

The background of the image features a vintage-style map with a grid of latitude and longitude lines. A prominent compass rose is visible in the lower right quadrant. Overlaid on the left side of the map is a large, flowing piece of red fabric, possibly a shawl or a flag, which adds a sense of movement and texture to the composition. The text is centered over the fabric and map.

**A DAY IN A LIFE OF  
WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS  
IN THE TIME  
OF COVID**



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WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS  
IN THE TIME  
OF COVID



DEMOCRACY TODAY

2020

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## INSTEAD OF INTRODUCTION

It was the hardest task to write an introduction to this outstanding collection of one-page stories: "One Day In The Life of Women Peace Builders at the Time of CORONA" written by amazing women from various parts of the world between April to August 2020.

2020 is a significant year for women's rights with celebrations of achievements related to progress in women's movement throughout the world. It's the year of anniversaries of many iconic documents for women's rights: the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 20th anniversary of the 1325 Resolution on Women, Peace and Security, the 10th anniversary of UN Women and many other accomplishments for which regional events have been planned.

Irrespective of challenges brought on by Covid-19, many of these events still took place with some moved to the cyberspace while others were held, observing strict security regulations related to COVID-19—and many celebrations are still in the pipeline. While considerable accomplishments have been made by women in many parts of the world and women have sound reasons to celebrate, important discussions are also planned to understand the inability of the nation states and countries to meet the pledges taken under the international laws and policies to guarantee women's equity and equality. And why the essential issues, like guarantying women's

freedom from discrimination, violence, racism, meaningful participation in the peace process and governance, right to vote and equal pay – are still not upheld by most governments worldwide.

Many complex discussions are planned to understand the impact of different colliding factors which include: the global existential challenges related to deep economic recession, devastating climate change, extreme inequality, uprising against racist policies and global rise of and the entry into political establishments of the states of far-right parties with openly misogynistic and sexist behaviour towards women in many countries which has become acceptable as far-right leaders make negative comments about women. Events are also planned to analyse the methodologies adopted by International agencies and women's groups to enforce legislation and translate policies into realities for women. There are also planned discussions to analyse the effectiveness of methodologies developed by women throughout the years and their adequacy and correspondence to today's political realities.

We have discussed the impact of Covid-19 and complex relations bound with it throughout all these months—they are going to be pivotal for multi-sector analysis. With Covid-19's onset, humanity faced the unprecedented global challenge on the universal scale, and new rules of personal behavior and working standards introduced challenges not always

easily acceptable. In addition, the pandemic has brought up numerous existing governance and management problems among many huge inequalities of wealth distribution and levels of protection of people throughout the world. The pandemic also augmented and exacerbated numerous existing problems in societies that women faced worldwide—from gender-based violence, honor-killings, children in abusive families, women's trafficking and forced labour, women working in shadow economy, climate change, conflicts, wars and financial crisis. In response to all these, women are disproportionately affected and pushed to the forefront of the pandemic response efforts as caretakers, mothers, essential workers, healthcare providers and victims of the virus. These and many other social, economic and human rights issues revealed and caused by the pandemic must be brought to the attention of the states, demanding urgent state response and long-term programs.

This publication "One Day In The Life of Women Peace Builders at the Time of CORONA" is a unique collection of documentation of a day in the life of 53 women from 38 countries. As the stories keep coming, we decided to have an electronic publication of the stories we already received and compile the full collection by the end of this year. We plan to publish the full collection on the eve of our 8th Annual International Conference and the 9th Young Women's Peace Award. Both the conference and the book are part of the 2020 celebration by Democracy Today.

Three generations of women have invested and shared their personal narratives. From long-time peace and anti-militarism writers,

to remarkable women at the forefront of development of the most pivotal women's rights documents celebrated this year, including the UN Protocol on actions against trafficking of women and children that laid the foundations to policies of many states and international agencies and to the OSCE counter trafficking policy, to experts on minority rights and women's role in Parliaments and political decision making, to young women working in the field daily some of them being laureates of International Young Women's peace award, established by "Democracy Today", translating the commitments of these laws and programs into a reality of everyday lives of women and children. They are making society more resilient and people more protected—with extensive knowledge on the situation on the ground.

For us in Democracy Today, each story was a memorable event—providing us with new energy and insight into the tremendous change women are advancing in the world through their unnoticed, daily creativity and wisdom.

This publication is not about figures, comparisons, or politics. It is about women and their lives and work, which they rarely discuss. It is an original chronicle of the daily lives of selfless, remarkable women, who are inspired to be change makers for better lives and have the strength to inspire others. It is a documentation into understanding women, under unusual and unpredictable Covid-19 related state of existence. It is a narrative on changes in the women's lives related to Covid-19 and the creative solutions and methodologies they procured to continue their work under the most challenging conditions.



The stories shed light on the invisible groups of the society with whom the women work with, and the courage they must display to continue their work in the most astonishing conditions far from politicians and media attention. They work with child-headed households, IDPs and war divided groups, women victims of forced marriages and domestic violence, migrant workers and victims of trafficking, and women in refugee camps. The women share their innovative activism during Covid-19, difficulties of working online when personal touch and emotions are life changing, be it victims of domestic violence, refugees and IDPs in camps or handicapped children for whom just a hug can mean rehabilitation. They write also about their own family relations and changed behaviours.

In their stories, women present their recommendations to the governments, international communities and the world leaders in addressing women's rights. We hope in this form their recommendations will be heard and put into action by those they address.

We arranged the stories in this collection according to the order in which we received them-with almost no editing to preserve the ingenuity and cultural specificity of the women's country. It was the most miraculous coincidence that the first story came from the 93-year-old Louise Sheneider, a lifetime anti-war activist from Switzerland, whose story inhaled force and power to the whole collection of stories. She writes:

*Never have as many women applied for the army as this year. What's going on? Do you really want to embark on the worst kind of slavery,*

*voluntarily, and have people from above dictate when you should lift your right and when your left foot? Why are so many youngsters being enlisted to serve in the protection of the public? A lot of them don't have anything to do, but the army presents itself as the big saviour. We really don't need an army for that!*

Lock downs are not seen as a threat to women as many survived wars and earthquake. They know how the quality of their work and personal attitude, behaviour, personal touch, hugs and words of encouragement matter for those they work with child-headed households, victims of domestic violence, victims of human trafficking and forced labour, IDPs, abused and handicapped children. Women from Georgia write on difficulties in working with IDPs when they lack internet connection, and the elderly IDPs lacking modern communication means and in need of daily support, human touch and personal conversations.

*And over the years of my work in the North Caucasus, I already developed a strong immunity to unexpected surprises, thanks to which I gained a valuable gift, knowledge and love which I generously share with those who need help and support - Chechnya*

*It will pass, the major point is to stay active and follow my own favorite formula of life: the more you do, the more you manage - diplomat from Russian Federation*

Remembering the scarcity of food during the war in Lebanon, and other difficulties that was the real hardship, not what we have today - Lebanon and Gyumri, Armenia

Covid-19 revealed the stark inequalities of

our world. How preventive global protocols proposed by WHO on self-isolation and simple hygiene rules like washing hands under running water is impossible in areas lacking water and where soap is a rare product.

*The child-headed families<sup>1</sup> have been suffering in silence due to fear and stigma that comes with being members of such families - Kenya*

*Personal time is impossible during the time of Covid-19, we had to listen to women, specifically as rate of domestic violence has grown and similarly grown police brutality - Iraq*

*There is no time, no space, we can be dispossessed at any time, of our right to health, we can be Sharawi's, Palestinians, with restricted movements, without the availability of our livelihoods, dependent on those whose they call and make us dispossessed - Spain*

*Thus, during this Covid-19 pandemic time, while I had to cease face-to-face advocacy work, my daily work during stay home order has been the constant monitoring of the military abuses against the civilians and advocacy online in order to keep the international momentum during this pandemic time and keep pursuing for the issue of justice and accountability for these crimes that Myanmar military has committed and continue to commit - Myanmar.*

**As women peace builders, we easily found a way to quickly adapt to the new reality of enforced isolation and online meetings and immediately connected, communicated and**

**continued without missing a peacebuilding beat. - Cyprus.**

*Under a pandemic situation, being at home makes a working day more intense and busy - we have now more opportunities to spread the word about peace initiatives and reach out to the masses because many people are online and have more time to get information. As always women find the most creative solutions to make their work effectively done - Georgia*

*While during pandemic organization of demonstration have been halted, they organized a demonstration without moving all of us together through a banner where each activist comes to stick their photo and leave. This banner is displayed for 2 days in front of the Ministry of Justice, and two days at the door of the parliament - Mauritania*

*Women write on changes in their personal lives with great sense of humor:*

*"Warriors break". The virus caused a change in my daily life, so I created new positive behaviors between me and my family. There was no pressure for studying exams on my children until they did their homework. One of the funny things that I discovered during this period is that my daughter has become taller than me and that my little son loves photography. Even cooking has turned into a family ritual that everyone helps in, and I have time to make our favorite meals- Iraq*

**The critical part of the collection of stories are recommendations prepared by highly experienced women around field work and policy development. Expert from Germany presents a detailed manifest and roadmap for promotion of women's rights and famous**

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1. <http://www.Anppcan.Org/many-children-living-in-child-headed-households-inkenya/#:~:text=among%20the%20four%20major%20urban,while%20mombasa%20has%204%2c001%20children.>



feminist from Cyprus writes on effective feminist policies. World known experts from Senegal and Great Britain write on the role of women in the Parliament and rights of minority women. Their recommendations are a solid basis for the state policies in advancing women's rights. The well-known journalist from Russian Federation, writes on the importance and the professional role of the media in reaching out to the government and the international agencies.

Other women peace builders offer more insight:

*All these should be a wake-up call for us, the feminists across the globe but also it is time for leaders to take up their responsibility and act upon it. In numerous cases feminists stated that we will never reach equality as long as women and children continue to fall victims of any form of male violence including rape and trafficking for any form of exploitation. We have to demand that in the same way that most leaders across the world employ political will to combat Covid-19 we can certainly use some of it to reach equality. We need institutional structures. We need to fight harder for this. We have to go back and remind ourselves of the long fights of feminists and demand access and shared/ equal power, re-activate our networks to look deeper to what we have fought for throughout her story and come out of this united and stronger. Political leaders should take on their own responsibility and urgently move from words to actions and walk the talk-Cyprus*

*The strategies to deal with pandemic are mainly elaborated by male researcher and communicated by male leaders who take the*

*crisis as an opportunity to consolidate their power and exercise their authority as strong men. The side effects are evident: patriarchal images of masculinity, narratives of women as caring members of the society diligently providing services for their next and for the nation (didn't we have this before...?), while the male members are there to defend the national unity, inventing their own unique nationalistically underpinned authentic strategy to defy the virus. In their discourse, they pretend to protect the weak, such as women. Is it a pure rhetoric trick? At least, as far as we can see, these big words leave no traces in the financial contributions - Switzerland.*

Women recommend policies during and after COVID-19-, and for stronger solidarity and unity in promoting women's rights.

We have realized more than ever that a solidarity network needs to be formed in Cyprus to look after cases of humanitarian nature and try to solve them esp in times of a pandemic when medications and food are needed, a crisis when people lose their jobs, natural disasters, today we had a fire in the northern part of the island (Turkish Cypriot Community), for the first time airplanes and helicopters from the south (Greek Cypriot community) took off and helped over, with putting of the fires - Cyprus

More importantly women write on positive lessons learned from COVID-19 - to build a new, transformed world of shared humanity.

These are positive disasters of Covid-19, if we learned how we unite humanly and believe that we are all sons of this earth and there is no difference between us at all - Syria

What matters to me is to do whatever I can to help build on the sense of shared humanity that so many are feeling just now, so that together we can transform our world. We need attention, affection and support, we cannot give up on interpersonal relationships - Great Britain.

And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what storms are all about- Croatia (referencing Haruki Murakami's Kafka on the Shore)

While we offered short excerpts from the numerous stories from women peace builders, we hope you will find the full stories from the frontlines of peace building truly inspirational and can adopt useful and practical ideas for your fieldwork. We leave you with inspiring words of the UN General Secretary, Antonio Guterres:

The #COVID-19-19-1919 pandemic is demonstrating what we all know: millennia of patriarchy have resulted in a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture which damages everyone - women, men, girls & boys.

We must also emerge from this crisis with women's equal leadership and representation. The past months have seen a growing recognition in the media and through academic research highlighting what we have known anecdotally for years: that women leaders are extremely effective. Women heads of state, ministers for health, health workers and community leaders

are winning widespread recognition for their empathy, compassion, communication and evidence-based decision-making.

"Democracy Today "wishes to thank all the women who found time in their busy schedule to share their stories and those who still will send. We also would like to thank our board member Jackie Abramian famous journalist for advise and taking many stories of women to FORBES magazine.

*“Democracy Today” team*

# STORY 1



*Author:* Louise Schneider

*Country:* Switzerland

*Louise, who has been active in the Swiss peace movement for many years, committed to human rights and equality is sitting in her garden and thinking.*

## COVID 19?

What a drama! What I notice first: the army is becoming stronger and stronger, that can't be! I write to the newspapers, knowing that they won't publish my letters. But where are the activists now, where are we feeling this spirit of optimism, where has all the energy generated by the women's strike gone? Never have as many women applied for the army as this year. What's going on? Do you really want to embark on the worst kind of slavery, voluntarily, and have people from above dictate when you should lift your right and when your left foot? Why are so many youngsters being enlisted to serve in the protection of the public? A lot of them don't have anything to do, but the army presents itself as the big saviour. We really don't need an army for that!

The whole world is in discord, it looks like in times of war, the language, the ads, like in the war. I suspected that our society would not turn out well. There is no equality. Human rights are something else. I'm an attentive person, I can hear the grass growing. Yes, this is it, now we "old" ones are dropped, I knew it. The relaxation of the rules is for the others,

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2. GSoA = Gesellschaft für eine Schweiz ohne Armee / Association for Switzerland without an army

we, the old are staying home, "protected". Nevertheless, we shouldn't lose patience now and make use of the time we have.

Corona means that at my age I am part of the risk group of the old (Louise is 89 years old). Of course, the measures taken hit you hard. I live alone, I am alone since my husband died. But I always had lots of visitors. The young activists from GSoA<sup>2</sup>, old friends from the peace movement, my family. They were all here often, in the living room, in the garden. We ate, debated, cooked together. Now nobody comes, nobody is allowed to visit, because I'm to be protected, it's the distancing that is demanded.

Yesterday was the third anniversary of my "spraying action" in front of the Swiss National Bank SNB: Money for arms kills. This had led to my being taken away to the police station, but also to many letters and enthusiastic media reports. I was in fact planning to stand in front of the SNB with a banner yesterday. I'm sure I would have had lots of support. My slogan "Money for arms kills" is still highly topical, unfortunately. Because of this Covid drama, all that cannot happen now. An activist came to see me, we made a toast in the garden, keeping the required distance of course, and we talked about peace policies.

You saw my peace flag, hung on the fence, well visible for all passers-by. Sadly, the appeal for the Easter March is missing, it's not happening this year. Whilst sorting my papers, I have the time for that now, I found some of the speeches I held as an activist for GSoA who had co-organized the Easter March. It's important for peace events like these, with



such an impact, to be supported by secular and not only church organizations.

