

COVID-19: Women, security and peace

Pax Christi International, 3 June 2020

The impact of COVID-19 on women

According to the UN, [COVID-19 could reverse](#) the limited progress that has been made on gender equality, which is an important foundation for a peaceful and sustainable world. Women represent 70 percent of frontline healthcare workers. Their unpaid care work has increased significantly due to school closures and the increased needs of older people. They are harder hit by the economic downturn; almost 60 percent work in the informal economy. The pandemic has also led to a steep increase in [violence against women and girls](#).

The [Center for Peace Education at Miriam College](#) in the Philippines, through their “Women’s Agency in Promoting Peace, Keeping the Security” (“WePeace”) was training community women from four conflict-affected areas (North Cotabato, Surigao del Sur, Kalinga and Quezon) with four different conflict lines (clan wars, internal displacement, tribal wars and development aggression). The training focused on conflict resolution, mediation, monitoring and documentation, showcasing nonviolent means for addressing conflict while promoting gender-sensitive peacebuilding and peacekeeping. The project has been suspended due to COVID-19.

Research shows that sustainable peace is more likely if women are meaningfully involved in peace processes. Higher levels of participation, particularly of women, is also a major factor in making nonviolent movements nearly twice as successful as violent ones in achieving their objectives. In spite of significant inequalities, [women have persisted](#) to assume roles as strategists, organizers, and active participants in various nonviolent campaigns and movements, including in Argentina, Chile, Egypt, Liberia, the Palestinian territories, Poland, Syria and the United States. Also, [according to Erica Chenoweth](#), the greater the role of women in a campaign, the larger the correlation with nonviolent methods, even in highly repressive contexts. Campaigns that feature greater women’s participation—in terms of both the extent of women’s frontline participation and the formal involvement of women’s organizations—are more likely to maintain nonviolent discipline (i.e., are less likely to have violent flanks).

A principled critique

The serious problem of direct, structural and cultural violence against women and girls needs to be named and addressed as sins that are personal, relational and social—causing harm to individuals, to relationships built on trust and mutual care, and by infecting societies with structures of dominance that destroy community.

The late Kenyan Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai created a nonviolent movement that simultaneously planted 200 million trees in Africa, created economic self-sufficiency for women, and fought political corruption. Each interconnected facet of her work challenged a domination system that had been constructed by men to serve and benefit men. To resist the violence of exploitation was to stand against a patriarchal system. Nonviolence is not only a challenge to specific forms of violence; it is a principled critique of systemic violence which, historically and culturally, has often been perpetrated and sustained by men.

Recognizing International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament (May 24, 2020) and the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, [235 women leaders from around the world](#) expressed "deep concern about the humanitarian and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the aggravating impact of conflict and armed violence, and the existential threats to humanity and the environment from climate change and nuclear weapons." They affirmed "the vital role of women in peacemaking, policy development and governance" and the value of their "active participation in ... peace and disarmament processes." They said, the "pandemic has undeniably demonstrated that key issues of human security cannot be resolved through military means or independently by nations, but require global cooperation and nonviolent conflict resolution."

Recognize the equal dignity of women

The universal ethic of nonviolence demands that we affirm and promote the central role of women as agents of the nonviolent change capable of constructing a future beyond the "unjust normal." If this world is to peel away deeply ingrained structures of inequality so that the infinite worth of every person is prized and the life of the planet is spared, women must not only be recipients of such change, they must lead this change. The greatest movement in human history is coming—and it will be led as much by women as by men.

Women will be critical to creating policies and social structures that are inclusive and sustainable – and to facilitating powerful campaigns and social movements to help establish them – because, generally speaking, of their capacity to produce alternatives to dominant, patriarchal methods for ordering the world, especially the threat and use of violence. Hence the US Institute of Peace research showing that sustainable peace is more likely if women are meaningfully involved.

To build a future that is nonviolent, just and sustainable will require a dramatic increase in:

- the leadership of women in governments and institutions as they move through the process of adapting to nonviolent governance;
- the role of women in envisioning, organizing and mobilizing nonviolent people-power movements to create the traction necessary for the global transformation to a future envisioned in *Laudato Si'*;
- the role of women in widespread training and education in the vision, principles, strategies and tactics of nonviolent change;
- data collection and quantitative research on the impact of women's leadership in each of these areas.