
“DO OUR VOICES MATTER?”

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

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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.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	3
2	Research design and methodology	8
3	Impact of briefings by women civil society representatives	11
4	Key challenges to the impact of women civil society representatives' briefings	19
5	Conclusions and recommendations	25
6	Notes and references	27
7	Appendix: UNSC member opinion survey	32

1 INTRODUCTION

As we celebrate the 20th 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.

1.1 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".¹ However, these two "purposes"² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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).⁸ 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.⁹

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;¹⁰ request gender-sensitive conflict analyses from both special envoys to peace processes and heads of peacekeeping missions;¹¹ 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.¹² 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”.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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:¹⁷ women are more likely to bridge divides, keep peace negotiations on track,¹⁸ expand peace agendas by raising issues such as development and human rights,¹⁹ and have different access to information and spaces that can provide early warnings helpful in conflict prevention.²⁰ 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.²¹

1.2 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.”²² 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.”**²³

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 representatives²⁴ – regardless

of gender – were excluded from country-specific discussions,²⁵ and only invited to debates held on thematic agenda items, Arria Formula meetings, and official side events.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.²⁸ 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”.²⁹ 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.

1.3 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,³⁰ **even if this means fundamentally changing the ways in which the UNSC works.**

1.3.1 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.³¹ 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.³² 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.

1.3.2 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.³³ 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.

2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 RESEARCH PRINCIPLES

Our research process was designed around inclusive principles. We took steps to:

- be collaborative, involving partners and research participants at each stage;
- amplify voices, by providing a platform for women rather than speaking on their behalf; and
- value contributions through strong relationships, i.e. using a non-extractive approach.

These principles frame the choices we made in both the process and product of this research. They also drive our commitment to share and speak about our findings with UNSC members, who have the power to bring about positive change.

2.2 BUILDING ON PREVIOUS RESEARCH

A number of recent studies by civil society organizations, often in partnership with academic institutions, have investigated the treatment of the WPS agenda within UNSC products and practices.³⁴ They highlight growing concern about the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of the UNSC's commitment to WPS, and the delivery of substantive change for women in local contexts. A 2019 report by the NGOWG found that the UNSC's approach to WPS remains "superficial, ad-hoc, inconsistent and subject to the individual efforts of UNSC members who have a commitment to the agenda as part of their foreign policy."³⁵ The report also highlights the problematic attitudes and practices within the UNSC that undermine women's role in peace and security:

"Despite articulating regular support for women's meaningful participation, it has long been clear that it is easier for the Security Council to focus on protecting women from violence rather than addressing root causes of violation of their rights and enabling their participation in all spheres of public life. This can be seen in the ways in which women's participation is discussed across the work of the Security Council, as well as the ongoing failure of peace processes to ensure women's inclusion and leadership."³⁶

The most frequent references to WPS in country-specific resolutions are often limited to preventing and addressing sexual violence.³⁷ While this is an issue of critical importance, if treated in isolation, it ignores the fact that violence against women is inseparable from structural exclusion and discrimination in political, economic, and social spheres.³⁸ Further, it risks re-entrenching gendered hierarchies that circumscribe women's role to that of passive victims in need of protection.³⁹

A June 2020 study by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the London School of Economics Centre for Women, Peace and Security mapped the 10 WPS resolutions in country-specific resolutions over time.⁴⁰ Looking at 2,500 WPS commitments, researchers found a low level of WPS language in operative paragraphs, and that the language was watered down in commitments. Several issues emerged around the tendency of UNSC members to use non-binding language, as well as a weak link between Chapter VI and VII resolutions. These factors suggest the deliberate use of ambiguity and avoidance of legal obligations for WPS in country-specific resolutions by UNSC members.

Such research and analysis forms part of an accessible and ever-growing evidence base available to the UNSC members that offers a roadmap for needed change. This report adds another layer to these insights, by taking an in-depth look at the UNSC's engagement with the specific priorities of women civil society briefers in their decision-making and commitments in country-specific briefings.

2.3 RESEARCH METHODS

2.3.1 Countries of focus

We chose to analyze South Sudan, Yemen, and Afghanistan because a number of women from these countries briefed the UNSC during our research period of focus (2017–19). We chose this three-year timeframe because the UNSC only started consistently including women civil society briefers in 2017, but there were no women civil society briefers invited in the first half of 2020. These country contexts reflect a range of UNSC dynamics – they all have different types of UN presence, politicization/sensitivity, and regional elements – and different types of conflict. It was also important for us to choose contexts in which both Oxfam and the NGOWG have sustained and strong relationships with women locally. This is linked to our research principle of not being extractive.

2.3.2 Textual analysis

Using Excel and Nvivo software, we first carried out a qualitative textual analysis of UNSC meeting transcripts on Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Yemen from 2017–19, during which time 26 different member states served on the UNSC (See Table 1). We chose to analyze country-specific briefings,⁴¹ as UNSC members consistently struggle to apply a gender analysis to their statements and recommendations in these meetings.⁴² Open debates on WPS themes do not necessarily result in the same gender analysis discrepancy. UNSC member statements represent a formal articulation of their national position and priorities in relation to the situation in each country. They are delivered during every formal meeting of the UNSC. Issues that are raised in a UNSC member's statement are taken as national priorities for which they will exert political pressure during negotiations on outcome documents (e.g. peacekeeping and political missions' new or extended mandates, calls for sanctions, new border crossings for humanitarian aid, etc.). Therefore, the inclusion or exclusion of WPS commitments and analysis is seen as an indication of that UNSC member's support for the agenda.⁴³

Next, we thematically analyzed statements delivered by women civil society briefers from South Sudan, Yemen, and Afghanistan for the same time period. A total of 14 women civil society representatives from these three countries briefed the UNSC in country-specific briefings over our three-year period. This analysis enabled us to identify a number of cross-cutting thematic priorities that have been raised consistently over time by briefers. We then performed text searches of UNSC member statements for key terms that aligned with the specific priorities raised by briefers in their statements, analyzing the pertinent passages for context and relevance. This analysis enabled us to track over time the frequency and nature of incorporation of the points raised by women civil society briefers in UNSC members' statements, as well as specificities around which governments are more supportive of their recommendations.