In times of Corona everybody is talking about chats across the garden fences. Up to now I've had little to do with my neighbours, they live different lives to mine, they have different ideas. So, I was most astonished when I found a prettily wrapped cake, courtesy of my neighbours, in my letterbox. They have probably become one of the hobby-bakers due to Corona. Should I accept this? I don't want any help from people with whom I would not normally have anything to do with.

Digitalization worries me. I don't have any internet of course, I don't want it, maybe I'm a bit old-fashioned. I have a landline and I write and write and write. But what I'm observing today is that even the left (left wing parties) is canonizing the digital world, but beware! The internet is certainly helping to get the virus under control, but that's only part of the

truth. What's missing are the direct encounters. Feeling, touching, an awareness of closeness, these are the important components of peace work. That's why I always go out on the streets to collect signatures for petitions, so that I can talk to people, get them into dialogues. That's what gives us strength, this experience of closeness, face to face discussions.

During the day, I often think about what's happening to our society, where the peace activists are, why the voices raised against the relaxation of the law against arms export aren't louder. Thanks to Corona we have lots of time to think. So just don't lose patience now, hang in there and reflect! Everybody probably realizes that there are going to be some tough changes, it will just take some time. But yes, then GSoA must get back into action, they have to mobilize society, something has got to happen.

We need attention, affection and support, we cannot give up on interpersonal relationships. My great-granddaughter sent me a drawing; she had painted "something beautiful": our whole family taking a walk to grandmother's house.

## STORY 2



*Author:* Annemarie Sancar

*Country:* Switzerland

*Organisation:* Bern Counselling Bureau for Undocumented Migrants

Today is Friday, 17th of April 2020. Under normal circumstances, this is the day, when undocumented migrants can enter our counselling bureau<sup>3</sup> to get advice without prior appointment. Our door is open between 3 and 7 PM, the waiting room fills up with people quite quickly.

Since the covid-19 related lockdown, we cancelled the open counselling afternoons. The mode of advising is limited to phone or mail. Only if necessary, we agree upon a specific hour for direct counselling. Otherwise, our doors remain closed. This is a big change and challenge for us as social workers, as well as, for our "clients", undocumented migrants. They need to call for an appointment and ring the bell, a very unusual situation for all of us.

Still, today we could advise 12 individuals, of course respecting the two-meter distance, Plexiglas disk between us and the person. We are only a small team of four women. We share different tasks such as counselling, fundraising, communication, administration. Normally we work with a committed group of volunteers, retired social workers or young lawyers. Under the current conditions we cannot rely on them, which is of course a sad side effect.

The Corona-crisis hits undocumented migrants heavily. Many of them are working

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3. The Bern Counselling for Undocumented People is an NGO. The public and political support is quite broad, the churches, NGOs, private donors and members support the NGO also financially. Besides the paid team, the office can rely on a broad group of volunteers.



here, without permission. A work salary is necessary to cover the costs of their daily needs. Otherwise, they do not even have the minimal security. Now, due to the Covid-related measures many of them have lost their jobs. Their existential security is fundamentally threatened. At the same time, their status obstructs their access to unemployment benefit or social security. The issues they sought answers to today reflect this clearly: What can I do; now that I have lost my job? The rent has to be paid, the accommodation may get lost and they know that for undocumented migrants it is almost impossible to find a new shelter. They are hungry and don't have cash to buy food. The Health insurance bill must be paid and they are afraid, that if they do not pay it, they will be discovered, punished and deported.

In order to give them a minimal support, we initiated a "Corona-Emergency-Fund", supported by the catholic church of the region of Bern with a contribution. Since our office is quite well known and highly appreciated, we have a big and steady number of donors and members we can rely on. Some of the committed supporters send us vouchers for grocery stores, which we can distribute easily. We can also submit requests to Caritas, if we need more money for complicated individual cases, among those also single women with children.

The longer this situation will last, the more emergency calls we will get. The economy is imploding, the labour market shrinking, and many of the undocumented migrants will be the first to land on the street - without social security or any other safety net. The

workload of our Bern Counselling Office for Undocumented Migrants will increase immensely, so will the need for our support.



No woman is illegal - Women's strike 2019 in Bern,  
Bern Counselling office for undocumented Migrants

Undocumented migrants are scared of getting sick. Corona, the expensive treatments, all that frightens them. On the top of all these worries, as undocumented persons, they are haunted by the fear of losing their invisibility. If ever they need to be hospitalized, they run the risk that their stay will be communicated to the Aliens Police. It is our task to explain them the access to hospitals and support the in term of health insurance. Of course, the normal problems of the undocumented remain as well, regularization, requests for leave to stay in order to get married, school enrolment of their kids. Today we gave advice (phone or video) about the requirements for marriage, elderly pension schemes, regularization, and access to German classes, and answered questions concerning convictions for irregular stay in Switzerland. Friday afternoon, closing the door behind us, we leave with a certain uneasiness, what will come next?

## STORY 3



*Author:* Shirine Jurdi\*

*Country:* Lebanon

*Stop and reflect: an opportunity wrapping the constraints.*

Let me start with expressing my sincere sentiments and support to all of you who faced Covid-19 barehanded. Let us pray for all those who lost their lives to Corona and to all the families who were unable to pay farewell ceremonies to their beloved ones. Covid-19 exposed the weak, feeble and not properly equipped health system, which was sometimes lacking prompt governmental procedures or coordination. Despite of all the suffering that we collectively passed through we had to fight individually.

Anyway, many of you will agree that Covid-19 came as crisis, as a war with the exception of the armed conflict. Why do I say that? Well, I remember all the wars we passed through in Lebanon, how we were in lockdown, not in our houses but either in corridors or in the basements to escape the bombs. Lots of time we had food shortage, families got disconnected. There was no physical distancing. Time and space were different then. People kept on thinking why they cannot live their life in peace. Social media was not there to show what was really happening. "Responsibility to protect" was not yet adopted at the UNGA<sup>4</sup> as a political concept that holds states accountable for crimes against humanity.

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\* Shirine El Jurdi is a laureate of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2019.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.

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4. United Nations office on genocide prevention and the responsibility to protect. n.d. "Responsibility to protect." <https://www.un.org/>. Accessed 08 29, 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.shtml>.

Now coronavirus is worldwide. It came to change. That is my moto during Covid-19. We take it as an opportunity, a crisis that unveiled the mask of ruling elites and their hegemonic, patriarchal power. In the absence of a human-centred approach, governments were entrapped in front of their people and in front of the international community. Health system, nurses, delivery staff, many segments of population started to re-evaluate what is essential and what is not.

The world we were living in seems somehow blurry now. The real threats and basic concerns for humanity and human life are redefined now. It only became clearer with the redefinition of essentials and non-essentials that human life and well-being is flagged out. Just going few steps back and moving few steps ahead or staying in between we see that it was and it is still us, the people, the peacebuilders working on the ground, who called for the 'human first', 'dignity first', 'well-being first'. So, let us stop and reflect.

Coronavirus crossed continents, boundaries, genders, age groups, ethnicities, minorities, social classes. And yet the impact and the means to fight the pandemic were not handled with the necessary knowledge, sufficient resources or mechanisms. Challenges are many, but there are still opportunities for us to collaborate more in the aftermath of Covid-19. We are the people and we are many.

How many of you thought that before the coronavirus we were entrapped with our lives, that we rarely had time to think. It seems to me now that slavery is not over. It just changed its shape and form the most dangerous of

which is the "slavery of the minds". No time to think and reflect on what is happening around us. Lots of concepts coming in the discussion, lots of policy papers, toolkits, language and terminology studies intersecting in many ways working with an up-bottom approach.

The world is interconnected... In Lebanon we were living during the revolution, with women and youth at the core. The non-essentials and not represented took the streets calling for state building, equality, uniting people from across the different sectors and forgotten regions. North was depicted as terrorist and extremist area. Politicians wanted to use their divide and rule ideology. We saw hunger and poverty, we saw the voiceless when they had an opportunity to voice their demands and concerns.

As the revolution in Lebanon is still ongoing, it puts empathy to the front. Lots of WhatsApp groups, each with the certain objectives and mechanisms are created. Humanitarian aspects, food, sanitation. Lots of times I was unable to provide families with food and essentials. Inflation, currency devaluation took place. More than 40% of people either lost their jobs or were paid half a salary. This led to inability of people to help others and increased a number of people in need. Here, you cannot stop. You have to keep on connecting with people from here and there, until someone can help you with a box of essentials. This is frustrating. But still, it is so rewarding when you see how people reach out to each other through personal initiatives.

Corona came at a time when the whole world was preparing for major dates, Beijing

+25, 1325, +20, 2250, +5. While China was facing the Corona by itself, Lebanon was passing through its revolution, our work persisted. What is the revolution and the challenges we faced?

NAP came and the SSR included more women in the military. No budget for the SALW. Inequality, lack of human security approach, lockdown, no money for daily workers, feeling helpless, lack of a strategy...

In the early days of Corona, all the countries were putting an effort for the "survival of the fittest" and the redefinition of the fittest. This brought to redefinition of essential and nonessential. We are the essential, our work is essential. Corona exposed the system and its manoeuvring survival mechanisms which mainly were supported with militarism and arms expenditures at the expense of human rights and human security approach.

Tracking was proposed. Insecurity and fear escalated.

New Marshall plan impact. Covid-19 or Corona name it as you wish. A pandemic. A crisis. With a global impact. Superpowers were seen as countries which were lacking to ensure basic needs for their people. The world is shocked and so we are. The whole world started to redefine what is essential and what is not.

The first thing was, why would I need my lovely long hair during this crisis. It is not essential. It is not essential to go to the beauty salon too. I had to have my hair cut by myself, out of hygiene reasons and because of increase of anxiety that I passed through. My hair which I would only have usually

trimmed for not more than one cm. Things are changing, things have already changed.

As peace builder and as a female living in conflict area, with a "revolution" that we called "Feminist revolution", essential and non-essential is changed. We saw that the work we did and are still doing is essential. However, the priorities have changed. This pandemic came to show the world that our work should be taken more seriously, since the reaction to this pandemic should be more human rights and equality oriented.

Stay safe, stay home.

With the corona virus as individual so collective came to the front.

While we say this military industry is still by yourself. Personal hygiene, the ability to enjoy the luxury of having an appropriate physical distant while you see people in tents, refugees that comprise almost half of the population in your country. It is collective when you need to provide help, knowledge and sanitizers to the less privileged members of the community. Don't you think that we have enough immunity to fight this virus? Do you think we will die out of this virus or out of hunger? Do you think that the garbage crises of Lebanon provided us with the immunity to face this crisis? Is it a greater reason for us to die? What about the water issue, the clean drinking water mixed with the switch system?

Today we have a protest. At what time? Under which slogan? I am dressing up with the revolution which is feminist, grabbing my Lebanese flag and going down the street, chanting slogans that raise concerns about the root causes of the marginalization of women

and subject her of being a victim of a system and a power structure that has her as a scapegoat in the struggle for power politics. Women and men are calling for equality and justice. In Lebanon, a revolution calling for equality show the women power and how women are in the core of state building, however, they were brought back because of the coronavirus to square one.



Here comes a new government that does put the priorities of revolution in its agenda. But it is saved by Corona, which leads a new game. Corona does not respect state sovereignty, however, it exposes state insecurity versus human insecurity. We are fighting the virus on an individual level, so if you get sick you have to deal with the virus by yourself.

Being a MENA regional coordinator, I had to maintain the work I do, with a new crisis. It seemed a time where concerns have unified under a major threat. Listening to our local partners along MENA region highlighted institutional concerns. Now it is called for inclusion, cooperation among different actors. I feel so privileged and honoured to be part of

work either related to peace and security or to networking and coordination of members and partners along the region, as well as, internationally.

My work with GPPAC has many dimensions. As all international networks are redefining their priorities in post Covid-19, our 2020 MENA plan did not change much. As Corona was taking over countries, we were able to work on prevention, peacebuilding and human security. I feel lucky that I am at the centre of this work. As MENA regional liaison officer, I have to keep the flow of information among members in 16 countries and between the Global secretariat and its members. However, due to my belief in local efforts, I do try to get opinions of members before I put forward new concepts. They are the ones who are working on the ground and they know better how things should be going. We were successful in submitting a MENA perspective for the Peacebuilding Architecture Review. We raised many issues that are in the centre of inability to reach a positive sustaining peace in MENA and offered our best practices and lessons learned.

As part of WILPF I am working on the UPR. We are working against the crime and violence. Violence has no gender. How to make states respect international law and international humanitarian law and the UN position to preserve peace and security. The secretary General appeal was the first thing that brought hope among the dark period. Indeed, we need this approach from the UN.

Slavery did not end. It does not have to be in chains. It can be "slavery ideology".

## STORY 4



*Author:* Lesley Ann Foster

*Country:* South Africa

*Organisation:* Masimanyane Women's Rights International

I am Lesley Ann Foster and I am an executive Director of Masimanyane Women's Rights International based in East London South Africa. My organisation provides services to victim/survivors of sexual and domestic violence.

### **Background**

A month before the lock down started, our deputy Director was re located to another city. I was left with all the management issues, playing a leadership role within the organisation. COVID-19 required an adaptation in a situation of a crisis. My first decision was to rope the entire management team into the process of leading during the crisis and I requested them to work closely with me, as I knew it was going to be a challenge.

### **Initial steps**

As soon as our President, Mr. Ramaphosa announced the need for a lock down, we went into planning mode. The management team agreed that we would work within the WHO<sup>5</sup> protocols and advisories. The government advisories and in particular that of the department of health. Since Masimanyane is a human rights organisation, we would always apply human rights principles throughout the pandemic.

We went into lock down on the 20th of March when we were expected to remain completely in our homes. At that point in

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5. WHO - world health organisation



time, South Africa had a few cases but we were expected to see a great increase in the infection rate because of our poverty level and because of the fact that large part of the population is immune compromised due to HIV/AIDS, poor nutrition etc.

### **Challenges to remote working**

Preparing to work remotely meant that we had to develop work at home protocols as well as conduct an exercise into looking at what resources were needed for remote working. We worked on developing a policy for epidemics and pandemics. We developed a working methodology for staff providing services. We developed a mental health support programme and consulted psychologists whose services we secured to support staff. We developed educational materials to disseminate to the public. We had to check whether we have enough smart phones for the communication channels we were setting up. We had to buy phones for some who had very old phone models that did not even have Whatsapp which was important for us to have. We had to determine data needs of all staff as well as train some staff members on the use of various platforms such as zoom and skype. Accessing and using these platforms remains a challenge for some.

### **My day**

#### **Home responsibilities.**

I have an 87-year-old mother who has dementia. She is at the advanced stage of her illness. After five falls in which she broke various limbs, we realised that Mum requires someone next to her at all times. I usually have three carers who alternate in taking care

of my mother 24 hours a day, allowing me to continue my work. With the lock down, all the carers had to stay at home, so I had to take on her care.

