Social media, blockchain, big data & co: How do we support women mediators in peace processes in a technology-driven world, writes Fiona Knäussel

Since the introduction of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in 2000, women's inclusion and active participation in peace processes have been promoted and promised on multiple occasions. Within the last 20 years, we have also learned and recognized that women's involvement is important for achieving sustainable peace. Yet, the reality is that women are still excluded from many political efforts to end conflict, or have to risk their personal safety to secure a seat at the negotiating table. Enabling women mediators to participate in and lead peace talks remains an urgent goal in the 20th anniversary year of UNSCR 1325. How and when can technology help?

PeaceTech for Women

In recent days, women have been involved in online consultations and mediation in a number of conflicts around the world. Online consultations – now fast-tracked with the COVID-19 pandemic, are one part of a multi-disciplinary development of technologies aimed at supporting peacebuilding activities, or in-short 'PeaceTech'. PeaceTech offers new opportunities to support inclusion in peace processes. While many industries in the world, including warfare, have heavily benefited from the rapid emergence of new technologies, peacebuilders have only recently begun to engage with this

trend. However, as the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates, the use of new technologies for peacebuilding has become an urgent necessity. The potential for PeaceTech is vast, and goes beyond the exchange of information on social media, and the use of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) such as smartphone apps.

The Challenges

However, PeaceTech is still an emerging practice with limited sources for funding. Therefore, its application on the ground is underdeveloped, and there are additional challenges involved for women to engage with nascent PeaceTech initiatives.

Lack of infrastructure: Conflict-affected and developing countries struggle with the lack of access to digital devices, including smartphones and PCs, and to continuous, stable internet coverage and broadband connection. According to a 2019 report by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 53% of the global population use the internet, while only 19.1% of the people living in the least developing countries have internet access. This is despite the fact that 93% of all people live within the reach of mobile broadband. Additionally, even places with existing connections face connectivity issues, such as in Yemen, where connectivity is unstable as fallback options for damaged undersea cables are more tenuous than in many other countries. Hence, days-long internet outages, such as most recently in January 2020, take place regularly. Furthermore, the internet is now divided and controlled with different ISPs for the government-controlled and Houthi rebel controlled internets. Another problem in many countries, is lack of privacy (and therefore security), and the common occurrence of deliberate internet shutdowns and social media restrictions, as well as state-based censorship, particularly during times of unrest and crisis, which, for instances, has been the case in many countries during COVID-19. On top of this, women are prone to having

insufficient or no access to a phone and the internet. On a global average, women are 26% less likely than men to have a smartphone and access to mobile internet. In the global south, this percentage is even higher, with 34% in Africa and 70% in South Asia.

Lack of financial resources: The lack of funding for devices, access to the internetand further research into their use for peacebuilding purposes poses a great hurdle. Among conflict-affected people, and in particular, women, as well as peacebuilding and women's organisations, money for expensive technologies is scarce. For women, especially when they have been displaced, forced into dependency, or made the family's only breadwinner, such an expense is unthinkable.

Digital illiteracy: Due to the lack of access to phone and internet, and prevailing structures of gender inequality, women are less likely to own and regularly use digital tools. This makes digital illiteracy among the population, but especially among women and girls, who have less exposure to technology than their male peers, a significant problem. Despite this, in some contexts, established women peacebuilders have utilised the internet as an opportunity to expand their existing networks and promote their activities. Members of the Yemeni women's coalition, Peace Track Initiative, for example, have continued with their peacebuilding efforts throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by corresponding over digital platforms such as Whatsapp, and have even tracked ceasefire negotiations over Twitter. However, women without this existing link to a network or who lack confidence with basic online tasks may face difficulties with accessing initiatives, and risk being isolated from digital activities.

Becoming a target: For anyone in a conflict-affected setting, participating in peacebuilding may turn them into a target of displeased authorities. Authoritarian governments have long opted to using surveillance methods, such as trackers, to

monitor and disrupt activists' and peacebuilders' online activity, which, in some instances, may lead to them being threatened, harassed, arbitrarily detained, tortured, vanished, or killed. In Vietnam, for example, a repressive new Cybersecurity law from 2019 has intensified the use of surveillance to target human rights activists operating online and increased the number of prisoners of conscience in the country's detention facilities. In other contexts, women are specifically targeted if they stand up for their rights or are politically active, such as in Houthi governed regions in Yemen, where for some women this has meant being captured, detained and sexually abused.

Online gender-based violence (GBV): Besides general challenges that women face in, use of technology can carry gender-specific risks. These include the spread of online gender-based violence (GBV), which can manifest itself as bullying, hate speech, blackmailing, cyberstalking, sex trafficking and more. Twitter, for example, has been named the most toxic social media platform for women to interact on. Its open and public nature has created a space in which harassment of women is immediate and widespread, when at the same time, it is one of the most important platforms for them to be vocal on. In May 2020, this was the case for Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Tawakkol Karman, who became the target of a smear campaign led by Saudi Arabian media. The stress and anxiety women experience as a result of online GBV often has real-life implications, such as a fear for physical harm, and can cause them to self-censor, leave a platform, or become tech-averse altogether. Many female journalists, for example, as a survey by the International Women's Media Foundation has revealed, feel the need to withdraw news stories or avoid certain topics in their work as a consequence of encountering online attacks and harassment. Additionally, some forms of online GBV can also have severe implications for the involved in real-life, notably when harmful threats are realised in person.