Table 1: UNSC membership 2017–2019

	Nation State	2017	2018	2019
	Belgium			X
	Bolivia	X		
	China	Permanent Member		
	Côte d'Ivoire		X	
	Dominican Republic			X
	Egypt	X		
	Equatorial Guinea		X	
	Ethiopia	X		
	France	Permanent Member		
	Germany			X
	Indonesia			X
	Italy	X		
	Japan	X		
	Kazakhstan	X		
	Kuwait		X	
	Netherlands		X	
	Peru		X	
	Poland		X	
	Russian Federation	Permanent Member		
	Senegal	X		
	South Africa			X
	Sweden	X		
	Ukraine	X		
	United Kingdom	Permanent Member		
	United States	Permanent Member		
	Uruguay	X		

Source: Compiled from information available at <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/search/member>

2.3.3 Interviews

In addition to analyzing women civil society briefers' statements, we also conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with seven of the 14 women who had briefed between 2017 and the end of 2019. The interviews explored their experiences before, during, and after briefings. We wanted to learn how to improve the process from their perspective. In the interviews, we also heard each woman's perspective about any impacts they had witnessed in their countries since giving their briefings. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed.

2.3.4 Survey

In the final stage of research, we circulated an anonymous survey to current and past members of the UNSC. It was emailed to 38 diplomats and 21 of the 26 missions that served the UNSC over our three-year period. They were selected based on the availability of contact information and the likelihood of response, so it is likely the survey responses skew towards governments that are already more engaged and allied with the WPS agenda. In the end, we received 13 responses. The survey included 10 questions (See Appendix)

intended to generate an understanding of attitudes, barriers, and opportunities for women civil society briefers. We explored which conditions would be likely to maximize the impact of women’s voices in decision-making processes by focusing questions on what would make the information shared by women civil society briefers more influential for UNSC members.

2.3.5 Limitations

As an initial scoping project, we recognize that we were not able to look at every country-specific context or the full stretch of years since women civil society representatives began briefing the UNSC.⁴⁴ This report therefore presents only a snapshot of available data. Even so, we believe the findings that emerge illuminate larger issues. Further research should be conducted to investigate these across expanded timeframes and country contexts.

In addition, we acknowledge that we were only able to interview a small number of women during our research timeframe. While we reached out to all 14 women who had briefed the UNSC from Yemen, Afghanistan, and South Sudan during 2017–19, due to various circumstances, only seven were available for interview. In addition, while the women we spoke with were diverse in terms of citizenship, ethnicity, and age, we were not able to delve into how these positionalities informed their experience with briefing. Future research could expand on this, as well as benefit from engaging more of the briefers.

We also recognize the political process that UNSC members face in forming written statements, which may make the reality of reflecting briefers’ recommendations at short notice difficult. However, looking at the data across a three-year period meant that UNSC members had ample time to reflect priorities raised by women in previous briefings in deliberations that followed. Future research may benefit from following up with UNSC member governments directly to better understand their statement-writing processes, as well as the impact UNSC discussions have on national foreign policy.

Finally, our findings and recommendations relate to UNSC members as a general group. This said, however, it would be remiss if we did not recognize the wide range in attitudes and actions of the member states who make up the UNSC. Some governments have been consistent allies to women civil society briefers on specific issues and the WPS agenda in general, while others fall short. Instead of naming and shaming, this report intends to foster positive change through presenting findings in the spirit of learning together. In this spirit, we hope there will be motivation for all UNSC members to engage and take appropriate action.

3 IMPACT OF BRIEFINGS BY WOMEN CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESENTATIVES

Including and valuing women’s work at all levels of decision-making is essential to the more collaborative forms of governance that sustainable peace requires. In appreciation of this, the UNSC recognized in resolution 2242 (2015) “the need for far greater implementation of the women, peace and security agenda, remaining deeply concerned by the frequent under-representation of women in many formal processes and bodies related to the maintenance of international peace and security.”⁴⁵ Five years later, 100% of all UNSC member survey respondents said that they believed that it is **either highly important or important** to include women from conflict-affected areas as civil society briefers in UNSC country-specific meetings. However, how that belief translates into action by UNSC members varies, as will be discussed below.

3.1 APPRECIATION FOR BRIEFERS' DIVERSE, IMPARTIAL, LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

The findings suggest that **for those UNSC members who responded to the survey,⁴⁶ women civil society briefers are valued, and further, their participation as briefers is viewed as an important aspect of the UNSC's regular flow of information.** Specifically, UNSC member respondents felt the top reasons for including women civil society briefers were to bring awareness to the barriers facing women's participation in peace and political processes (92%); to shape opinions on priorities and actions to take (85%); and to hear perspectives that members may not otherwise (85%). Some specific comments included:

"The Security Council needs a complete picture of the situation on the ground in a given country. This is usually not possible without consulting women, who often bear the brunt of the conflict."

"Civil society are a great asset to the discussion, advocacy, and are the greatest implementer of the different resolutions adopted."

Many UNSC member respondents stated that **briefers' contributions bring to life local conditions and give perspectives on conflict mitigation that are too little heard in the UNSC space.** One UNSC member noted that these briefings are essential because

[t]hey bring expertise, knowledge and experience, but above all, they bring the neutrality, unbiased and blunt statements and recommendations that are needed and that the Security Council needs to hear. They are not influenced or impacted by politics around the issue, and CSOs are the ones working directly with the people in the ground, bringing their voices, concerns and demands to the international arena.

The briefers' ability to deepen the UNSC's understanding of local issues and affect the overall narrative is invaluable in creating sustainable pathways to peace. Briefers were aware that the **information they provided was often different or more nuanced than what might be heard through typical channels.** One brifer noted this as a particular value-add of their statements:

"More connections are needed between the international and local. We have issues that need to be amplified and raised. Global institutions need to share what's happening on the ground. Because on a daily basis, we are there with people, we know their problems, but sometimes it is difficult to address them. The situation on the ground is not easy. But we are trying to have community dialogues, to have home-grown solutions to communal kinds of conflicts."