My morning begins around 5.30 am when my 87-year-old mother wakes up. I assist her to go to the bathroom, settle her back into bed and then go and make her breakfast. I sit with her to ensure that she eats her food and takes her medication. She usually rests for a while after breakfast and I take the opportunity to shower and dress. After that I need to bath my mother and dress her up. She often goes back to bed again but sometimes she stays up and walks around which requires constant attention. My two sons were at home from college and they provided support to Mum.

I am totally focussed on ensuring that no one visits our home. I am worried that my Mum of 87 and her best friend who lives with us and is 76 are in the high-risk category. I am obsessed with hygiene around the house and particularly in relation to my Mum and Theresa. I will not allow anyone into the house and prohibited anyone from going out. These restrictions are necessary but stressful.

Following my early morning rituals with my Mum, I do my cooking. I find that preparing lunch early in the day takes a lot of pressure off me as I begin working. I do not usually cook during the week when I am at my normal job but because there is no support at home, I have to do it. I must say that it is something I thoroughly enjoyed doing because I could experiment and be creative.

### **Work duties**

My first zoom meeting begins at 10am when

I meet with Masimanyane's six managers. We usually do a check in to see and hear how managers and staff are coping. During 56 days of this lock down, staff members faced many challenges. One lost her grandmother, another her brother, one had her sister in law who lost a new born baby, a day after giving birth. One of our longest serving staff members lost her 27-year-old son, 3 months after burying her husband and this week she lost her niece. Her son's death was deeply distressing, so soon after his father had died but the death of her niece was almost unbearable. We also had an uncle who died as well as a brother in law and in my extended family a young woman committed suicide. The level of grief being experienced is exacerbated during this period. The challenge that has made it so much worse was the fact that burials during the COVID-19 lock down were restricted in many ways. Traditional burials were not allowed. No more than 50 people could attend (our funerals draw hundreds and sometimes thousands of people) and each of the 50 people had to be registered to attend. The funeral can only take 1 - 2 hours while traditionally our funerals last 4-6 hours. There is always a meal served afterwards and during lock down these was strictly prohibited.

Needless to say, the "check in's" are intense and can often last as much as 1.5 hours to discuss and to provide support to the managers who are themselves affected by these deaths or by giving the staff members support.

After the check in discussions, we receive and share reports on the work which was taking place during that week.

## **Strategies responding to COVID-19**

When the lock down commenced, one donor insisted on daily reporting on statistics during the lock down period and initiated a new data collection programme which required us to input all our client's files going back to April 2019 and ending in March 2020. There were more than 2200 files with extensive information in each so we estimated that one person could upload approximately 20 files a day. So, we spent some time during our management meeting working out the logistics of this exercise. We had to assign staff who were capable of capturing the data to undertake the task but we needed to appoint an additional person which was difficult during the lock down. Recruitment, induction and training had to be done remotely. We then had to review the resources required which in this case meant we had to purchase two new laptops, buy data and secure a company to do the scanning of the documents that had been uploaded and much more.

The next discussion was on the Return to Work Protocol. We were advised by a member of our board who is an Occupational Health Doctor on how we should approach the protocol.

We needed to discuss the physical offices we occupy and sanitize it from infection. We had to think through all the health and safety measure that needed to be put in place to make sure that our premises are free of COVID-19 and that they remain so.

We then had to discuss staffing issues from health and safety perspectives. We discussed the government and department advisory which

said that people over 65 should not be working in the public realm. It also said that anyone who is 60 and over with co-morbidities are at high risk and should also not be allowed to work in public spaces. We knew that we had at least 8 people who fell into the high-risk category and who were part of our essential services team as they provide post rape support to survivors at three hospitals. We had to take the decision to put them into working from home. We developed a strategy to discuss this with them to ensure that they understand that we are not discriminating, but protecting them as best as we can. We then had to discuss a recruitment and selection process to employ women to replace them on a short-term basis. Masimayane's board of directors is consulted on all developments and they contribute to the development of policies and protocols related to COVID-19.

We discussed other aspects of the return to work protocol which included how to deal with a possibility of someone testing positive at the organisation and at the shelter which we run. We discussed changing our work schedule and having shifts for the staff at the offices, to reduce the number of people in the building at any one time. We decided on a morning shift and an afternoon shift. Such discussions pretty much take up the entire morning.

My afternoons are usually dedicated to working with colleagues who together with me, formed part of a Presidential Interim Committee on Gender Based Violence and Femicide. We worked from the beginning of the COVID-19 lock down in our country to strengthen women's organisations across the country to be able to form part of a national

network that would respond to calls from women seeking help.

After the meeting with the Interim Presidential Committee, I check emails and respond to the issues that need my attention. Sometimes I am requested to make inputs into news articles, appear in Television programmes or call people who require my input or support. In the evenings I may connect with people in the USA who are only half way through their days or I connect with people in Australia and Malaysia who are just beginning their day.

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I read every single day before putting my mother to bed and spend time with her until she sleeps. If I have energy, I do some light reading or watch National Geographic animal documentaries which I love.

### Observations

It is important to speak about the impact of COVID-19 on women in our country. We have heightened levels of poverty, unemployment and underemployment. The lock down resulted in massive job losses where women suffered the most. Women in the informal sector were hit very hard. The meagre income they earn selling products on the streets, was lost. This resulted in massive hunger and widespread severe food insecurity and a loss of access to the services. The lock down meant that all children and young people were sent home from schools and universities. Again, this put pressure on the family and in most cases, the mothers or grandmothers who take care of them. Many women spoke about the care burdens that resulted from young people being home. Children were provided with work by their educators who required home schooling

and this was a difficult challenge for most parents with the mothers being the most likely to carry this burden.

In addition, other care and reproductive work also fell on women and some reported increases in violence when they protested or resisted having to take up all the challenges.

South Africa went into lock down before we had our first death and while the infection rate was very low. The reason for this decision to drastically curtail movement and practise social distancing, was to give the government time to prepare its response strategy to COVID-19 with the main objective being to reduce community infection spread for as long as possible. As most African countries have very poor health infrastructure, the lock down gave the government opportunity to prepare hospitals and clinics, as well as, train health personal while also procuring the necessary Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The drastic measure of banning all alcohol sales was to reduce the number of incidents of violence related to alcohol usage. In our country, stabbings, car accidents, murders and even domestic violence are strongly linked to alcohol usage. Very often such cases lead to hospitalizations and too many take up beds in the intensified units which are being prepared and kept ready for possible COVID-19 patients.

While there is huge resistance to this decision, it has resulted in a more than 50% reduction of violence and murder and has taken the pressure off the hospitals for now.

One of the impacts on the population and women in general was the reduced access to health facilities which was extensive. Women's

health challenges were exacerbated during this lock down phase. First, women have high level of comorbidities such as high blood pressure, diabetes, cholesterol, heart disease and HIV/AIDs. Accessing health facilities for health assessments, reporting of illnesses or obtaining medication was problematic because women could not move from their homes. Permits were required to move from one area to another and public transport schedule was also restricted. This has a profound impact on whether or when women can access health services or go to court for protection orders. Women reported defaulting on their hypertension medication, diabetes medication and other chronic medications. They reported being turned away from health facilities because they were instructed not to accept anyone if it's not COVID-19 related. This is dangerous for women and will result in people dying from a chronic illness during and after COVID-19.

Pregnant women report difficulties in accessing information and support during their pregnancies. The biggest challenge to women giving birth is the moratorium on partners accompanying them. They have to go through child birth alone. No visits are allowed and this contributes to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression especially postpartum depression.

### **Gender Based Violence**

The South African police services reported that there were at least 120,000 calls to the National GBV Command centre. This was deeply worrying because it indicated that the levels of domestic violence increased considerably. My

organisation has noted trends and changes in the women seeking our services. Firstly, more women called to request us to get the police to remove them from their homes. We do not usually encourage this as we expect women to come to us if they require support because it gives her power to make a decision on what she wants to do. We also noted more reports of marital rape and incest. This of course is indicative of the close proximity in which women and girls find themselves during the lock down period.

There are many factors which impacted women differently and gender-based violence is one of them. For women, being in isolation with a violent partner is incredibly challenging. Not only is the violence ever present but because people are in isolation, there is an increase in tensions and an open environment for using violence as an excuse. Abusive partners enforce additional means of cutting women off from families and friends which have a devastating impact on the mental health of a survivor.

One of the most important findings that emerged with COVID-19 was that we have no idea of the actual numbers of women being abused. While the police reported having received 120,000 calls, we could not verify that. The Presidential Interim committee has not opted to conduct research to determine the validity of the statistics.

## **Conclusion**

South Africa has instituted a 5-level risk adjusted strategy responding to COVID-19. Our first lock down was at level 5 and meant that all movement was curtailed, shops closed except from essentials. Since the 1st May, we

moved to Level 4 which allowed people to exercise during a 3-hour time frame from 6-9am. All essential workers such as home carers, those looking after the elderly and a few other sectors were allowed back to work. I have relished the exercise periods and I have used it every day to walk for at least an hour. This became possible due to return of my mother's carers to the work.

As I complete this piece, the country is waiting to be addressed by the state president hoping that he will lift the risk adjusted strategy to Level 3.

## STORY 5



*Author:* Masoon Ismail

*Country:* Iraq

My name is Maysoon Ismail. I am 24 years old, holding a bachelor's degree in psychology. Currently I work for Baghdad Women's Association.

In the beginning when Coronavirus was spreading throughout the whole world, it was a challenging period because it was hard to deal with the cases of women and girls online. Since, I was at home and not face to face with the women and girls, I was thinking on how can I deal them without seeing personally. I did not have chance to see their facial expressions and body language, and it was difficult to understand how can I learn about their feelings, as well as, evaluate their response towards psycho-social support.

My first online meeting was with a Syrian women-survivor from Domez camp. She said "I made her day" and that it was the best call she received during past days. She also mentioned that she is happy that there are still some people who think about girls and women during this hard situation. This meeting made me change my mind about working online and stimulated by motivation to do more and more. It is really amazing to make women feel that there are people who care and give support in all possible way. And what I learned from this quarantine is that we can still help and support each other.

Human beings get their strength and positive energy from each other even if there is a long distance between them.



## STORY 6



*Author:* Khin Ohmar\*

*Country:* Myanmar

My name is Khin Ohmar. I am a woman human rights defender from Burma/Myanmar. I have been working for democracy development and protection of human rights in Burma/Myanmar for the past 30 years of my life. A key area of my work is shedding the light on human rights abuses committed against ethnic and religious minorities by the state and its institutions such as the Myanmar military, amplifying the voices of victims and survivors of the military abuses and advocating for justice and accountability, as well as, highlight military impunity. The nature of my work involves lots of travel and face-to-face meetings with local and international communities, relevant international entities including UN human rights bodies as well as online advocacy activities.

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In early March, when the COVID-19 outbreak started to spread across the world, I was in Geneva to engage with the UN Human Rights Council, as the former UN Special Rapporteur on human rights situation in Myanmar, Ms. Yanghee Lee's final report during her tenure was to be heard by the Council. Due to the outbreak, the HRC session had to take urgent measures. The session was suspended after the SR Yanghee Lee's interaction with the Council on Myanmar's human rights situation. Our original plan was cut short and I had to rush out of Geneva immediately after delivering the statement<sup>6</sup> following the SR Yanghee Lee's reporting. I also had to cancel a few trips lined

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\* Khin Ohmar is a laureate of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2018.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.

up for the coming months.

Ever since, I have been working from home in the US, just like many of us have been doing these days under the circumstances resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic!

Working from home creates some challenges in my human rights advocacy work. Firstly, because I am unable to travel. Secondly, because I am physically so far away from the situation on the ground, so I am literally behind the actual time to respond or react timely for the worrying events taking place in Myanmar during the time of pandemic. These include such situations as the government's crackdown on independent media and ongoing shutdown of internet in the western Myanmar's Rakhine State for about one year while blocking more than 200 websites. Many of this web pages are the only source of information for people to know what is happening with conflict situation in Rakhine and how Myanmar's military is leading intensified war with ethnic Rakhine army, attacks Rakhine civilians, including bombing and artillery shelling of the villages, extrajudicial killing, torturing, arbitrarily arresting and burning villages, as well as, destructing the property of civilians.

Since the international community has no access to these areas while being under the enormous pressure to fight the pandemic for their own domestic constituencies and for the humanity at large, and since the UN investigators are blocked by the Myanmar

government to enter the country, it is of my grave concern, and my priority, to ensure the international community remains vigilant on what is happening in Myanmar. Meanwhile despite the International Court of Justice ordering Myanmar government in January 2020 to implement provisional measures to protect the Rohingya people as the Gambia filed complaint of Myanmar government for case of genocide against the Rohingyas, it is very frustrating to see nothing concrete has been implemented by the Myanmar government with its continued lack of political will to work for the protection of the Rohingyas.

Thus, during this COVID-19 pandemic, while I had to cease some of the face-to-face advocacy work, my daily work during stay home order has been the constant monitoring of the military abuses against the civilians and advocacy online in order to keep the international momentum during the pandemic and keep pursuing for the issue of justice and accountability for these crimes that Myanmar military has already committed and continues to commit. Despite of different time zones, I am trying my best in order to catch up with the situation on the ground and communicate with different actors and partners in different parts of the world. My daily routines are long; yet, I am grateful that I remain safe and healthy during this pandemic (so far) and am able to carry on with my work for human rights and justice, for the victims and survivors of the military abuses in Myanmar.

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6. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development. 2020. "HRC43 Oral Statement on Item 4: Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar." <https://www.forum-asia.org/>. 10 March . Accessed March 20, 2020. <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=31220>.

## STORY 7



*Author:* Abeer

*Country:* Iraq

I am Abeer, a 30 years old married woman with two kids, holding a bachelor degree in English Literature and I work as a Social Worker at Baghdad Women Association - Mosul Center.

At first, I did not care about Coronavirus at all and did not take it seriously enough, until the first case of infection appeared in my own city. It made me start following all the precautions and educate my children on the appropriate rules to ensure their safety.

I started to suffer from anxiety while the virus was spreading around the world. And yet, it had a positive side, as it made me learn more about taking care of the elderly, as I live with my husband and his old grandfather. Before the virus, I barely saw my family due to my work, but now as I am working from home, I have chance to see my husband and children all the time. Our relationships get stronger day by day.

I received many cases from women who are experiencing violence. During my work from home I support them through individual psychological support sessions, in addition to online awareness raising sessions.

Staying at home made me miss the work at the office, where I helped women. This made me want to achieve the same tasks from home and communicate with women trying to help them as much as possible, sharing prevention information and instructions through awareness

raising activities which I was providing throughout the quarantine period. I started rearranging my daily life, I missed walking even though I used to hate long distance walks. This made me start working out at home, and whenever I feel bored, I communicate with family and friends through social media. I also gained new skills, related to cooking food and handmade.

During the quarantine, I started developing myself by attending workshops that increased my work capabilities.

## STORY 8



*Author:* Israa Azhar Saeed

*Country:* Iraq

I am Israa Azhar Saeed a team Leader at Baghdad Women Association - Mosul Centre, holding a Bachelor degree in English Literature, married with 3 children.

I used to hear stories about the victims of diseases and epidemics from my grandmother. However, I do not remember a state of terror or panic in the world, similar to the one which the spread of the Coronavirus caused. Perhaps this is because I did not live during the times of my grandmother.