Too few women in tech: Within 'Big Tech'—the five largest tech companies in the US (Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google and Microsoft)—less than 25% of tech jobs are held by women. This figure is not an abnormality in other tech-savvy countries either. As a result, devices, applications and content are mostly created by men, and are more likely to be tailored to men's interests than aimed at benefitting everyone regardless of gender roles. For the above challenges to be addressed more effectively, gendered perspectives in technological development are needed, and ideally, women will be at the forefront to lead on them.

What does a PeaceTech solution need to do to be useful for women mediators?

Participating in peacebuilding activities can put individuals, and especially women, at a risk. Increased online activity and the use of digital devices may reinforce this risk if insufficient protective measures are put in place. This, in turn, creates an adverse effect on women's inclusion. To ask ourselves if a technological solution for women does more harm than good, we should consider if it tackles the challenges described above. This means thinking of what kind of technology women mediators on the ground find practicable and user-friendly, and how to utilise and adapt these technologies to provide adequate peacebuilding tools. The following are some important aspects to consider:

Does it inform? An aim of PeaceTech is often to provide better information, for example, to make sense of 'Big Data'—the abundance of information in the world—in a concise way to, then, better inform peacebuilding efforts. If done right, this can contribute towards equipping women with the necessary knowledge and skills to enter the peacebuilding arena, or to be offered greater support if they are already experienced.

Does it support? A PeaceTech solution can build on existing knowledge, motivations and goals, and support women with

further tools. This can be by creating platforms to build networks, by providing resource hubs that makes it easier for mediators to access certain data, by facilitating decision-making through scientific methods and algorithms, by offering applications to collect data (e.g. survey apps), by enabling knowledge-exchange on dedicated dialogue platforms, and by simplifying the presentation of information (e.g. with data visualisation tools).

Does it enable? Women who previously were not able to effectively participate in peacebuilding should find themselves empowered and enabled through PeaceTech solutions, rather than further disempowered. If a tool provides the right skeleton, female users will be able to use it to acquire vital competences, for example, by: bridging important gaps in knowledge; providing data-supported arguments for negotiations; raising international awareness and support; founding and expanding networks; finding common ground and building coalitions; running own projects on their platform; or by learning about their rights and what tools might help to realize them.

Does it aim to mitigate the associated risks? Women face greater societal, mental and physical risks when accessing technologies. The design of safeguards and protective measures for existing and new tools is needed to guarantee that online spaces are safe for women to use and do not further replicate or reinforce offline gender inequalities and exclusion. Secondly, offline availability of PeaceTech tools can be a critical asset to its practicability. It tackles the issue of low or unstable network connectivity, as well as the fact that women are less likely to own their own devices.Thirdly, the easy navigation and straightforward use of an application can be beneficial in circumventing digital illiteracy. There are many innovative and promising applications out there that are too complicated to be used by the average user without tech background, and even less so by people without the necessary

infrastructure. If peacebuilders with limited access to technological infrastructure and digital literacy cannot apply PeaceTech solutions in practice, we are wasting important opportunities. Finally, a PeaceTech tool should be universally accessible and eliminate cultural and language barriers. In practice, this means that the application designs need to appeal to women from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, and ensure availability in multiple languages, which raises key development requirements, such as user interfaces which function as well in Arabic as they do in English.

Challenges going forward

As informed and well-intentioned any new PeaceTech tool might be, its practicability and impact will only reveal themselves in the hands of its end-users. In the case of PeaceTech tools for women's inclusion in peace procceses, women mediators' user experiences will be critical to its development. The focus should be what benefit the tool gives to a peacebuilder that they otherwise would not have, and if it does so in a safe matter. Technologies have only come this far because they are continuously scrutinised, adapted and improved, and women mediators and their supporters need to have the same honest conversation about what works and what does not, where problems and risks lie, and how we can address these most effectively. This might mean taking a closer look at the circumstances of end users, what options are needed to provide the necessary knowledge and infrastructure, and in the longer-term, to vehemently advocate for women's education, digital literacy and access to technology. PeaceTech as a field is just as much about the exchanging of knowledge and sharing good (and bad) practice as it is about delivering a technological solution. And any PeaceTech solution is only useful if it effectively supports a peacebuilder on the ground.

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Fiona Knäussel is a graduate fellow from PSRP. She was part of a women-led team developing 'PeaceFem' which works to develop a PeaceTech platform to support women mediators, is through a new mobile app. This is the result of a collaboration between UN Women and three leading research programmes on women's mediation. PeaceFem is a mobile app that provides a full picture to selected peace processes by combining women's strategies for mobilisation, the factors enabling and constraining their engagement and the gender provisions incorporated in peace agreements as a result of those engagements.