The presence of women civil society briefers in UNSC meetings also often **introduces new and compelling perspectives for governments to consider – and these frequently challenge the status quo.** As one brifer noted:

"There are of course, certain things we cannot talk about within the Council. But when my turn came, I started actually talking about civilian losses; I talked about the shrinking political space for civil society, shrinking space for women's organizations and activists. It was very welcome. It opened the door for questions and answers in the conversation around the peace process and many other challenges we were talking about. It was very welcome. I received numerous appreciation emails and messages afterwards from many countries...What they learned from my statement was much more real from a community and human perspective, more from a people's perspective, and they very much appreciated that."

One brifer reinforced a similar point in her interview, and took it a step further to highlight how **women civil society briefers often serve as an important monitor for UN accountability:**

"Nobody is really speaking the hard truths that go in between the warring parties. I think myself and my colleagues were doing that. We believe that we are monitoring what's going on, even at the UN,

we see ourselves as monitoring the system or the process. And I think people are not used to that. They're used to thinking Yemeni women are just victims... There are lots of women who are experts in security issues, the economy, etc. I think our role has been in creating that visibility."

While there is clearly an appreciation from UNSC members for the information briefers provide, for women's inclusion in decision-making to be *meaningful* requires UNSC members to reflect and integrate civil society recommendations into their work, with the ultimate goal of impacting local situations.

3.2 LIMITED INFLUENCE OVER UNSC STATEMENTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Given the narrow focus of this research, and the complex factors influencing peace and security decision-making, assessing the specific impact of briefers on UNSC member statements and actions can be difficult. However, what is clear is that despite the extent to which UNSC members state that they value women civil society briefers, their appreciation is not consistently reflected in the work of the UNSC. For example, while every UNSC member respondent articulated that briefers are valued, **there was considerable variation in the extent to which UNSC member respondents felt the information shared by civil society briefers impacted their work**: only 46% of respondents reported high impact, 31% reported somewhat high impact, and 23% reported neutral impact (as ranked on a five-point scale; see Appendix for details).

Similarly, only 69% of UNSC member respondents reported high or somewhat high influence over the identification of important issues, and 62% reported high or somewhat high influence over follow-up actions and priorities for negotiations on resolutions or other outcomes. **Women civil society briefers' influence over the shaping of government commitments received the lowest rating**, with more than half (54%) reporting neutral or low influence.

The perception of women civil society briefers on the impact their briefings had on the UNSC was also not unified; but for those briefers who thought that they had a positive impact on the UNSC, they specifically pointed to a shift in the UNSC *narrative*. One brifer explained:

"You know because the war is still going on, it's difficult to talk about the impact of our work at the grassroots because the violations and war should stop. But at the level of raising the voices of victims, changing the narrative of the war, and putting more pressure to lessen the violations of the war, we can feel it. But if you ask a Yemeni on the ground, everything is still going on. They will not feel the impact until the war is over. But we know that [the narrative change] is a step in many steps towards accountability, human rights demand that we help to make the situation a little bit better."

However, the specific way in which UNSC member respondents told us that women briefers influenced their work was surprising: they told us that the greatest influence of briefers on their work was on developing messages for public statements, with 85% reporting high or somewhat high influence.

Over the period of study, basic references to WPS, typically signified by references to 'women' and 'gender', increased year-on-year, which may suggest a general increase in attention to WPS.⁴⁷ However, beyond simply mentioning 'women' and 'gender', the details of this picture are less positive. **According to our analysis, UNSC members have been slow to include women civil society briefers' specific priorities in their statements over time**. The one exception was on the issue of meaningful participation. In UNSC meetings where women civil society briefers raise the issue of women's meaningful participation, UNSC members were more than twice as likely to also raise the issue as compared to meetings where there were no civil society briefers present.⁴⁸

This support was confirmed by one brifer who spoke to the benefits of seeing language around inclusion increasingly adopted in UNSC member statements, but with the caveat that this had not sufficiently translated into changes for people locally. She said:

“They haven’t taken a lot of actions, but I do feel that from the statement [by] myself and other briefers, we emphasized a lot about the inclusivity issue...We achieved that the UN Security Council started to incorporate so many of our sentences, wording, things in language terms. Also, the international community, like diplomats, when they speak, they speak about inclusivity, women’s participation, the role of women in mediation. I think this is really important.”

The discrepancies are further explored below through the priority themes raised by women civil society briefers across the three country contexts. These discrepancies suggest insufficient engagement by UNSC members with the actual information and perspectives brought by briefers. Priority themes include:

- ensuring inclusive peace processes;
- improving justice and accountability, including ending impunity for perpetrators of violence, and addressing gender-based violence;
- implementing stronger ceasefires and arms embargos; and
- increasing funding and support for local civil society organizations to deliver humanitarian, development, and peace initiatives.

3.2.1 Inclusive peace

Although 92% of UNSC member respondents in our survey viewed briefings as an opportunity to understand the barriers facing women’s participation in peace and political processes, references to inclusive peace by UNSC members in their statements were more ad hoc and inconsistent. Out of 26 members it was referenced by:

- 20 members in the context of Afghanistan;
- 13 members in the context of South Sudan; and
- 13 members in the context of Yemen.

All women civil society representatives spoke in their briefings to the importance of creating conditions for inclusive peace to take hold. Across our country contexts, briefers called on the UNSC to support inclusive peace both in terms of ensuring diverse civil society representation – especially women’s – in peace and political processes, but also in referencing the nature of peace itself as needing to be necessarily centered in equity.

In their calls to action around inclusive peace, briefers illustrate through lived experience what research has also confirmed to be true:⁴⁹ that diverse participation and meaningful inclusion in peace and political processes produce more equitable outcomes, and are therefore essential in any road to lasting peace. One brifer spoke to this directly in her interview, highlighting the need to act on local knowledge and women’s expertise in peacebuilding:

“I keep seeing the same things being published. If women are participating, the agreements tend to last longer. But the men don’t want them to last longer, that’s why they don’t want us. So, this is why I personally think we need to go in deeper, and really understand the conflict dynamics and how the women are really working on the ground from their point of view. The women are already working on these issues from their way. It’s their model, their local way of doing it. So, we need to also study the traditional and local ways of doing it more.”

As well as representation, as the above quote suggests, achieving inclusive peace also depends on establishing shared understandings of the causes of conflict-related issues and their appropriate solutions.