Everything happened so fast, it was a nightmare; curfew, suspension of schools and universities, closure of malls and commercial stores. The situation has become exceptional. The virus caused a change in my daily life, so I created new positive behaviors between me and my family. There was no pressure for studying and exams on my children unless they did their homework. We tried to create a spirit of solidarity with the neighbors. I even called this period a warrior's break. One of the funny things which I discovered during this period was that my daughter became taller than me and that my little son loves photography.

Even cooking turned into a family ritual during which everyone helps and I now we have time to make our favorite meals.

I admit that I missed my friends, social relations, and interesting work discussions. However, during this period I managed to sleep

better and longer with less stress in everyday life. Now I have time for listening the music and taking care of myself.

I agreed with my husband and children to stick to the instructions of the World Health Organization. We never left the house. My husband is the only one who left to provide the family with all the necessary. He sticks to his commitment of wearing masks and gloves and do not approach people.

Our family washes hands continuously for twenty seconds, together with cleaning all purchased goods, door handles and roofs in the home. Despite the difficulty of this procedures, we have already adapted to it.

I received many cases of women through the safe lines during my work from home. I provided many women with the individual psychosocial support and received cases from women who experienced violence during these days. I tried to give them hope that tomorrow will be more beautiful. Through the coordination with other organizations I was able to refer many women to the institutions which provides aid and food baskets, in addition to the awareness raising sessions, which are done for women via social media applications.



## STORY 9



*Author:* Kristina Kilanava

*Country:* Georgia

Association "IMEDI" IDP Women's MovementforPeace is non-profit, juridical entity which has been functioning in Zugdidi, Georgia from 1999. Our mission is to promote women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, as well as, psycho-social and economic rehabilitation of IDPs. The association is one of the first among women NGOs in Samegrelo Zemo Svaneti region, which started working in the field of protection of rights of IDP women and girls, gender equality, increasing of women's role in peaceful resolution of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

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Events related to the Corona virus have changed the daily lives of all of us. Online activities gained special importance for the continuation of our work. Corona virus is a difficult challenge and a significant threat not only for the health, but also for economy and human rights. The negative consequences of the pandemic created many difficulties for women and young girls.

Our organization despite of its small financial and human resources continued to work and implement activities for the Women's Peace Club within the framework of the ongoing project funded by Kvinna till Kvinna foundation. Online remote meetings have been held with the lawyer and doctor on the dangers of COVID-19 and possible protection mechanisms.

During pandemic in Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region, the need to advocate for the

problems and challenges faced by vulnerable groups of IDPs, including women and girls became particularly important, as the region has large number of IDPs. Our organization concentrated on particularly vulnerable groups of IDPs who live in IDP settlements in the villages near the Abkhazian conflict zone in Zugdidi Municipality. They face many serious problems, such as poor hygiene conditions, lack of pharmacies and markets in the villages, etc.

During the pandemic we coordinated activities of non-governmental organisations and the representatives of the business sector to support vulnerable groups.

In the frames of the initiatives of the Turkish Embassy in Georgia our Association started negotiations with the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency and implemented joint project in the frames of which we provided materials for the face masks. International Committee on Migration funded the sewing of this masks by the women's peace club. Moreover, the manufactured masks were distributed among IDPs, including women and girls, to protect them from the Covid-19. The masks were distributed by the volunteers of the Georgian Red Cross. Moreover, a certain number of face masks was also sent to the territory of Abkhazia for distribution among population and the medical staff.

There are still negotiations which are taking place with this organizations to provide our beneficiaries with disinfectants and equipment needed to facilitate agricultural activities and minimize the possible damage caused by the virus.

A few days ago, Turkish cooperation and

coordination Agency (TIKA), handed over 100 gift packages to the IDP settlements in bordering villages.

Through these activities, a small group of women from our organization was able to make small but positive changes for the benefit of our beneficiaries, including IDPs and young girls.

The association is still trying to solve the problems faced by IDPs and continues various activities for the women and girls who are members of the Women's Peace Club, which is supported by Kvinna till Kvinna foundation.

## STORY 10



*Author:* Marina Simonyan

*Country:* Artsakh, Nagorno-Karabakh

Young people understand their potential and have the power to change the world.

Being a young activist, I know very well that it is young people who make a real difference, drive change, as well as work full of dedication and passion. Young women have an important role in the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We - the young women from Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) recognize that during these challenging times, we need to take a moment to remind ourselves that it is OK not to be OK both as individuals and as communities. It is a time to take care of each other and to take care of ourselves, our own health and our own wellbeing. This period will pass and we will come out of it as stronger generation of responsible and resilient citizens.

We have passed through many difficulties of forced isolation, non-recognition of our state by the international community, full scale war and daily shootings, as well as communication blockade by Azerbaijan when nobody from international community is allowed to cross our border. So factually we just passed from state isolation to self-isolation.

More than ever, we need to have deep compassion and hope. We need to understand that we are bearers of hope and compassion, willing to make our contribution to the society.

Here in Artsakh, due to low number of COVID-19 cases as young activists we have

not taken any tangible steps in the battle against the new coronavirus. However, we all ought to follow hygiene rules, stay at home, work from home and be self-isolated. With these steps we show our care towards the ones we love, the ones who are old, vulnerable and have poor health conditions.



Before COVID-19 our life had another rhythm, we used to hurry somewhere, life was very active, especially for young people. But now we have enough time to step back, review our lives and think how we can make our lives better and how we can make our societies or communities better. Using this opportunity, I decided to motivate young people to raise awareness on the protection of human rights, to empower and encourage them to take care of human beings around them, be it during the pandemic, military actions or just during one of the beautiful and careless days. I started to organize online discussions with young women from my hometown on such an important topics as protection of the rights of children, human rights protection, international human rights law and other topics which are very

important especially nowadays. Together with young women we watched videos and read manuals and guidelines published by WHO and ICRC. These online video calls also train our active listening skills. Very often young people lack this skill, however, through video calls we improved our skills to listen to and hear each other. Because, sometimes just a simple act of listening gives people hope, especially, during these challenging times.

May God bless our world so we could overcome this crisis soon!

## STORY 11



*Author:* Anki Wetterhall

*Country:* Sweden

In Sweden we are lucky not to have closed down the society completely. Shops and schools have been opened as well as restaurants and cafes. However, cinemas, theatres, concert-halls are closed and all big events have been postponed. The metro and buses are working but people are recommended not to use them if not necessary.

All elderly people 70 + are recommended not to go out shopping, not to use community transports, not to be close to their grandchildren and keep a distance of at least 2 meters with other people.

This situation is of course difficult for those living alone, with different medical problems and so forth. Also, for the healthier ones there is a problem to be able to visit their far-distance friends and relatives if they cannot go by train, metro or buses.

The Corona has, however, created a lot of new human relationships such as neighbours helping neighbours, young volunteers helping elderly bringing home groceries from shops, choirs singing from a backyard for the elderly etc.

The real heroes are all the people working in the hospitals. The number of people in need of intensive care has been growing and the staff had to work much more than normal working hours. A lot of medical doctors, nurses and assistant nurses have testified about the terrible situation in not letting relatives sit

beside dying corona patients, letting the dying person die alone.

For the healthy elderly 70+ life has been easier in Sweden as they could go out walking, biking and meet with friends in parks and even go to an outdoor cafe.

## STORY 12



*Author:* Muna Luqman\*

*Country:* Yemen

At times when the violence and despair shadow our lives with the overwhelming pressure, I feel that I am responsible for keeping the community alive. As women peacebuilders we naturally step into response mode, as whenever a crisis arises the women rise. And as Sonia Johnson writes: "I am a warrior in the time of women warriors; the longing for justice is the sword I carry."

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This has been the reality of my life for many years with the conflict in my country Yemen, where the true heroes are the women and the youth, sacrificing their lives to save and protect others.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, I was very concerned for the people in Yemen. I knew all the suffering and what a total nightmare it would be. I started working from as early as 4am and until late at night for many months, strategizing awareness raising campaigns, advocating for the ceasefire and supporting medical teams and hospitals. This was difficult with a small funding but I was not ready to stop. My team relies on me to keep them motivated and many times I was hiding my fear from them just to keep the spirit up and continue supporting others who needed us.

As the crisis evolved into a deadly threat for the peoples' lives, my workload became heavier. I was advocating for the release of prisoners to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in overcrowded, inhumane conditions, worked

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\* Muna Luqman is a laureate of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2019.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.



to support families who have lost their source of income, initiated water projects to help women and children suffering from the scarcity of water to prevent diseases caused by contaminated water.

I did not have much sleep during very long period of time and all my focus was to work towards a better tomorrow for those innocent families trapped in the conflict they did not create. In addition to strategizing, following up, motivating and fundraising I have also been zooming on a daily basis participating in panel discussions, research and peace consultations. I am inspired by women around the world taking action from Yemen to Cameroon, Iraq, Pakistan, Armenia, Italy, Syria, Kenya and everywhere. There are courageous women with strong leadership who respond to the community needs with innovative decisions. And I am grateful for having great friends who have made the pain easier and continue to believe in our work and supporting us. They are shining like stars who guide us.

Amidst the sadness, I feel hopeful that with a beautiful and brave hearted woman around we can make a difference in the world. In fact, we already did!

## STORY 13



**Author:** Heidi Meinzolt\*

**Country:** Germany

**Organisation:** WILPF's Regional Representative for Europe

### My Corona History

I am sitting in my garden, enjoying the variety of spring flowers – it is a total unusual summerly April for my region in 2020. I just come back from the weekly bio-market to get fresh fruits and vegetables and stop at the little Turkish shop with very friendly people behind a new plexus window to keep distance to the client. I don't need the big super markets. No stress, the rhythm of life is just slower. I miss the cinema, a good concert – but radio, CDs compensate. I see my neighbours, a young couple, combining difficultly online jobs with home-schooling of children – who desperately miss their friends. I am free. I enjoy regular lively video sessions with my sons, grandsons – so near- so far – a luxury.

We had planned with WILPF here in Germany and beyond to use the momentum of 2020 for a great feminist campaign linking the 20th anniversary of UNSCR1325 with remembrance of the Beijing declaration of action 25 years after and the 10th anniversary of the SDGs. We have produced a multi-coloured leaflet and planned events with a lot of enthusiasm with a bunch of new young members! Now, with all the social distance and only online conversations, the movement is a bit suspended.

**In the news, 90% Corona news - has the world stopped to turn around? Nationalistic views within closed borders prevail. Everywhere this protective masculinity,**

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\* Heidi Meinzolt is a board member of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2019.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.

**virologist warning, politicians in concurrency about who is the hardest and the most tolerant crisis manager, chancellor Merkel warning of an “opening discussion orgy”.**

I hear that billions of Euros are distributed in Germany, in Bavaria extra money - where are they coming from and going to? The transfers are not transparent - despite what was published the first day: the first millions going to Adidas - why? Adidas made an enormous financial benefit last year and yet doesn't know if they really need the money? Isn't this absurd?! The federal State of Germany has decided to compensate with indemnity bonds workers and employees who cannot work because of closures for 3 months with "Kurzarbeitergeld", 60%, now even with 80% (87% for families with children). The political explanation: a rich country - as we are - can allow such transfers! Great but a very narrow view point, ignoring in a provocative way neighbouring countries and especially the Global South. The German self-sufficiency and arrogance are a psychological and ethical problems and of course political ones.

On the European level, political and psychological damages are already heavy and an existential risk for European cohesion, trust and the European Community as such - even the German national bank. A lot of (German) economists recommended specific Corona bonds to carry this specific dept. Burden for re-construction as a community and secure even our chances for a future exchange on the European market with partners so necessary for this country and its economy. But the economic and finance ministers and the chancellor just bloc and say no! In the

neighbouring countries, extreme right-wing, nationalist, anti-European forces have an easy game to blame Germany for that - and this is not what we want! Prime Minister Orban instead doesn't have to blame Germany, he has good friends here, especially in conservative Bavaria. He gets what he wants also from the EC (von der Leyen) while he is putting democracy in his country in quarantine. Our friends are struggling so hard to get at least some basic income for the poorest in the opposition town Budapest! I am full of admiration!

**What remains to do: Talking to friends and neighbours, drafting emergency resolutions, initiating long-term thinking for a transformative change, spreading some optimism. I sign petitions, write, share information with Italian and Spanish Polish, Georgian, Ukrainian, Armenian friends! At least we women act in solidarity! Our sharing is great!**

The most fashionable word is now "system relevance" - the originally meaning is to valorize jobs keeping basic service in the care and health sector alive. Mostly women in bad paid jobs. And, of course, I have to recognize what an advantage it is to have a functioning high-tech health system in my country, prepared to cope with the crisis - with more Greek doctors in Berlin than in Athens! Thanks to imposed austerity measures! But what about the elderly do, living and dying alone, poor families in small spaces and women and children exposed to the risk of violence, SGBV? What about the right to abortion even here when the administrative ways are closed and medical assistance not available? What about the

homeless, missing food banks, migrant's children missing a computer to continue learning? So many questions and challenges!

"System relevance" drives me crazy because it is full of lies! In no case, it should be relevant for arms industry, but here production feeding the next wars continues, no trade union opposes! Our female Defence Minister, totally insensitive, pushes in the middle of the crisis to buy new military airplanes in the US able to carry nuclear bombs - according to the NATO agreement on "nuclear participation/Teilhabe". Weak parliamentary opposition - even in climate questions! Great NGO activities instead in social media and online discussions!

What keeps me busy is: to raise awareness that we cannot go back to "normal"- and "normal" was already the preparation of the failing in the pandemic challenge. I stick to our feminist analysis of the root causes of crisis and inequalities and the answers that we give since more than 100 years as WILPF. There are alternative narratives for the way out:

*- Gives a push to the idea of prevention: if we don't jump from one crisis management to the other, support early warning, divestment campaigns: we pay attention where we put our money in pension funds, we don't bank on the bomb, refuse to spend tax money for military purposes, work together to stop military manoeuvres and close military basis, shift the money from war to peace, share, support and endorse a permanent cease-fire!*

*- Gives a push to the fulfilment of existential needs and human security in our daily life: we struggle for social and reproductive health and rights of women, clean environment, good food*

*and clean water for a strong immune system, support care work and intersectional peace initiatives to leave no one behind.*

*- Gives a push to democracy: we reclaim individual and collective responsibilities and choices, women as role models for change making and the defence of women's rights as human rights, creative and culturally diverse ways of communication.*

*- Gives a push to analyse the root causes of inequalities and get a good diagnosis to end patriarchy, militarism, capitalist exploitation, neo-colonialism.*

*- Gives a push to sustainable development and climate justice: the real dangers are weapons, land grabbing, war, right-wing nationalistic, racist attacks. When the pandemic will have an end, we continue anyway to struggle for survival in peace and justice.*

I stop here, to meditate a moment in the garden, to see clear and not getting frustrated by all what happens around and what I am still missing to do!

## STORY 14



*Author:* Gohar Markosyan

*Country:* Armenia

*Organisation:* NGO Women for Development

Speaking to myself...

April 2, 2020 - the third week of the quarantine...

