution.

1. Local does not have to mean small

Locally founded organizations and movements often begin small, but their impact tends to be tremendous. They tackle niche and contextual issues affecting their communities, creating effective systems for support and perceivable positive change. As already discussed, local knowledge is essential, and local peacebuilders deserve a seat at the table for wider WPS discourses. Consequently, platforms should be created to enable local peace builders to share

their knowledge and expertise. WOC ensured this by facilitating South-South exchanges between local partner organizations and movements. Representatives of these organizations also made their voices heard on international platforms such as the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

1. Male allyship is essential

The import of male allyship in WPS should not be ignored. This is a strategic appropriation of the contextual deference afforded men, where their voices are sometimes more valued and the most likely to be impactful. Palestine's Wi'am engaged men of status in communities to be spokespersons for women's rights in a context where such advocacy would otherwise not be widely well-received. The WOC project also successfully brought on male allies who felt moved for change after the trauma of violence suffered by their female relatives and loved ones. This was the case for Colombia's OFP, whose members recruited their male relatives for the cause. Evidently, men bring more than numbers to the WPS agenda.

WOC is proof that contextualized WPS strategies that prioritize the grassroots are effective, impactful and worthy of protracted support. While this is only a snapshot of the extensive work that went into the project, it shows that for WPS programming to go beyond band aid solutions, women on the front lines should be centered.

Sources

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