3.2.2 Justice and accountability

Issues related to justice and accountability, specifically calls for ending impunity for gender-based violence and investigating human rights violations, were almost universally raised by briefers across contexts – they were evident in 86% (12 of 14) of briefers’ statements. In our interviews with women civil society briefers,

many also highlighted the fragility of peace if impunity exists for violators of human rights. Yet, there was wide variation across country contexts in how these priorities were reflected back by UNSC members in their statements over time. For example, a much higher number of UNSC members referenced the need for justice in South Sudan (26 of 26), than in Afghanistan (20 of 26) and Yemen (14 of 26).

While this seems like strong UNSC support, a closer analysis of briefers' specific justice concerns paints a less certain picture. For example, in South Sudan, briefers' statements called for the UNSC's support specifically on the Hybrid Court, Chapter V, and transitional justice. These concerns in turn were not consistently echoed by UNSC members, with the Hybrid Court raised most (by 16 of 26 members), but transitional justice only raised by less than half (12 of 26), and Chapter V raised by even fewer (8 of 26). The failure by UNSC members to reflect these specific issues related to justice and accountability highlights a more superficial versus substantive engagement with briefers' justice priorities.

As another example, in Yemen, where briefers made specific calls for justice linked to the release of political prisoners, this issue was reflected by 21 of 26 UNSC members in their statements. Briefers called on the UNSC to ensure the release of civilian detainees who are arbitrarily held and those forcibly disappeared, and to hold all parties to account. Yet, despite this strong show of support in UNSC statements, in her interview one brifer clearly illustrated how these efforts were not translating into the needed action nationally:

"For instance, we had the Mothers of Abductees. They've lost their sons to kidnapping, detainment, imprisoned. They created their own network. They go out. They protest. They meet the tribal leaders. They negotiate. And they were able to release 944 detainees in this way. Of course, the UN had arranged for zero at that same time. These women of course, they're not involved in the peace talks. But they meet the rebel leaders, they're involved on the ground so immensely. But nobody knows about them... Honor these women... That's if we really want to see change and sustainable peace."

3.2.3 Ceasefires

Ceasefires are key to creating an environment in which all people can participate safely in dialogue, and in which peacebuilding can start to take hold. Mentioned by 57% (8 of 14) women civil society briefers, supporting ceasefire efforts was the most common brifer priority reflected back by UNSC members in their statements:

- for South Sudan, 26 out of 26 members mentioned it in their statements;
- for Yemen, 21; and
- for Afghanistan, 18.

In interview, one brifer pointed to some positive changes since her briefing as a result of the UNSC's support for a ceasefire and de-militarized zones:

"One thing I [spoke about in] the statement, [was] the military occupation of civilian location. Though I cannot say the military have been completely clear about their location. But in the current agreement, there is a body on ceasefire to ensure that the parties seize the opportunity and if there's an incident they'll report it and also monitor the location of the military in civilian locations. When I was briefing the Council, there were a number of locations that were still occupied by the military. So, what I saw after [my statement and the subsequent agreement] was a pressure from citizens. I feel like that particular call put pressure on informed citizens as a monitoring entity, in a way they're trying to now make more calls for the parties to do so. So, I think this may have been a positive impact."

While support on ceasefire and disarmament was among the strongest from UNSC members, it is also critical that these measures adopt a gender-sensitive approach to shield civilian populations from unintended harm or further suffering.⁵⁰ However, linking ceasefire efforts to appropriate gender-sensitive planning was reflected by far fewer UNSC members.

3.2.4 Funding for women-led organizations

While funding and support for local CSOs was one of the priorities most frequently raised (by 71% of women – 10 of 14) before the UNSC, it was inconsistently recognized in members' statements or in some contexts not mentioned at all. Over three years:

- there were no mentions of funding for local or women-led organizations in UNSC member statements on Yemen;
- only three UNSC members reflected local funding commitments in their statements on South Sudan; while
- Over half of statements (15 of 26) on Afghanistan delivered by UNSC members referenced local funding or support for civil society.

One briefer stressed the urgency of the UNSC's attention to these matters in her interview, saying:

“The number of women’s organizations closing is alarming, given that these organizations are the ones that are raising the voices of Afghan women... We call on the international community and members of the Security Council to ensure that specific funding is allocated for women’s organizations as part of the empowerment agenda and the implementation of WPS.”

However, even in Afghanistan, where funding issues were reflected back most strongly, UNSC members were more likely to discuss funding in relation to high-level donor conferences or general references to the importance of meeting broad foreign aid commitments. There was limited mention of ensuring support for civil society organizations, or specifically women's groups, to carry out work at the local level.

3.4 ENGAGEMENT WITH DECISION-MAKERS BEYOND THE UNSC CHAMBER

In many cases, **briefings by women civil society members have facilitated more substantive exchanges between the briefers and UNSC members outside of the UNSC chamber.** Due to the formal nature of UNSC meetings,⁵¹ creating space for informal engagement is considered to be important by both briefers and UNSC members, with 70% of UNSC members noting that external meetings can allow for strengthened impact, and the lack of those informal meetings could actually be a barrier to future impact. Not only do these informal interactions at the UNSC provide opportunities to jumpstart more in-depth ongoing relationships between UNSC members and civil society representatives, **they can also provide space for sharing details that would put the briefer at risk** if shared in a public UNSC meeting.

It is important to emphasize, however, that **while these informal channels can be important, they should not replace formal public inclusion of women in UNSC meetings.** Those governments willing to set up additional meetings with civil society are often the most engaged allies to or interested in the WPS agenda. Thus, while these informal interactions can be positive overall, they do not have the impact of addressing all 15 UNSC members who need to be influenced regarding the importance of women's rights and gender equality.

Several briefers affirmed that from their experience, **smaller side meetings with engaged governments have allowed for the exchange of ideas and deeper consideration of appropriate responses.** Briefers also shared their positive perceptions of those governments who set up informal meetings engaging in a more “meaningful” way and demonstrating their willingness to learn from and identify solutions with civil society:

“The impact I think comes following the Security Council briefing when we have meetings with some of the missions. Like in one of the informal briefings, I was giving them an overview of the peace and human rights situation [in my country], and then we ended up debating about the nature of the

International Tribunals, including the Hybrid Court. One of the members said that setting up a Hybrid Court would be expensive, citing the example of Rwanda and Liberia. I asked them to consider the cost of humanitarian response compared to stopping the war by ending impunity and holding perpetrators accountable.”