Can't find my inner peace since morning... My memories are taking me back to this same day 23 years ago, in 1997 - the day when my son was born. He has been away from Armenia ever since he turned 17, to obtain education abroad, and later to work in Romania, Czech Republic and Russia. It has already been several birthdays that we celebrate apart. But this year it feels different, uncertain and difficult to explain. Last night we agreed to organize a "family call". To do that, we all had to adjust our schedules. When it is 8pm in Armenia, it is 9am in California, 6pm in Switzerland and 7pm in Saint Petersburg. We will talk, we will drink and will say happy birthday to you. Three children, all of them in different corners of the world, everyone has their jobs and their errands to run, and already 12, 7 and 6 very long years apart...

I must have been adjusted to this by now, and I have. It is all good and I am happy that they found their unique place in the life, however it is still so difficult for me to find my inner peace today...

**We have decided to get together this year, no matter in which country, what matters is together, at least for a week... COVID-19 came as an unwelcomed guest and messed up all our plans.**

Ok, enough, you have so much work to do, turn your computer on. You had lots of work 23 years ago too, so much work that you were back at it starting from April 20th, again working from home because you had a new born baby. He was very quiet, mostly sleeping peacefully or staring at how I was working with the great attention. We were working together with my close friend Armine Mikayelyan. We were drafting our organization's policies, deciding on name and our future plans.

**I am used to hardships. What is this compared to those days back in 1997? For an earthquake survivor woman from Gyumri, the hardship and inconveniences of present days are really nothing serious. The real hardship was back in those days, when there was no heating, no food, when your 2-year old child was saying to you "mama, make a lot of pasta, so that I could eat so much that I am finally full...". That is the real hardship, not what we have today. So what, that we are working from home? COVID-19 will pass. It will be bored, tired and will vanish from our lives...**

Ok, I am back with my memories again, let me sit and get my thoughts together. I have made so many plans last night. The night is not for sleeping, it is the time when many new and great ideas come to us and make us awake. Get up, they tell you, enough sleeping. I always have a pen and a paper next to my bed, so that I can write down my night time ideas, otherwise they may vanish in the morning and later it will be so difficult to recollect them, and to turn them into a project... The thoughts I had last night were COVID 19 related. We organized this year's "I

Have the Right to Enjoy Peace" International Youth Painting Contest & Forum program a while ago. No, we must change the title... COVID 19 has changed too many things in our lives, and taught lessons to every single one of us, to the whole world... You will ask what lessons? Is COVID 19, a teacher? How can it teach us lessons? But I am not the only one to think like that. Recently, my good friend from Austria Werner Wintersteiner shared his ideas around this topic. 270 people from all the corners of the world gathered to listen to his speech. Gathered? Did I say gathered? Yes, each person in his/her house, but at the same time all together in one place, where they could share their experiences, feelings and anxieties.

**Yes, I think that way. I think that COVID 19 is a good "teacher", indeed. You will ask me again - what lessons does it teach to be qualified as a teacher? And I will tell you, it is teaching us how to live together in a harmony and peace, how to help each other, how to change our attitude towards life, how to find our inner peace, how to think globally, how to worry about the lives of people we don't know and who live far away from us, how to love from a distance and to care for someone you love on a distance, and how to empathize with people close to you and those afar.**

Ok, it's decided! We will make this year's peace drawings contest an international one, allowing youth from all over the world to participate and share their ideas and feelings. Let us see what they think, what they suggest to the world leaders, what their ideas are to live in peace and how to avoid wars and what we must do to take good care of our Planet...

## STORY 15



*Author:* Eka Horstka\*

*Country:* Armenia

### HUG TIGHTER

I am driving to Martuni. Like most people I guess, I have never stored gloves in the car's glovebox, but now I have got plenty of disposable ones in there along with the medical masks. Hand sanitizer's cap sticks out from the side pocket, very much like Pinocchio's nose. I have followed all the guidelines and took all precautions, but I cannot get rid of my anxiety completely.

The quarantine measures were imposed in Armenia two weeks ago. Even my stable and balanced personality succumbed to the fear of the unknown that surrounded me. Even though there were no infected people registered in Martuni, during all this time, I did not go to work – scared to get sick or unintentionally infect others.

But today I pulled myself together. I am attending a work meeting. I run "Voskeporik Center for Development and Integration" with 249 children attending, mostly with musculoskeletal and mental disorders, and about a thousand non-disabled children. We need a meeting to understand better how we can restructure the work of therapists and what are those tasks we can implement over the internet.

A pretty complicated task, considering the fact that there are children who had only recently undergone complex orthopaedic surgeries. If we are going to postpone their rehabilitation sessions, all the efforts would

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\* Eka Horstka is a laureate of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2019.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.



have perished down the drain.

One of the therapists came with her child, a ten-year-old boy who is our experienced and irreplaceable volunteer. He helps with a broad set of tasks, from cleaning the therapy room, putting together our traditional little angels, accompanying children to Yerevan for clinical examination, etc.

We are sitting down, discussing our workflow in these new conditions. Children with autism are yet another group that would miss our sessions the most. Working with them through computer screens is a bad idea. The only thing we can do right now is to host virtual lessons for their parents instead, so that our psychologists can teach them more how-tos and everyday skills to practice with the children.

I thank heavens that when we set up this centre, we had agreed on the goal of educating the parents, teaching them tolerance and acceptance toward the way their children are. By doing so, we engaged parents in the rehabilitation process. As a result, now we have 56 well-trained mothers who carry on with the work from home. Quarantine is not an issue for now.

Suddenly, I notice that the volunteer boy is not there. I get up and soon enough I find him in the physiotherapy room. The boy stares at an empty wheelchair that is standing there.

"Soon quarantine will be over, I will go to school. But they, it turns out, are kind of always in quarantine?" - he says. His eyes are wide with realization; his voice is filled with emotions.

**I look at him, and joy rises in my heart. This boy has spent the last two years besides the children who use wheelchairs to move around. He saw them basically every day, but only when his own movements became limited, and his normal way of life had changed, did he realize that these difficulties, which are only temporary for him - lasted their entire life.**

There are lots of people out there who are "isolated" forever, in a way; because our society is not going to get rid of the barriers it has set up, not by itself. But it does not mean things have to stay that way.

**This is what we have set out to do here: to break through the barriers, through the disability itself.**

I feel tears burning my eyes slightly. Here it is, my victory, here it is - social integration in practice, something I have been striving for all along, the reason behind the creation of this centre, as well. Today this boy has changed. More kids will follow. And adults, too.

**"You know, when the quarantine ends," the boy says after a moment of silence, "I will hug our guys even tighter."**

## STORY 16



*Author:* Nadezhda Azhgikhina

*Country:* Russia

### **One Day of My Isolation**

My self- isolation (we have no official term quarantine in Russia, we are on self- isolation) lasts already more than a month. Together with two children (my 1-year old grandson Mikhail and a 6 years old daughter of my son's colleague Varvara) and Anna, I stay in the countryside which is 30 km away from Moscow. My son, his wife and their friend are doctors and work hard at the hospital in Moscow. I moved to the countryside first of all to finish writing my book during isolation. Later, I suggested to move children to me, because they are not allowed to stay with their parents who are working with COVID-19 patients. It was my decision. I am happy to help doctors who do fantastic job these days. Varvara says that her mother saves the universe and is very proud of her. We try to create a fairy tale about moms, who are combating the virus together.

I should say this is very unusual experience. I used to travel a lot. For now, I had to skip 5 international and national events, editorial and board meetings in Moscow.

**Self- isolation, in any way, makes you think more about serious things, about yourself.**

We are lucky to stay at the countryside. We can take a walk to the small park near the house, together with the children. In Moscow it is not allowed, since you are allowed to walk only with a dog. I work online for a magazine, work in PEN Moscow

Club (as director), Woman Journalist Club (as co-director) and Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers (as a board member). I also consult several national and international projects on freedom of media and gender equality. So, we have regular meetings with Zoom, Blue Jeans, Skype and WhatsApp.

My day usually starts here at 5:30 or 6:00 a.m. It is my own time, since I write my texts, answer to the letters and look through the latest news. I also prepare healthy drink (consisting of ginger, cucumber, lime and honey - important during the pandemic) for our team and have my coffee.

The rest of our team gets up around 7:30-8:00 a.m. We have breakfast, contact our relatives and plan the day. Later, I have online meetings almost every day in the morning, for one or two hours, so kids and Anna go for a walk or visit the nearest supermarket to buy food. We usually have lunch together, however, if I have long meeting, I eat later.

In the afternoon I also have online discussions or conferences. These are usually professional discussions on journalism, protection of colleagues, open letters for those in trouble etc.

**During quarantine domestic violence is very hot issue, colleagues discuss it, call to authorities, give interviews - everything is online. I am happy to say that human rights activities are really strong in Russia nowadays.**

Two big seminars on domestic violence have been organized by Russian NGO and "Yabloko" political party during the last two weeks. An online celebration of 10th anniversary of "Sexist of the Year" anti-award was also organized which is really powerful tool to

combat sexism. Trade Union also arranged campaign against sexual harassment to support of ILO's anti-harassment convention (not yet ratified by Russia).

**I should say that online work is productive. It is clear that in the future it will be widely spread. At the same time, it seems that online you work more, since you work all day long.**

If I can (no urgent work or online sessions) I try to have a walk with the children in the afternoon, as well as, take the walk in the evening, when the children go to bed, together with Anna and neighbours and talk face to face (in a social distance).

But it is a luxury, I am on the phone and computer almost all day long. I and Anna try to share all house work. We cook easy meals and clean, she walks more with kids plays if I am online. We bless vacuum cleaner, washing machine and other household equipment. Internet first of all!

I try to go to sleep not very late, if I have no urgent conversations with Western colleagues or texts to write. Sometimes I manage to do so.

## STORY 17



*Author:* Eliko Bendeliani

*Country:* Georgia

The pandemic and the spread of the virus has completely changed my lifestyle and my everyday routine. We have all faced difficulties and challenges and I have not been an exception. Specialists assure us that we, ordinary citizens can save the world only by staying at home and we see the "Stay home" slogan everywhere. At first glance, it is not so difficult to stay at home, but unfortunately, the reality is not so simple, because not everyone has the luxury opportunity to stay at home, since people in difficult conditions need help.

**The period of the pandemic was especially difficult for the victims of the conflict. Their already difficult situation was aggravated by the pandemic. The task me and my colleagues had become more complicated. However, we think that we should not stop and continue our peacekeeping activities. We should use online platforms and strengthen communication, support and help people who are today the most economically challenged (IDPs, populations living at the borderline, people left in conflict regions).**

It has been already two months, that two conflict regions of Georgia - Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tskhinvali Region) have been closed. The people who are left there, especially the ethnic Georgians, for whom it was vital to cross the dividing line, do not have any support nowadays. Therefore, during all this time my main concern was to support the people who were left there as well as find ways to help

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\* Eliko Bendeliani is a laureate of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2016.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.

my family, friends and colleagues. We try to provide some assistance, medical and hygiene products and essentials for the vulnerable families. For now, we have helped several families and each photo sent to me throughout the day gives me additional motivation and hope that even in such a difficult situation something can be done.

IDPs are facing problems, especially those living in compact settlements as they have to live in the most difficult living conditions, where even following the simple hygiene rules is challenging. Together with colleagues, we developed suggestions on what can be done in order to send it to donors and assist IDPs to solve at least their basic issues. At the same time, we continue to work on the book called "Public and Political Participation of IDP Women". Even today we had a focus group with IDP women.

At the end of the day through the online platforms traditionally we have a workshop with youth group, discussing existing conflicts and analyzing solutions. The pandemic, along with its downsides, also has positive aspects - making it possible to bring people from different geographical areas, including conflict regions, into the discussion and creating a space where listening is possible.

**During the pandemic, being at home makes a working day more intensive and busy - we have now more opportunities to spread the information about peace initiatives and reach out the people because many are online and have more time to get information.**

That is why I am working intensively with the youth - the newcomers - to create youth

analytical platform "16th Element" where we publish interesting analytics materials and create a "peace space" for young people.

## STORY 18



*Author:* Vera Gracheva

*Country:* Russia

### **One more COVID-19 day to make meaningful**

Let me introduce myself. I am Vera Gracheva, and I consider myself being a part of anti-trafficking community for over two decades. At first - as a Russia diplomat working in Vienna, at the Office of the OSCE Special Representative for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, and then, starting from 2014, as an independent expert on CTHB, a President of Inter-regional social movement against THB and modern forms of forced labour "Alternative". This is a Russian NGO that I am proud of being a member of, a team of young dedicated volunteers who, starting from 2011, have been providing direct assistance and protection to trafficking survivors. I mean, literally rescuing victims of trafficking and forced labour from various forms of exploitation all over Russia and even abroad, in case there appear requests from victim's relatives or friends, or direct calls to our hotline.

Certainly, being an aged person in my 70-s, personally I don't participate in rescuing operations, but I am trying to be helpful by using all my knowledge and my contact-base accumulated in the course of all those years, to find partners among Russian and foreign NGOs, to look for appropriate shelters abroad in case there is a need for safe and immediate accommodation, to engage with International organizations to ensure safe return and

rehabilitation of victims in transnational cases, and promote human-rights standards in our daily routine.

**Coronavirus significantly undermined our ability and mobility to be expedient in providing assistance to the victims. Though personally I am in a privileged position staying out of the town in a lockdown and working online, my dear colleagues are doing their utmost to address all requests for assistance, to communicate and co-operate with local volunteers and humanitarian aid providers (food, money, cloths, medication, masks, gloves, sanitizers) for the people who became most vulnerable to trafficking. Labor migrants who became unemployed and left without any financial resources, often homeless, sick, and having no options for safe return to their countries of destination. I remain online coordinating our work with partners abroad and volunteers here in Russia to meet these current challenges affecting so many and so hard.**

For example, today I would have to ask the IOM Office in Kiev to find volunteers in Odessa to facilitate the restoration of citizenship for a Ukrainian old woman who was rescued from forced begging in Moscow, and, after a short period of rehabilitation, referred to our Ukrainian partners. She is staying in a crisis center, having no home of her own, and is in need to restore her IDs so that to go on with her social reintegration. COVID-19 slowed down any documentation processing, and the old lady can't wait, she needs assistance in this matter.

The other day I was trying to find a solution

for two labor migrants from Uzbekistan, who were fired by their employer, and had no resources to pay the rent for their room and even to buy some food. Together with our volunteers we managed to reach them and, at least, ensure that they don't starve from hunger. Our shelter is accommodating people in need up to its limit, providing food and roof. Sometimes we even manage to find decent employment and empower them to survive through those hard times.

In parallel, I am trying to finalize some research of mine on the functioning of national referral mechanism in one of the CIS countries, to draft another report on victim protection in court procedure, write an article on the impact of COVID-19 on countering THB for a Turkish magazine, participate in webinars with our Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan partners, provide consultations on THB situation in the Russian Federation and think of another article for the Russian media.

**I feel desperately obliged to my colleagues who are staying in town as first-liners, but anyway, the lockdown is still there, especially for the people of a certain age who are considered as a group of risk.**

**It will pass, the major point is to stay active and follow my own favorite formula of life: the more you do, the more you manage.**



## STORY 19



**Author:** Liza Nissan Hido

**Country:** Iraq

**Organisation:** Baghdad Women Association

I think of the COVID-19 restrictions as an opportunity to re-engage with my family and friends.

Like many people all over the world, I am not leaving the house now. For me, though, staying at home, was a good chance to spend more time with my parents, as I had no time before being busy with my work with Baghdad Women Association, travelling, attending meetings. There was really no free time to listen to myself, listen the music, helping my old mother, taking care of my parents.

But it took me some times during the Corona pandemic to take care of the health of my parents because they are old and my fear of the virus was huge. So, I had to clean the house all the time, continue my work with the Baghdad Women Association and be concerned for the safety of my staff members. All these made me so tired!

I was also very much worried about the cases that I heard from my colleagues about increasing risk of domestic violence for the women during the coronavirus pandemic. So, we put many activities to help and support them through BWA centres and provide specific free services to women GBV survivors.

## STORY 20



*Author:* Rita Izsák-Ndiaye

*Country:* Senegal

Independent UN Human rights expert

I am writing these lines on International Mother's Day on my 57th day of our voluntary self-quarantine. In Senegal, schools, gyms and most restaurants closed down weeks ago but people are still relatively free to move around, except between 8pm and 6am when a curfew is imposed. We do have to give due credit to Senegal's leadership for all their efforts. The number of people tested positive is still below 2000 and the number of deaths is 19 as of today. But Ramadan makes it harder for the 95% Muslim population to cope with this special situation. Because of the current curfew, they cannot easily visit families and friends to break their fast together and practice in this important sense of community which is at the heart of Ramadan.

One interesting aspect of COVID-19 is the fact that now we all find ourselves in a similar situation. I can talk to my friends in Budapest, New York or Manila and we all understand each other from half word. This is especially valid for mothers of young children who all seem to bear the burden of this pandemic in the same disproportionate ways.

The sad reality is that this pandemic has affected women both at their workplaces and in their homes more severely. First of all, women are over-represented in the health care, hospitality and service industries which were severely hit by the pandemic. The gender digital gap further hinders women's ability to work remotely. According to Human Rights

**Watch, women are up to 31% less likely to have internet access than men<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, women who managed to continue working from home have been voicing concerns that they perform poorer compared to their male counterparts due to the many additional responsibilities they have at home. Which will make men progress faster and, once again, help them catching promotions and higher salaries.**

Women also had to take up more care work at home. International Labor Organisation (ILO) states that if unpaid domestic services were valued on the basis of an hourly minimum wage, they would amount to 9 per cent of global GDP, which corresponds to US\$11 trillion<sup>8</sup>. And this is even before the COVID-19 era. A recent New York Times study<sup>9</sup> asked couples about how they view their own contributions to household chores during COVID-19. Interestingly, although not surprisingly, 21% of men believed they are most responsible for housework, while only 3% of women agreed with that. It might be because – regardless the geographical region – men often seem to have rather limited understanding of what it actually requires from a woman and mother to keep a house running. Most of them take little interest in

mastering these many necessary skills anyway, arguing (while excusing themselves at the same time), that women are more gifted in carrying out multiple tasks around the home and at a better quality than them (needless to say, this opinion is rarely replicated in professional work environments).

My life has changed drastically too. As an independent UN human rights expert, I used to travel every 2-3 weeks to meetings, conferences and lectures, being surrounded literally by hundreds of people, exposed to different time zones, languages, cultures, climates. I have not stayed for such a long period of time in one place for more than 10 years. Although the constant travelling makes me exhausted, I also realize how important it was for my mental well-being. I used to read and educate myself constantly to prepare for my speeches and lectures, meet people from all kinds of backgrounds to discuss important human rights issues, I had to solve complicated legal matters, negotiate between people of power, simply put, feel useful. It is not to suggest that my motherhood activities carry less importance but I simply miss the feeling that I am fulfilling a higher global call. Now all sessions of UN Treaty Bodies are suspended until probably next year and I can't help but thinking about the protection gap that this causes, all those individuals and groups who are enduring human rights violations and require that we take urgent actions to protect them. So, we are now trying to explore flexible and creative ways to continue fulfilling our mandates.

Of course, we all know this is temporary. Although it is not yet clear when we can enter the streets freely like we used to do

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7. Human Rights Watch. 2020. "Human Rights Dimensions of COVID-19 Response." Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/>). 19 March. Accessed August 10, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/human-rights-dimensions-covid-19-response>.

8. International Labour Organization (ILO). 2018. "Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work." <https://www.ilo.org/>. 28 June. Accessed August 10, 2020. [https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS\\_633135/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_633135/lang--en/index.htm).

9. Miller, Claire Cain. 2020. "Nearly Half of Men Say They Do Most of the Home Schooling, 3 Percent of Women Agree." The New York Times, 6 May.

before. But I do know that I have to work hard to maintain my own coping mechanism, which include small daily practices. Such as remembering and voicing out every morning and evening things that I am grateful for, like the health of my family and the fact that we don't have to worry about putting food on our table. I have to keep on turning away from disturbing or upsetting news that could weaken my mental power. I will need to take home-schooling easy, not stress too much about the academic performance of my kids but rather create moments of joy and jokes that they will remember once this is over. And that I have to continue doing my regular physical exercises to help me take a break from reality and recharge my batteries. At the end of the day, we know women are incredibly resilient. So, we must be hanging there and continue supporting each other so we can build better networks and stronger unity and emerge from this even fiercer than we were before.

## STORY 21



*Author:* Ina Darmstädter

*Country:* Germany

Canaan Project

From the childhood on I have wondered why people can be as warm-hearted as Mahatma Gandhi and as brutal as Stalin. Even more I ask myself why so many narcissists who glorify violence come into positions of power, but so few Gandhis?

I was born 20 years after the end of World War II. Men all over the world agreed that there should never again be an Auschwitz. That sounded good. The fact that a quarter of humanity was considered undernourished and had no access to social systems, health care or regular income did not matter in the Cold War arms race for the same gentlemen. I wanted to become Gandhi. I wanted to overcome injustice, protect people from exploitation, protect dignity and health and stop the madness of over armament. But where would I find the wisdom to be heard? How is a normal person supposed to practice this kindness, empathy, and infinite love with all beings and at the same time be politically successful? This contradiction could not be resolved. So, instead of becoming a wise and important leader, I became a mother of two, with a small real estate company, a lot of work and little influence on the rest of the world. Then came 9/11, when four airplanes flew into prominent buildings and caused a shock in the USA. That very evening the superpower's decision was made to attack Afghanistan militarily. An attack on one of the poorest countries in the world, which was under the heel of blinded Islamists who

based their claim to power on the successful expulsion of Soviet occupying powers. More than 1 million people had already fallen victim to this proxy war of the Cold War, nowhere in the world was infant mortality higher, life expectancy lower. To bomb this country to hit some Islamists seemed to me the peak of barbarism. It was shameful how many "never again Auschwitz advocates" took part in the murder of innocent Afghans, who were later not even be counted as "collateral damage" in any statistics.

**A virus was spreading, the virus of "counter-terrorism". The license to kill, ignorance or perversion of international law and a never-ending wave of armies, torture chambers, mass rape, rolled over the planet without any significant resistance. Men in leading positions seemed to agree that every government should be allowed to take violent action against disagreeable opponents at home if the interests of the other were not affected. Was 9/11 the wake-up call? What will our planet look like in 50 years, when power, technology and finance determine our thinking, when the vocabulary and action of politics is dominated killing, destruction, extermination?**

The answer was obvious. We women must form a global alliance and counter the mechanisms of dissocial "leaders" with a constructive, life-affirming and transforming alternative.

I developed a long-term strategy. I would write a satirical book on international politics that everyone would understand. Afterwards, I would invite all relevant associations to peace

festivals in the capital to bring peace as a socially relevant topic to the public. At the same time, an infrastructure must be built up that acts like a security council and checks, advises and, if necessary, sanctions governments for the conformity of their policies with international law and human rights. But above all - we women must be involved in political decisions.

When Corona broke out, I was in the midst of preparations of Round Tables for Israeli and Palestinian women who wanted to start working on an alternative peace plan. Now we are developing an online version of the "1325 Accord", which will be launched on 01 June 2020.

A homepage will explain how in seven steps, participation, transparency, and inclusion of women will be brought to the negotiating tables. It just cannot be that some business men agree on a deal while ignoring basic human rights of Israelis and Palestinians.

**Today I don't believe any longer that one Gandhi would be the change. It is the wisdom of the crowd. It is the intuition of life that will bring the change. It is on us women to build the structure for Peace and Sustainability.**

## STORY 22



*Author:* Katherine Ronderos\*

*Country:* Columbia

I do not want to start my story with the negative aspects of this pandemic, including multiple difficulties faced during the lockdown or the fear of having my closet friends or family members ill as a result of the virus. Sadly, I am sure everybody already knows that. I rather use this space to express the journey I gone through the last year, with the hope that something positive might come out after this pandemic.

As a woman peacebuilder, the pressure and stress we face in our daily lives is huge and it never stops. For seven years I led a national women peace organization from Colombia, which brought as joy so downfalls to my life. Once in a lifetime, I had an invaluable opportunity to contribute to the peace process in Colombia, supporting the inclusion of gender perspective on different levels into the peace agreement, signed in November 2016.

However, by the end of 2018, after seven amazing years of reward and inspiration, I decided to leave the organization and take a sabbatical year, something that is forbidden for women peacebuilders, because we tend to carry all the burden of social problems, injustice, conflict and war on our shoulders.

**Generally, people do not see the challenges and difficulties that women peacebuilders face while doing peace work. They tend to focus solely on the positive impact we have on other women, on people in general, and on the success stories on the grassroots level.**

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\* Katherine Ronderos is a laureate of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2014.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.



**Nevertheless, behind all that, there is a whole universe of attempts and errors, different approaches, persistence and sacrifice.**

Moving on with my story, I used this year as a much-needed opportunity to slow down, connect with myself, sleep and eat healthy, healing from depression, and recover my overall health condition. I did not see anybody or go anywhere for some period of time, just with a few exceptions. At the end of this healing and self-nurturing year of rest and constant reflection, I started to come out of my cocoon, which coincided exactly with the beginning of the lockdown in Colombia caused by the pandemic. On the one hand it was very frustrating for not being able to get out and connect with the outside world, but on the other, it became an opportunity to overcome this lockdown and pandemic difficulties. This is very usual for women peacebuilders, as every difficulty we try to turn it into an opportunity.

As it usually happens, life brought me into contact with another resilient woman peacebuilder, looking to develop new social post-pandemic and post-conflict ideas. Thus, I started to think about new economic models that focus on resilience, arts, culture, sustainable social markets and peacebuilding, having women at the core of this process.

**This is how my journey is starting once again, in the times of COVID-19, by developing new economic approaches to tackle the root causes of war, violence, inequality and armed conflict - rather than simple, quick and fast remedies, as well as providing moral and financial support to my beloved ones.**

**So, a day in my life as a woman peacebuilder in the middle of the lockdown is a day of readings, virtual meetings, planning, designing and thinking on future approaches to sustainable human development, social corporate responsibility, human rights, gender equality, resilience and a culture of peace. All these is crucial in order to be ready to respond to the challenges people are going to face once this pandemic is over - if this ever happens...**

Everything occurs for a reason. Indeed, my sabbatical year provided me with an opportunity to stop and look back at what I have done and achieved, as well as, helped me to reflect on how much women peacebuilders sacrifice their lives for the others. However, my main learning so far has been that although it is important to support and save others, the main person to save is yourself.

**You will hear from me soon and more importantly, you will hear about new projects I am working on, that will reach many women at the global scale and hopefully will also reach your doorstep to connect with other women working on peace around the world!**

## STORY 23



*Author:* Molly Freeman

*Country:* USA

I live in Berkeley, California on the US Pacific Coast. This is not an active conflict zone where my physical safety is at risk. However, every day the US is increasingly polarized as the White House occupant amplifies disinformation. I love Democracy Today conferences in Armenia where I live 3 to 4 months each year, except this year during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I spend my "shelter in place" days in Berkeley advocating with about 200,000 thousand supporters of J Street who are working for a negotiated agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. We channel our energies toward US policies that recognize the right of Palestinians to self-determination and the right of Jews to a Jewish homeland, albeit in different states. Obviously, the current US and Israeli administrations pose an existential threat to a negotiated agreement, not to mention to stability in the Middle East and to the two states that might emerge from such meetings.

I take inspiration from Israelis and Palestinians and other international actors who continue under difficult circumstances to advocate for the welfare of both peoples. For example, in addition to the amazing Democracy Today staff who create space for global sharing about the conflict, there is Ina Darmstaedter in Germany, Huda Abuarquob in Palestine, Regional Director for the Alliance for Middle East Peace, and from Anat Saragusti and Hamutal Gouri, who publish weekly news

from Israel.

This photo witnesses about the demonstrations in the days of COVID-19 that are continuously held across Israel on behalf of Israeli - Palestinian peace and the equitable role of women in negotiations.



An end to the Occupation is an essential first step for the liberation of Palestinians from Israeli control. There are people on both sides of this conflict who are engaged in over a hundred organizations working to build a robust constituency for peace. The well-being of Israelis is interdependent with the well-being of Palestinians. I believe this is how peace building works. It is indeed tragic that it is taking so long.

## STORY 24



*Author:* Fadwah Khawaja

*Country:* Palestine

Day during Covid-19. I am writing this story in the early morning of our Afterfeast, which is the first day after 30 days of fasting. All people are locked down, nobody is in the streets, no work, no schools, no movement. All of us are worried about what has happened?? All of a sudden to all, however, we the Palestinians had a lot of tragic days besides the Covid-19.

On March 22nd, during Covid-19, a horrible murder happened to my neighbour's son. He was just 21 years old. In the afternoon, the security allowed people to go outside of their homes to do shopping, visit the clinics and do some essential things, just during a few hours. On that tragic day there was this young boy called Sufian Khawaja. His mother asked him to pick some things from the market. He asked his cousin to go with him. So, they went out and crossed the check point located at the entrance of Naalin village. The Israeli soldiers stopped them and prohibited from going out. He mentioned that he needs to buy some food for the family. There was a critical situation, they had nothing to eat at home, where there was his big family with many members some of whom were small children and his mother was waiting for him to prepare the dinner. Nevertheless, even after explanation, the soldiers insisted on their return back home without shopping and asked them to leave the area. The young boy switched his car to return back, however, the soldiers on the spot shoot him from the back without any reason...

The people are depressed. Without money, frustrated and lost, waiting for solution. Nobody had any information. All of them were full of fear and insecurity. The Israeli army took his body and till now his family is waiting on the edge of the street for Israeli military court to give them his body. Can anyone imagine the situation of his family, as well as, the people around. Some of them went to his house to stand beside his family. Nevertheless, the ones who suffer the most are his parents. Poor family, quiet, peaceful, patient. People who are praying to God to see their son for one second and bury him.

Today inshallah the first thing I will do is to visit this family. It is really sad, 100 meters away from our family home. We are looking for a better future for our young generation however, it is not easy.

## STORY 25



*Author:* Ghaida Odat

*Country:* Syria

The Covid-19 crisis did not leave anybody without negative impact. Just a few found their way to discover the positive outcomes of this disaster and it is hard to find that outcome.