“Stopping this war requires holding perpetrators to account for their actions... So, following that conversation, I think they agreed and said, ‘yes, peace cannot come without accountability’.”

Women civil society briefers also emphasized inclusion at the UNSC as **an important opportunity to develop relationships with diplomatic missions and other high-level stakeholders**, such as UN Special Envoys, opening up a platform for continued exchange following the briefing:

“We hadn’t met the [senior UN representative] before that day, and we had the chance to sit with him and to exchange views. So, it was a good chance for us to meet a person whom I should have met before but didn’t have access to through other channels. We had the chance to speak to him directly, and he took it seriously because we were on the same panel just minutes ago.”

“I decided to go to them and talk about their responses to the briefing. I reminded them about their responsibility in terms of pushing for peace... Once I began those relationships, we went further in establishing a diplomatic mission and civil society dialogue. Every month we have a briefing to update the diplomatic community on what we are seeing as civil society. We get their feedback and their commitments in terms of changing the situation.”

Furthermore, the briefing opportunity has strengthened the impetus for local civil society representation more widely in other high-level processes. For example, the UNSC’s invitation to hear from civil society in some cases has **created momentum for other domestic and regional actors to engage with and listen to civil society voices**:

“When the African Union Peace and Security Council came to South Sudan following my briefing, they came in huge numbers. They had to consult women, the youth, civil society and we told them what we needed from them to be responsive to our needs. Now they have also started consulting civil society on issues of transitional justice. So, I think because the UN Security Council offers space for civil society, which the African Union was not doing, now they are trying to open up for the South Sudanese civil society.”

3.5 PERSONAL IMPACTS ON WOMEN CIVIL SOCIETY BRIEFERS

Many of the briefers we interviewed spoke of the personal impacts, both positive and negative, of participating as a civil society breifer to the UNSC. For example, recognizing the responsibility of this high-level opportunity, they described the painstaking lengths they go to – with the support of INGOs – on short timelines to ensure the issues they raise are well-evidenced and reflect diverse local realities. Each breifer we spoke with **discussed a collaborative process of shaping the information and priorities** she brought to the UNSC through consultation with other human rights and civil society actors in her community.

“When I was invited to deliver this statement on a special session of the Council, I started a process of consulting our members. That was a very important process for me because it helped validate what was in the statement. All the content came from a lot of people. When I delivered my statement, I mentioned that. These are not just the statements of a women’s rights activist or just one organization that I’m representing but actually reflect inputs from so many other civil society activists, organizations, individuals.”

Across our three country contexts, briefers also spoke of the importance of the UNSC as a space that amplified their messages.

“Does it make a difference? One is the reality on the ground, then there’s a reality for the Council. So, for people on the ground who usually don’t have a very positive outlook about the Council’s Resolutions and that they would actually listen to people who have more on the ground and practical experience. That was interesting when they started responding, and they were present. They listened to the statement. It was live telecast in the national television so that created a level of accountability that we very much look forward to see out of the Council and the UN structure overall.”

In some cases, this also opened up further channels to facilitate local peace work. Two different briefers illustrated this in their interviews:

“After the experience of briefing the Security Council, I decided to establish a center for strengthening community voices. It’s a community-based national initiative. Because I don’t want to keep silent, I want to keep amplifying the voices of women.”

“One impact is that my fellow women on the ground know me and that I am talking about issues women face. As an example, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence have started approaching me and sharing their experiences as survivors. There is already a survivors’ network, so I always encourage them to talk for themselves and advocate for their rights. This is an impact at the local level because of my engagement at all levels, including briefing the Council.”

Furthermore, **women civil society briefers also felt the importance of their participation at the UNSC was partly about a responsibility to find ways to keep civic spaces open and further civil society dialogue with high-level stakeholders in other processes:**

“I felt unsafe...but I also knew I could not let the opportunity slip off... I would rather make the voices of citizens and their pain heard now, than regret for keeping silent. It was an opportunity for the whole civil society.”

They emphasized that **they considered the wider perspective beyond their single appearances and how they were positioning their engagement as part of a long-term strategy that builds on the effort of previous briefers and ensuring that opportunities stay open for other women down the line.** Not only is this approach key to delivering accurate information about the situation in local communities, but research suggests that more inclusive, collaborative, and democratic ways of working like this have the potential to yield more equitable outcomes.⁵²

4 KEY CHALLENGES TO THE IMPACT OF WOMEN CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESENTATIVES' BRIEFINGS

Including and valuing women's work at all levels of decision-making is essential to the more collaborative forms of governance that sustainable peacebuilding requires, and the UNSC should be a leader in championing women's meaningful, equal, and full participation. Yet, as we look across our data, we see a number of missed opportunities for leadership and action at the UNSC. Inconsistencies among UNSC members in how women are engaged and listened to risk undermining the UNSC's ability to fully benefit from women's perspectives and, more widely, set back the possibilities for transformative or just peace. Inclusion will remain only a check-box exercise if we do not allow peacebuilding strategies and systems to be changed as a result of women's participation and their local expertise.

4.1 MISIMPLEMENTATION OR MISUNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN CIVIL SOCIETY BRIEFERS' PRIORITIES

Where women's priorities have been taken up by UNSC members in their statements, implementation is not always aligned to the views of civil society on the root causes of an issue and appropriate courses of action. One briefer recounted the emphasis she tried to place on accountability in her statement, but the difference in terms of what played out locally:

"One of the things I did during that briefing was to ask for a special court to start trying some of the cases for sexual violence in South Sudan. I said we cannot be waiting for the Hybrid Court forever when gross human rights violations are happening against women. So, what [UN Development Programme] and [UN Mission in South Sudan] picked up was to have a special court on sexual and gender-based violence. Although the court is operational, it does not cover conflict related SGBV, but [instead] violence at the domestic or community level such as wife barter, child neglect, forced marriages and sexual abuse. Rape and gang rape in violent conflicts are not going to be heard."