In the early days of Covid-19, I was really focused on the fear of getting sick, trying to find ways to protect myself.

**What scared me the most at that time was the idea that maybe I would die being outside of my country, homeless, far from my children and my beloved ones. I was scared for them.**

After I realized the situation and passed it through myself, I started to think about the impact of the Covid-19. The situation of the Syrians in the refugee camps, the situation inside Syria, the death rate as a result of ongoing war and crimes committed against this people by the dictatorial regime and by everyone who allowed this proxy war. I thought about poverty as a result of the worsen economic situation caused by the nine years of war. How will they manage this situation and who will protect them? When there is lack of minimum requirements for hygiene and sanitation. Lack of food.

The Syrian women are subject to all kinds of violations which come with this disease. So, there is an increase pressure on them with more abuse and violence imposed by men who see them as easy targets.

Today and after all the previous days,

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\* Ghaida Odat is a laureate of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2016.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.

my interests became much broader. I can no longer think about a narrow range of people like myself, my family and the people of my country. Every day I became a citizen of a country which is mostly affected by Covid-19, as my family there.

Every day I search for the countries in which situation improves to feel happy for them. Then I search for countries which have unique places in my heart to spiritually reunite with them.

This is the positive impact of Covid-19. If we unite as humans and believe that we are all people of this earth and there will be no difference between us at all.

**Perhaps as human beings we will learn a positive lesson from Covid-19, to regain our humanity and unite to fight injustice, poverty, tyranny and all kinds of discriminations.**



## STORY 26



*Author:* Diana Francis

*Country:* Great Britain

### **My life so far**

People in other countries, if they happen to know me do so through my three decades of international peace building work and related writing; or possibly from my eight years as President of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, which taught me so much about the inspiring ways that people in the most violent circumstances still find the courage and power to bring about radical change non-violently. What they may not know is that since I was fifteen (now sixty years ago) I have remained an activist for peace and justice in my own country, campaigning both locally and nationally for the demilitarisation of UK 'foreign policy' and for an internationalist approach to security and cooperation, based on care for people and planet.

In 2014 I was one of a group of UK colleagues who established a new initiative called Rethinking Security<sup>10</sup>, which now comprises many different peace-building and campaigning organisations, as well as individual 'practitioners', activists and academics. Its goal is to help people understand that the only 'security' that is meaningful is the wellbeing and safety of human beings, the ecology and biosphere of our planet, on which all depend.

**'National security' means nothing without those things, so the only security is shared**

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10. Rethinking Security For Just a Peaceful World. n.d. Rethinking security (in 90 seconds...). Accessed June 15, 2020. <https://rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/>.

**security. Right now, in the Covid-19 pandemic many people are coming to understand this for the first time.**

### **Covid time as campaigning time**

Early this year, our recently elected Prime Minister announced a review of its national security policy. Rethinking Security immediately saw this as an opportunity to generate a new debate about the meaning of security - human security, and began to work on a serious submission.

**Soon after, as Covid-19 was beginning to reach the UK, I put the idea of doing something similar to a group of campaigners at home in the city of Bath, which had come together last Autumn to formulate 'A New Vision for the UK', within the framework of human security. We decided to use this Government Review as a channel for the ideas we had formulated then. We couldn't meet physically but, like so many others, we discovered that virtual meetings work and that you can go on talking between meetings via email and by phone. The plans we formulated were to make written submissions to two Parliamentary Committees and then to initiate a survey of security and insecurity as experienced in the lives of local residents; also, to engage with our Local Authority and our MP (who has agreed to call for a Parliamentary debate on human security).**

By the day I am describing we had made our first submission, to Defence Committee, with just two days to spare. Now the deadline for the second was imminent so, for me as collator and shaper of the final draft, the day was tough. Writing anything substantial

cooperatively and that in a widely assorted group, is quite a test of group cohesion and a major challenge for the drafter. I had circulated what I hoped would be the final draft. Now there was an increasingly rapid and stressful flow of suggestions, corrections and re-circulations, followed by problems with formatting (not my forte) but after an urgent telephone call the needed help was given and at last the document could be saved as final and the submission was made. It was a real collective effort and I was able to circulate what we'd done to a long list and wide circle of supporters.

In the meantime, between all the exchanges on that final draft, and a steady flow of other emails, I managed to write an agenda for an online meeting arranged for the following day, when a small group of us would start to make plans for interviews with a range of local people, as part of our local survey. We needed to identify the organisations through which we would reach them: for instance, those supporting homeless people or refugees, or providing 'food banks' for the many people who go hungry in this rich country of ours.

My third campaigning task for the day was to fix the date and time for an online meeting with two members of our Local Authority's Council Cabinet and our local Member of Parliament, to discuss whether our Council would also make a submission to our Government on security; maybe also encourage other Councils to do the same. For years, while their budgets have been cut and cut, local authorities here have been struggling to meet the ever-increasing demands placed upon them: to house the homeless, provide

health care for all, look after those who are old and infirm, and support those who are struggling financially and socially, as the gulf between rich and poor grows ever wider and deeper. (In our rich country many parents now depend on 'food banks' provided by volunteers to help them feed their children.) Some local authorities are on the verge of bankruptcy. So, this meeting felt important but finding a date and time to suit all eight of us was proving difficult and I was getting confused, but ten minutes after our submission had gone in this too was accomplished!

In the course of the day I also rang several isolated friends and relatives, chatted with two of my grandchildren and went for a walk with my husband, greeting many people at a safe distance and even drinking a quick cup of tea in our little back garden. Still, by the time we had eaten and the last job was done I was glad just to flop on the settee and watch something undemanding on TV.

**What matters to me is to do whatever I can to help build on the sense of shared humanity that so many are feeling just now, so that together we can transform our world.**

## STORY 27



*Author:* Magda Zenon

*Country:* Cyprus

*Organisation:* Hands across divide

My name is Magda Zenon, born, brought up and an active peacebuilder in South Africa during the dark years of apartheid.

Fast forward a few decades and I continue to be active as a peacebuilder but now on the divided island of Cyprus. I am a founding and active member of Hands Across the Divide (HAD), the only island-wide women's organisation whose vision is to create a culture of peace in a united Cyprus where equality, including gender is a foundational principle.

A yahoo group was created in 2003 to facilitate communication and we met in the village of Pyla or at the Ledra Palace Hotel in No Man's Land as often as possible as the checkpoints were closed then and these 2 locations, though not easy, were the most accessible within our surreal context.

Movement between the two communities was difficult but it became easier when there was a partial opening of the checkpoints in 2004. This did not discourage the members of HAD and there were great activities within both communities over the years; over eight Peace Buses, releasing pigeons when the leaders of both communities meet for the first time in many years for a working dinner, a paper on a 'Gender Friendly Cyprus Solution', a Cinderella activity when the checkpoints opened with a curfew of midnight, to name a few. Hands Across the Divide was, and continues to be a visible presence within Cyprus, and beyond, with an overriding message of women as

strong creative peacebuilders.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the members of HAD a new kind of division, a new kind of separation!! After 18 years together, strong friendships had formed between the members, who saw beyond divisions and separations.

There was a strong need from many to meet and to make sure everyone and their loved ones were ok and the group began meeting regularly using one of the available online chat platforms. During one such meeting it was spontaneously decided to share feelings with each other about how the social distancing/lockdown had affected each individually and collectively and how they saw the future. This uncut conversation was led by me - I am a freelance journalist - recorded and then shared online<sup>11</sup>. It was during this conversation in lockdown that we didn't just let each other into our lives but into our homes, into our personal spaces.

As women peacebuilders, we easily found a way to quickly adapt to the new reality of enforced isolation and online meetings and immediately connected, communicated and continued without missing a peacebuilding beat...

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11. Hands Across the Divide. 2020. <https://soundcloud.com/>. 03 May. Accessed June 15, 2020. <https://soundcloud.com/magda-ze-non/hands-across-the-divide>.

## STORY 28



**Author:** Katie Economidou

**Country:** Cyprus

**Organisation:** Hands across the divide

Covid19 found me in bed with a broken disc, unable to move from my bed for 7 weeks in order to save myself from surgery.

I had to be creative, otherwise all this story would make me endlessly depressed and vulnerable. My beloved daughter suggested that I buy a new laptop to be able to work from my bed since I could not move and my husband was using our other computer. I've listened to her and she was right.

Then came the question, how do I deal with pain?

How do I make my situation, an inspirational one?

Not easy, but possible with the help of inner strength and the friends around who did offer their time and energy to chat and encourage my further steps.

It was actually very promising the fact that with some bicommunal groups such as the Hands Across the Divide, the Dialogue Group, the Meditation Group and a few others, we managed to meet online at least once a week, exchange views and ideas on how we go from here and what we can do to be productive in times of the pandemic.

With HAD, thanks to our colleague Magda Zenon who implemented the new technology of zoom meetings, we materialized the idea of our member Gina Chappa of a virtual peace bus, since we could not travel physically only virtually, to hold a series of interviews with

members on how they cope with the lockdown and the fact that we could not meet across the divide. The check points in Cyprus have been closed for more than a month and a half. So, the only way for us to meet was through online meetings.

We are planning some beautiful creative projects for the Hands Across the Divide Women's Group, including providing support to victims of domestic violence, solidarity across borders, an evening with wine and poetry from home, and many more.

With the dialogue group we've had some fruitful discussions with members and new friends from the two communities together with friends living abroad, expats in the UK etc. It is so hard to digest that so many Cypriots have died in the UK from coronavirus. Very high numbers.

We have realized more than ever that a solidarity network needs to be formed in Cyprus to look after cases of humanitarian nature and try to solve them especially in times of a pandemic, when medications and food are needed, a crisis when people lose their jobs, natural disasters, etc. During the pandemic there was a fire in the northern part of the island (Turkish Cypriot Community), and for the first time airplanes and helicopters from the south (Greek Cypriot community) took off and helped over, to put off the fires.

With the meditation circle that meets once and sometimes twice a week online, I found support and help in dealing with my pain and possible surgery case. I needed the boost of my morale and encouragement in a concrete manner. A sense of spiritual work

was incorporated in the days of covid19 that helped alleviate the fears of the lockdown, and the threats from the pandemic.

I helped some friends who needed professional help to see a life coach to start dealing with matters that bothered them and made them intensely unhappy.

And above all, I mediated for a woman domestic helper from Asia who suffered of cancer and could not work during the lockdown to get some financial help from previous concert sources to pay for her treatment.

Last but not least, the laughter and sweet talking of a two-and-a-half-year-old girl who lives in the Turkish Cypriot community but during this time stays over in the south for medical treatment and calls me grandma, offered moments of great joy and hope!!

My two daughters were there for me anytime I needed anything, food or techno help and to whom I am grateful!!!!

Most cheerful moment was an online concert we've organized with friends for charity purposes. Singing brought oxygen into my soul.

During the days I did not feel acute back pain, I could cook and share meals with my husband and did some flower planting to bring some color in the Spring we lost due to the pandemic.



## STORY 29



**Author:** Carmit Lubanov

**Country:** Israel

**Organisation:** Association for Environmental Justice in Israel

**Corona days as a parable: a day of my life, in Israel, beginning of May 2020.**

**Early Morning.** As every day since the corona pandemic broke into our world and disrupted the routine of life, I begin the day by looking at the latest updated information on the state of the corona starting from WHO, then daily newspapers of Israel and around the world. For some reason, I am far less patient with television and the repetitive talking on the screen.

**This morning, on early May, there are signs that we are heading for the 'post-Corona' era. Especially interesting is the trend in relation to the previous days. Improvement. The number of recoverees from COVID-19 is increasing, the rate of pandemic is restrained.**

Reviewing the cross-country comparisons, which highlight that the richer countries are more affected by the virus, it can be seen that Corona is a disease with a high degree of inequality. The poor are hurt much more. I think by myself that it is not surprising. Similar in our work: environmental inequality, inferior services for disadvantaged groups, and, certainly, priorities of budgetary allocations related to short-sighted political views. Alongside the fact that adopting proper behaviour during the Corona time, like in the case of climate crisis, helps greatly in coping with the situation.

And turning to a routine work during the Corona. Most of the time of the recent months has been devoted to the work on 'environmental

cabinet'. We aimed at raising environmental issues in the occupied territories and advancing agreed solutions. In a few minutes I will be holding phone and skype calls about developing a new climate plan for the populations whose exposure level and awareness is much lower than those in Western countries.

**Noon.** I am taking a break to watch special session at High court. It is broadcasted through main TV channels. Today and tomorrow special hearings of the Israeli High Court is concerning a new government. We just ended a year without a permanent government. Three rounds of election campaigns without a decision. And now, two days are devoted to legal petitions to stop the madness. "Democracy is in danger".

**Late afternoon.** The High court session for today is over, tomorrow there is another discussion about the unprecedented political situation here.

**Evening.** Close view from the outside. Spring blossoms is here. In spite of the isolation, sport routines are maintained by us to keep the routine during Corona. The semi-urban town where I live is located nearby Tel Aviv and is surrounded by green fields. Walking out with sense of freedom. The freedom to choose how far to go, when and where, as in an old Ad from CNN "The right to choose". And despite the Corona-ruling, the daily habits have not been completely lifted. We know that the restrictions are temporary here. And while writing now, as with any given moment of Corona time, I know that there is a large population, less than an hour away from where I live, who live in a common space: with a window to Middle-Eastern landscape. For them, freedom

is routinely denied. **The attitude to which the majority of Israeli society firstly exposes to during the Corona days, is the usual practice in Palestine: closure, checkpoints, curfew, control, part of routine life.**

While walking we talk about many issues that has been raised during Covid-19. Will humanity learn a lesson? Will nature continue its marvellous recovery, observing dolphins near Venice, and other animals that have not been seen so close to the human environment, which have plundered their living areas. And in the face of the big questions, which we have limited ability to answer to, there are questions with already provided clear answers. The Corona teaches that collaborations are much needed to deal with threats better. Collaboration between individuals and communities, between hospitals and institutions, between state entities. In one of AEJJ's climate justice studies, we researched the notion of "critical link" for community resilience, for better coping with the climate crisis, in the time of extreme events. The answer our research indicated is that collaboration is required at all levels. We have discovered that not the strongest survive better, but the socialized ones.

**Mid-Night.** And at this late point of the day, I prefer to hope that exactly this understanding that underpins our collaborations with Palestinian colleagues, for peace and regional sustainability in our region. Women work together on environmental projects, learn the value of cooperation. As we, two women, heads of civic organizations in Israel and Palestine, have been working for in joint vision for the benefit of the local populations, creating better environment, as neighbours and allies.

## STORY 30



**Author:** Lesley Julia Abdela

**Country:** Great Britain

British expert on women's rights and political participation and women, peace and security.

### Peace-building in the era of Coronavirus

January 2020

I am waiting to sign a contract for work as an expert Consultant advising on a Gender Charter for the Media in Sri Lanka. The island is still recovering from the aftermath of years of brutal Civil War. The Charter has been drafted by Sri Lanka Media institutions after much discussion and consultation. This Charter initiating dialogues and creating a strategy to encourage media to comply with a set of guidelines for fair, ethical and gender sensitive reporting and international best practice standards for gender equality in the Media Houses work-place is timely.