In the case of 'security issues', civil society briefers' and UNSC members' respective uses of the term suggest fundamental differences. Women civil society briefers tended to raise security issues in the context of 'human security', including risks from a lack of inclusive governance and peace processes, and the need to address poverty and demilitarize civilian areas. Women civil society briefers were also likely to talk about security in relation to supporting disarmament and demobilization efforts among parties to conflict. One briefer spoke about creating the conditions for security as directly tied to demilitarization efforts and opening up humanitarian access:

"The Council should continue to adopt an approach to deconstruct the conflict and localize the peace process by creating local peace agreements in conflict areas, which entails opening humanitarian corridors, as well as the withdrawal of fighters from the city and civilian institutions and ensuring that they are not redeployed to other fronts... The UNSC should promote local peace efforts and reconciliation where women play a central role as mediators. The Council should promote local peace committees that are inclusive of women and youth."

UNSC members, in turn, while often advocating for a political solution to conflict, were more likely to speak generally about creating stable ‘security conditions’, and frequently linked this to commitments to the security sector or peacekeeping missions rather than local efforts. This schism between a focus on localized human security responses and more top-down and militarized security solutions illustrates the importance of developing shared understandings of the underlying problems and relevant solutions around key issues alongside civil society actors.

4.2 LACK OF CONSISTENT POLITICAL WILL IN UNSC MEMBERS’ STATEMENTS

The variation and inconsistency in UNSC members’ adoption of civil society priorities over time suggests **members are missing opportunities to be consistently accountable and responsive to needs locally**. This is especially the case for more controversial issues that national governments are reluctant to act on, but that are critical to women civil society. Women civil society briefers across the three country contexts confirmed this:

“One thing that I’m frustrated about is the situation when it comes to sexual and gender-based violence. Since my briefing, not much is changing on the ground. Even after the signing of the peace agreement, things like the gang rape and abduction of women and girls are still happening.”

“Where is the implementation of transitional justice? What we are seeing in the context is a lack of political will that we are seeing from the government. There are serious delays when it comes to this implementation. The UN Security Council has to keep being there for the people of this country. And especially for the women, we need them to continue acting to put pressure on our government.”

Across our country contexts, **several women civil society briefers also felt that UNSC members should more strongly use coordinated efforts to pressure warring parties**, including governments, to address the realities of women’s exclusion from peace efforts:

“[T]he international community should exert more pressure on the UN in those countries where there are peace processes. It’s not an excuse to say the warring parties don’t want women. This is all talk that is just nonsense. This is 2020, the least we can do is have them participate. There’s no harm in doing that, on the contrary.”

This consistent pressure to protect women’s rights and gender equality is particularly critical in this moment when parties to conflict are leveraging the COVID-19 pandemic to avoid meeting commitments on women’s rights. This makes accountability and the responsiveness of the UNSC to women civil society messages crucial. As one brifer emphasized in her interview, local women’s rights groups are already operating with limited resources and need the UNSC’s support in maintaining the conditions for peace:

“As women we are concerned about the implementation of the peace agreement [in South Sudan]. We have seen that parties are using COVID-19 as an excuse not to implement it. We need the Security Council to hold the parties to the peace agreement accountable, to keep pressuring South Sudan. This is the only hope we have. The Security Council should talk about this frequently.”

Briefers broadly recognized the power of the UNSC to effect tangible change when they choose to apply sustained political pressure on a government. For example, one brifer shared the positive outcomes on civic space in her country when the UNSC applied consistent and targeted pressure to her national governments in regard to accountability:

“There was serious pressure when the UN started talking about arms embargo... although we can now hold activities with less harassment and intimidation, we are still requested to get permission from National Security for approval to hold events. The agents of the security sit in our meetings which is intimidating.”

In addition, the extent to which certain issues were reflected back varied by country (See Section 3.1), suggesting that despite consistently strong calls from briefers on shared concerns, the political dynamics of a certain country situation often prevent messages from breaking through to UNSC decision-makers.

4.3 WORKING METHODS OF THE UNSC

While 70% of UNSC member respondents agreed that the frequency of women civil society briefings should be increased to every time there is a country-specific briefing, their **invitations remain inconsistent and varied**. There are likely many factors that contribute to this reality due to the numerous processes and steps that UNSC members go through in order to contribute to discussions. As explained in Section 2.3.5, it was not possible in this research to investigate all factors. However, our data analysis and interviews revealed that certain UNSC working methods served as barriers to women civil society's meaningful engagement.

Several UNSC member respondents pointed to the UNSC President's key role in influencing or supporting women civil society briefers' engagement, and as a potential barrier. They noted the power of the President to lend credibility and encourage civil society briefers to take part, suggesting that this role could encourage opportunities, but could equally be an obstacle to women's participation – especially if one does not recognize the key role of civil society. One UNSC member said:

“The President of the Security Council has a vast influence in putting forward women civil society briefers. They have the prerogative in selecting the briefers for the different meetings, and those supported by the president tend to be... more welcome and less risky for the decision to be put under a process that can block them.”

In addition, **UNSC member respondents raised the timing for the adoption of the UNSC's Programme of Work – their schedule of meetings and topics which the UNSC approves at the start of every month – as a potential barrier** saying,

“I think it is important that not just the president but the rest of the [Security Council] members put forward CSO candidates as briefers. However, this is not as easy [when you are not president] since the [Security Council] members do not get access to the program of work until a couple of days before the month.”

UNSC member respondents offered some suggestions to ameliorate these challenges, such as having a pool of pre-selected candidates and their information to be able to expedite the nomination and approval process. However, this could be difficult given increasing concerns regarding the safety of briefers, and could put them at risk if the list were to be circulated too broadly. The nature of their respective security situations can change from day to day, necessitating regular consultation with briefers regarding risks to their safety. It could possibly also undermine regular briefings by a wider selection of civil society actors and restrict briefings to a handful of pre-vetted actors. Ensuring that the platform is open to a wide and diverse range of civil society actors is critical.

Furthermore, the President already receives a list of nominees every month from the NGOWG, who also connects bilaterally with member states for additional support for briefers. However, this list is regularly overlooked, and never met in full by the UNSC President. In addition, when a decision is made, it is often at incredibly short notice, as one brifer explained:

“When I was doing the briefing...I felt that the request came in quite late. I was juggling with so many things. But what made it easier was that the NGO Working Group team were willing to help me put together my speech.”

The top factor reducing briefers' influence on a UNSC member's statement itself was timing – 70% of UNSC member respondents stated that if information was delivered too late, it was difficult to incorporate into statements or other outcomes. However, it seems some of the changes to enable more influence will have to come from within the UNSC and member state missions, not civil society briefers. Contextual updates and

recommendations are often needed as early as one month before a briefing, dependent on the member state; this is often before a Programme of Work is even decided. Even if a briefer is able to submit recommendations in that timeframe, what is still unclear is why UNSC members do not refer back to previous women civil society briefer statements when preparing their own in the months that follow, or consult with previous briefers.

4.4 AD HOC ENGAGEMENT OF WOMEN CIVIL SOCIETY BRIEFERS

While timing was an issue for women civil society briefers, they stressed more the limitations of ad hoc invitations and recommended a move towards women's more regular and systematic presence in country-specific briefings. One briefer said:

"They aren't regular, they only happen once in a while when there's a special issue...So it's not mainstreamed into the Council's work. Of course, adding to the issues that their political mandates and directions might not support that. For example, I was very critical about the role of our neighboring countries in fueling conflict in Afghanistan. And that is not very well received by any of them when you actually put that responsibility on countries that might have supporters or strategic allies there...So, I very much think that because it's not mainstream, because it's ad hoc, because it's one time, it doesn't make its way into more meaningful outcomes for the Council's work."

One UNSC member respondent mentioned a possible divide in attitudes within the UNSC as a reason for the overall inconsistency:

"...including CSO briefers helps shape the views of other Council members. Our system is mostly aware and advocating for these perspectives already, but convincing other Council members requires many voices."

However, an issue not raised in interviews, but which has come up consistently for Oxfam and the NGOWG in their advocacy at the UN, is how **UNSC members are often reluctant to invite briefers they consider to be "controversial" or who will cost them political capital to invite.** In some cases, UNSC members will go so far as to identify women civil society who will align with their own national views, compromising on independent civil society voices (which UNSC members recognize as a valuable contribution – see Section 3.1). Civil society should be invited to brief even when their views do not align with the member state inviting them, the country being discussed, or the issues at hand.

Women civil society briefers also situate their participation strategically, seeing their participation as part of a longer-term and collective intervention to keep civil society priorities for their context at the forefront. **They understand the need for UNSC members to hear them over and over again, in the same way they expect UNSC members to apply continuous pressure to the parties to conflict in their contexts:**

"There are so many calls that have not necessarily be implemented. But then I think, it takes continuous advocacy and monitoring, because I don't think it's one statement that is going to change things."

In addition to systematizing women civil society briefings, UNSC members should seek stronger partnerships with those that brief in order to be able to follow up on what is happening in local communities as a result of their efforts. At present, the initiative to pursue these relationships often falls on individual women, drawing on their already limited time and resources:

"Sometimes we do briefings and there is no follow up on our experience and how things are moving. So, I think it's good to track the work we do after the briefing, so we are able to document proper evidence about the achievements of women briefing the Security Council."

“I would never regret it because I think my message went through. The message of the people, which is the most important thing for me. But for me, this has put a lot of burden on my side. I’ve had to leave a lot of work that I could have had an income for because I was just focusing so much on trying to help the country itself. I had to join tens and tens of panels. Everything just got too much. It drains you out a lot.”

Such comments highlight the need to value women’s time as context experts. As well as strengthening political commitments, UNSC members should provide financial support to enable women to participate.

4.5 LIMITED IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

These findings suggest a pattern in which even with UNSC statements and resolutions in place, implementation is not translating into sustained change in local contexts. Although it is clear briefers have a strongly positive impact on the UNSC’s *awareness* of conflict situations and their ability to act on insights tied to local expertise, the importance of the UNSC acting on briefers’ calls to action to the point of creating meaningful improvements in local people’s lives still cannot be overstated. For example, one brifer in Yemen noted these risks:

“Council members’ briefs always contain ‘demands’; however, nothing translates on the ground. Supplies are still obstructed from entering the country; parties continue to impose directives and regulations hindering access...more needs to be done.”

Briefers emphasized in their interviews the very real damage that a lack of UNSC follow-through has on local people’s trust:

“Even the UN, sometimes they have these good intentions so they don’t want to name and shame people because they think it might disrupt the diplomatic process. But they’re also causing mistrust amongst the people. If you tell people in [my country] about the UN, they have lost hope in human rights.”

“These briefings restore some hope for Yemenis that the UN Security Council is actively engaged with their concerns. But statements are not enough the people in Yemen need justice and accountability they need an end to the violence.”

The lesson that emerges is that **sustained political will and sufficient implementation mechanisms are needed to see through commitments to peace at the local level.**⁵³ While not naïve about expecting the UNSC to be a silver bullet on issues, the women we interviewed do recognize the tools that the UNSC has at its disposal to pressure parties. And for many of the women the UNSC is seen as a last resort for rectifying a terrible situation, and an institution in which huge faith is placed:

“Of course, we also understand that there’s bureaucracy around the Council – the power challenges, the dynamics are also problematic, not very balanced at times, so you can’t expect a lot in terms of the changes. But the fact that I saw more women presenting, speaking, delivering statements and in Special Sessions around WPS was very hopeful to me.”

Thus, many women civil society briefers continue to believe in and depend on the power of the UNSC to make a real difference in furthering peace.

4.6 RISK OF REPRISALS

Women civil society briefers also raised personal risks that can come from taking part in UNSC briefings as a serious cause for hesitation, as well as a barrier for women's meaningful participation.

This includes difficult decisions about whether it would be safe to return home following the briefing:

"When I was asked to speak to the Security Council, to be honest I was scared. I was very scared because I have heard of stories of women briefers who are threatened. Women who brief the Council end up not coming back to the country."

Especially when women raise human rights concerns, they are often labeled as 'problems' by hostile governments and other implicated actors. In certain cases, this has led governments who feel threatened by the briefers' actions to intimidate them. One woman civil society breifer spoke to not only the personal risks of this but also the knock-on implications for civic space:

"The aftermath was that when more women were briefing the Council, the government started saying 'these women are selling us out.' Then they started having meetings asking, 'how can we contain the women's voices?' That made some of the women fearful of doing briefings and speaking out on issues of [gender-based] violence."

The UNSC has a crucial role to play in shielding women from the brunt of harassment by backing up speakers with political support and amplifying their messages. In some cases, this could mean supporting protection programming, as one breifer suggests:

"We need to have the 'defend defenders' network...[we] should have more resources to protect women's right[s] defenders. And also, to protect them doesn't mean to take them out of the country. One thing I felt was that when I had the security challenge, I was between making a decision to seek asylum or to go temporarily to another region until things calm down. And then I thought, many human rights defenders they leave their country, and then we leave no voice behind. That is really something that worries me a lot. If I'm out, who can be a voice. So, we need to start looking at how do we protect rights defenders within [our countries] so that they remain safe and doing their own work."

Since many women are uninterested in living in exile, the UNSC must advocate for an enabling environment for women civil society in conflict contexts, as well as within the UNSC itself.⁵⁴ Even within the UNSC space, some women spoke of facing intimidation. For example, one woman breifer was followed out of the meeting and cornered by representatives from governments party to the conflict:

"To be very frank, I did feel the pressure from the regional and local players, even some of the international community. I was shocked when someone from our Mission spoke to me and said you're going to be briefing the Council, so we need to see your statement... Until now, I still feel that I have been put in a corner by all of them. They couldn't forgive me for doing this. It does put a threat on the breifer."

An enabling environment should be created by the UNSC to sustain its engagement with women and their networks. **Greater partnership could help to ensure recommendations are implemented – and as intended by the women civil society briefers** (See Section 4.1). In addition, pushing for the UN system to provide more resources for civic space protection, and amplifying women's messages in UNSC statements, would be particularly effective in illustrating that the broader international community is supportive (as outlined in Section 4.2). Women who brief can be treated as targets and isolated actors if there is not a broader community of support willing to defend, legitimize, and uphold their independence and their work. For this, member states, UN entities, and INGOs that prize civil society must take up the long-term strategy of regularly raising their recommendations and work to make them part of the norm and not be seen as controversial actors, which allows them to be picked off by state and non-state actors that view them as easy targets.

Despite the potential personal risks, the women briefers we spoke with across each of the country contexts also described participating at the UNSC as critical for realizing sustainable peace, as well as for holding critical civic space:

“People from political groups approach me and ask me not to expose things about South Sudan. They say I’m giving a bad image of the country. But I tell them that the truth must be said. I have information on human rights violations and violence against women. I’m wishing for the best for my country – I was born here, raised here, and I do the work. And I’m giving back to my country in this way.”

“I think it’s a great platform for civil society to echo voices to speak of issues but also, I cannot forget the security situation back home. I was thinking should I take this? But to hand it off, you know in civil society we are looking for space to air issues. Normally we have to fight for space, and it’s not there. And if I passed it would be unfortunate, like me blocking the way for civil society colleagues who are with me or would come after me in the meetings.”

It is clear women civil society briefers believe that even with the risks, these opportunities to brief at the UNSC are critical for reaching the ear of decision-makers at the highest level of international governance.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“We need not just to be consulted, but to be heard. When we raise concerns about tensions mounting or the need for services, we speak from an informed position of local knowledge – these are our communities.” – Ms. Angelina Nyajima Simon Jial, statement to the UNSC (8 March 2019)⁵⁵

As human rights defenders, peacebuilders, humanitarians, and leaders, women civil society briefers are embedded in local contexts and networks, giving them access to spaces and information that may otherwise be lost in high-level decision-making processes. Time and again, their statements convey vital data about the experiences and needs of people in their countries that, if listened to, open new possibilities for the UNSC to be more responsive with its actions – and have a greater impact on local people’s lives.

While we should rightfully celebrate Resolution 1325 (2000) as a historic landmark in valuing the contributions of women in preventing conflict, ending conflict, and rebuilding after conflict, it is important that we find ways to move beyond rhetoric to meaningful change. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently said, “inequality starts at the top: in global institutions. Addressing inequality must start by reforming them.”⁵⁶ For the UNSC, this means holding itself accountable for the commitments it makes, including taking a critical look at how civil society can meaningfully participate. This involves tackling the urgent need to shore up the inconsistent political will to include diverse women civil society briefers – and ensure their priorities are fairly reflected in decisions and actions. As one brifer stated, “[women] don’t just brief because we want to be at the UNSC – it’s because there are serious issues.”

We are at a critical point, where diverse perspectives and approaches are vital to effective international peace and security decision-making, yet we continue to rely on methods that undermine women’s contributions. Overcoming barriers to women’s meaningful participation involves valuing both the depth and breadth of views from local civic spaces that women brief the UNSC with, and the collaborative ways in which they gather and shape the information they share. Just as the nature of conflict has evolved, the mechanisms and approaches to transform and address the root causes must also change. It is the UNSC’s duty to be at the forefront of modeling these changes for full, equal, and meaningful participation without delay.

5.1 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 breifer 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.⁵⁷
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.

6 NOTES AND REFERENCES

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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
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- The information is not convincing or unclear
- There is not enough opportunity to meet with CSO briefers and discuss the information
- Other (please specify):

7. What are some of the factors you think may improve the influence of CSO briefers in your work? (please tick all that apply)

- Persuasiveness of speaker
- The information shared aligns with my government's existing priorities
- The information is delivered in a timely manner
- CSO briefers provide data or statistical information from local sources
- CSO briefers present clear information and calls to action
- Opportunity to meet with CSO briefers and discuss issues outside of formal Council meeting
- Other (please specify):

8. How often would you like to hear from CSO briefers in Council meetings?

- I would like to hear from them at one country-specific briefing per year
- I would like to hear from them every time there is a country-specific briefing, regardless of frequency
- I would like to hear from them during half of the country-specific briefings
- Other (please specify):

9. What role does the President of the Security Council have on influencing your decision to support or put forth a CSO brifer?

10. Is there anything else you would recommend about improving how CSO briefers are included in the Council? Do you have any further feedback on what has worked well or not worked well?

Research reports

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 publishing organizations. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the publishers.

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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 978-1-78748-711-6 in December 2020. DOI: 10.21201/2020.7116
Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

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