Media can support and strengthen women's roles in transitions by including women in mainstream coverage of all peace and security issues. When journalists and bloggers communicate messages on women as peace-builders, women's human rights, gender-based violence and social justice – those issues are better understood, better accepted, and better represented in public policy debates contributing to the overall goal of peace development, human rights, and democracy. The Media can influence the public's perception of women's importance in shaping reforms in society, women's status as credible leaders and experts in their fields, and women's status as sources for reliable information and thoughtful opinion.

In conflicts and in the aftermath of conflicts Women and Girls repeatedly find

**their voices drowned out in Media coverage of political, social, economic and peace and security/safety issues. Structural changes to media institutions, ending impunity and right to information, may sometimes be high on the post-war media reforms agenda. However, discussions on gender portrayal and representation in the media are almost always subordinated.**

**Globally, State propaganda departments and political movements linked to extremist religious groups have used Media stereotypes of women as a tool to inflame public opinion. Good journalism challenges such unfair, offensive and misleading stereotyping.**

A major challenge for women? Getting women's voices heard in discussions. As post-conflict countries turn their attention to elections, new governments, new Parliaments, amended legislation, including Family Status law, new Constitutions, and security system reforms, the public debates and decisions in the Media appear to be 'for men only'.

The Covid-19 outbreak starts in Wuhan, China. The virus is believed to have originated in a food market selling wildlife. I doubt this news will impact my proposed visit Sri Lanka advising on gender and media in the context of peace building. As the situation in Wuhan deteriorates, London's Heathrow airport begins screening all arrivals from Wuhan. Britons from Wuhan are placed in 14-day quarantine at a specialist hospital in the Wirral in the North of England after being brought back on an evacuation plane.

I live in a sparsely populated valley in the countryside in East Sussex in the South East

of England. We are a kilometre from the nearest village. It takes one hour 15 minutes by train from the nearest railway station to the centre of London. Between overseas trips I work from home. My partner Tim Symonds is an author. We are both accustomed to working from home. On one side of the pot-holed track leading to our home is the Batemans Estate land, owned by the National Trust, an independent charity. It owns over 500 heritage properties, which include many historic houses and gardens, industrial monuments, and social history sites. Most of these are usually open to the public.

Batemans was the home of Rudyard Kipling (author of *The Jungle Book*) Nobel Prize winner for literature. The Bateman's estate consists of 300 acres of countryside set within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, this landscape is classically medieval; full of small fields, hedgerows, old trees, abandoned iron ore pits, hidden ponds and magical deserted trackways. The River Dudwell runs through the valley and there are seemingly endless magnificent views, making it the perfect place for a daily walk. The countryside around here is hilly. In the afternoons when the weather is fine, we go for a 3 or 4 kilometre walk through the woods and fields.

### **February 2020**

The first transmission of Covid-19 within the UK is confirmed. It is thought to be a British family who returned home to East Sussex from a Ski holiday in Austria. By 28 February the earliest death in UK due to Coronavirus is recorded. The UK government

decides not to follow Italy and China in imposing restrictions on liberty and movement. Instead, the government advises a range of voluntary restrictions such as "social distancing" and, if any symptoms are exhibited, self-isolation and quarantine. Workers are encouraged to work from home where possible.

## **2 March**

So far, I am not directly impacted. I have signed my contract. The plan is for me to fly to Colombo. The first trip, I will be meeting key stakeholders. My second trip, will be to co-present the Gender Media Charter at a public launch.

## **14 March**

Ten more people in the UK have died in the last 24 hours after testing positive for coronavirus. The total number of confirmed cases in the UK has reached 1,140 with 21 deaths. Travel plans for me to fly to Sri Lanka are cancelled. Due to the tragic and dramatic escalation of Coronavirus in countries such as Italy and Spain the Sri Lanka government has imposed a temporary two weeks travel ban on passengers arriving from Europe. Even if you get a visa, quarantine or the risk of government enforced quarantine on arrival at the airport or destination is a real threat, medical insurance is currently in question globally as companies seek a definition from governments on the classification of the virus, in other words if I were quarantined or have any medical issues arising from the trips, I could end up having to pay.

## **15 March**

The Prime Minister Boris Johnson advises

everyone in the UK against "non-essential" travel and contact with others and suggests people should avoid pubs, clubs, theatres and work from home if possible. At this stage, these are merely suggestions.

## **18 March**

At an on-line conference with my colleagues in Sri Lanka we agree on a menu of alternatives to our original Plan which was foiled by the COVID-19. The consultative meetings with stakeholders will be conducted on-line instead of in-country as originally planned. Fortunately, I am fairly up to date on the Gender situation in Sri Lanka as last year I was in Colombo conducting a separate Gender Consultancy for a British Council supported peace-building programme.

## **21 March**

Here in UK The National Trust announces it will close its parks and gardens from midnight on Saturday, to help restrict the spread of coronavirus. This includes Batemans a few hundred meters from my home. The decision has been taken ahead of Mother's Day, which the Trust predicts will attract more people to its parks despite Government advice on social distancing.

## **23 March (The UK is put into official lockdown)**

In an unprecedented broadcast to the nation, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson announces that all UK residents must stay at home to protect the National Health Service amid the growing threat of coronavirus. We are not allowed to meet friends or family who do not live in our home.

My son and his family live in London. We speak every day on the phone. On Mother's Day he sent me flowers and tubes of paint. My hobby is painting pictures. I cried because I could not hug him. In this heightened atmosphere emotions can feel raw.

The police will now have the power to fine people money if they leave their homes for any reason other than the following:

- Shopping for basic necessities
- One form of exercise a day - either alone or with members of your household
- Medical need or to provide care help vulnerable person
- Travel to work - but only if necessary and you cannot work from home

The Prime Minister says, "We will immediately close all shops selling non-essential goods, other premises including libraries and places of worship."

Two days later all schools are closed. The schools are still closed. Only children who can attend school are the children of 'Essential workers' in health-care, food provision etc.

## **29 April**

After 5 weeks in 'lock-down' I feel like we are living in a Surrealist movie. On one hand for the past few weeks my personal life has been like a quiet holiday in the tranquillity and beauty of Spring-time the South East of England countryside. Each morning Tim brings me coffee and breakfast in bed. I look at my e-mails and face-book messages on my lap-top. Take a bath, dress and go to my desk to work on the Sri Lanka project.

In the afternoons we take our permitted daily exercise. In our case it is a two or three mile walk in the countryside. It is the season of primroses, bluebells and wild garlic.

On the other hand all the time running in the back of the brain I am aware the horror story taking place. We start each day listening in bed to the daily BBC radio news on Alexa. The news starts and ends each day with the daily death toll.

Today 29 April the death toll from the virus in the UK rises to more than 26,000 after care home deaths are included for first time. Until now, the figures have only included hospital deaths.

Each day around 5pm surrounded by the tranquil beauty of the countryside we listen on my mobile phone to the BBC for the daily update 'horror' briefing from Government and their medical advisors. A drink in the garden is followed by TV dinner watching more news on BBC, Sky, CNN, Al Jazeera in English and FRANCE 24. For people in cities with no open spaces it must be desperate to be cooped up indoors. Not surprisingly we hear reports of a large increase in domestic violence.

**1 May. Coronavirus death toll in UK increases in the past 24 hours by 739 bringing the total deaths to 27,510. Lack of testing means the exact number of cases of Coronavirus is not known. It is more than 186,000.**



## STORY 31



*Author:* Rose Mbone

*Country:* Kenya

*Organisation:* Legend Kenya

### **A woman peace builder. Life under isolation, pre Covid-19**

The life was normal and as usual. Me, together with my team had an awesome peace and security meeting with fellow youth and security actors on 11/3/2020. Little did I know that the government was soon going to introduce lockdown and Curfew from 24/3/2020 for the next 21 days.

Being a local community leader self-isolation is almost impossible in my life. I received calls from families that are struggling to make ends meet because most of our community members **are casual laborers who work from hand to mouth and the majority are women.** I had to choose between staying at home or reaching out to different actors, in particular humanitarian actors.

For the first 5 days we struggled as a team was trying to reach out for immediate support but later on, we had a partner who supported us with food, liquid soap and face masks.

Our key focus has been on children headed families. We realized that most of them were suffering in silence, due to the fear and stigma that comes with being members of such families. We have a response team that consists of 5 people. My focus and role so far, has been carrying out trauma-healing sessions through the phone for traumatized families that have lost jobs, hope and strength to carry on during this 'stay at home' period. It is sad because sometimes I am talking to a woman



who is going through abuse because the rate of gender-based violence has gone high. Police brutality during curfew is also witnessed and sometimes I have no way to stop my ears from listening. I must listen and cannot turn my back on them. Personal time for self-care is not possible now. Maybe sometimes later after Covid-19 is managed and curfew cancelled. That has deepened my understanding of how such scenarios affect both men and women differently. Together with my organization and in partnership with well-wishers we have been reaching out to the vulnerable in our communities (children headed families, and the elderly).

As a young woman I came across children headed families that were marginalized while relief food has been distributed. This came across because of the fact that most of the caregivers are insensitive in handling the issue that they are children and parents at the same time.

**We have identified 20 children headed families and 10 elderly families, majority being women whom we hope to feed for the next 3 months until when we anticipate things might start to get back to normal in Kenya.**

## STORY 32



*Author:* Inna Ayrapetyan\*

*Country:* Chechnya, Russia

### When tomorrow was cancelled

#### Can a war with the virus stop the fight for human lives in another critical situation?

One day in the life of a human rights activist

The coronavirus and the quarantine which was announced became an unpredictable reality and test for the humanity. The regime of self-isolation did not become a tragedy for me. I survived 1995 – 1999 in Chechnya, during hostilities. We were usually finding a shelter in the basements and for a long time could not go out on the streets due to shelling, bombing and simple human fear of people with weapons.

Over the years of my work in the North Caucasus I already developed strong immunity to unexpected surprises. Thanks to this I gained valuable gifts, such knowledge and love which I generously share with those who need help and support.

It was one of these quarantine days when I received an alarm call. The girl was in danger of "honor killing". Through the years, the human rights defenders in the North Caucasus have developed their own emergency response algorithm. Our communication channel received a signal from the activist that a girl from Ingushetia was detained and is in one of the police departments of Vladikavkaz. Her relatives put her on a federal wanted list and the police, which discovered the girl, was obliged to inform her relatives about that.

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\* Inna Ayrapetyan is a laureate of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2012.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.

Activists, including lawyers, psychologists, and journalists, began to take emergency measures immediately. I phoned to the police and they told me that they have a girl. She is an adult, so they cannot keep her, however, they are obliged to inform her relatives, who in this case will immediately take her away, which in turn will be followed by inevitable death of the girl.

After consulting with the colleagues, we have decided to evacuate the girl to the crisis centre. We contacted several such centres immediately. One of them was located in the centre of the Southern Federal District and was ready to accept her. We agreed with the police that they will take her to a safe place, so she could spend the night there. Then we took her to the crisis centre. I was in touch with the girl all the time, so that she could feel support. At the same time, I was in contact with the centre's specialists to explain them our traditions and customs. I told them about "honor killing" and the reasons behind it. This is essential, so the centre's specialists who are not aware of our culture can inspire confidence and build the right communication with the women without criticizing traditions and customs, calling them "barbaric" or "medieval", but focusing their attention on the needs and feelings of the victim.

Now she is safe. She has been in a new place for 1.5 months already. The centre's specialists have been helping her during all this period. They have found a job for her as well as helped with housing. She is socializing. And all this has been done during self-isolation.

Helping people recognizes neither time nor

administrative boundaries. Despite changing conditions, attention and care overcome all obstacles. Today, the lives of those suffering from domestic violence, enclosed within four walls of their homes with people representing their main threat, have become a real struggle for survival. Nowadays, more than ever, we feel the importance of our work which is impossible without team spirit and solidarity.

Together with Sofia Shakirova, laureate of "International Young Women's Peace and Human rights Award" (2012) established by "Democracy Today", we launched an online psychological consultation line for pregnant women, teachers, doctors, parents and children, women who remained at home and suffered from domestic violence. And now everything got worse. Ten practicing psychologists from the North Caucasus hold supporting consultations, redirect applicants to other specialists, record statistics, and in cases of detected violence, respond through law enforcement agencies, guardianship authorities and other channels of safe assistance.

I am writing this story to share with you our reality.

## STORY 33



*Author:* Anahit Danielyan\*

*Country:* Artsakh, Nagorno-Karabakh

### Covid-19. An ordinary story

Quarantine, I don't know what day.

In the morning, I don't wake up in a panic anymore to look for a new data on coronavirus in my phone during the first seconds. It was in the first 10-15 days of quarantine.

Then things slowly changed when I realized that the spread of the virus is inevitable and that this situation will continue for quite a long time.

This morning I started checking the phone again, but now digging my work chats. It is not easy. There is a need to go back and understand whether I have missed anything. Maybe someone asked me something, or the editor wrote about a new topic.

Today will not also be different from the previous days. I will stay "hanged" on my phone and stick to my computer, which reads so much information with me every day, receives and reports so much news from so many people that if it had a language, it would have said "that is enough, one cannot stand it anymore". Nevertheless, in its way it definitely curses me.

That is what the life of a journalist is all about. That is what the life of journalist is like.

After having coffee in the morning, I switch on my computer and look for constantly updated and supplemented news.

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\* Anahit Danielyan is a laureate of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2014.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.

Today have been reported hundred... new cases of coronavirus. The number has not dropped below of 100 for several days. "But we haven't reached the peak yet", - I think and go through other news.

Besides watching the live broadcast of the Prime Minister and various officials, as well as, witnessing insults and arguments against each other at the National Assembly, I read about the violation of women's rights, domestic violence, targeting, cursing or mocking women, and so on.

Alongside with the news, chats, answering frequently asked questions of my four-year-old daughter, cooking and implementing household chores, I have to write an article and sometimes go to the store or market.

Today I also have to do shopping. The activity I do once or twice a week (I don't go to the bakery every day, my mother bakes) which requires much effort.

But this has been a part of my daily routine since the first day of quarantine. I put on my mask and gloves and go down to the store. At first, I am greeted by the stare of people without masks and gloves, and I am amazed in my mind and ask myself: "why these people are not beware, because the number of infected people is growing".

The shop takes up a lot of my time. I try not to forget anything, including my daughter's favourite cookie, chocolate and yogurt. I buy everything packaged. I approach the cashier and stand in line, keeping the required distance. A man with a strong and large body comes from the end, satisfied with himself, stands by the cash register, pays for his purchases with

a clear conscience and leaves.

I get indignant about this, but I am silently waiting my turn. I am kind of tired of explaining the rules and regulations to such kind of people.

It is finally my turn. I pay with a card and go out, breathing a little more freely. But everything is still ahead. I get home, wash myself, disinfect the products I bought one by one, and go back to work.

The best is spending time with my daughter in the evening, when she reminds me of what I have promised her when I have persuaded her not to disturb me.

I also call to Karabakh, where my relatives live, and then to Russia where my aunts are living to find out how they all are. Meanwhile, I try to persuade them to read less fake news on the Internet and not to believe everything that is written. As if there is no coronavirus or that everyone is given money to write that the cause of the death was coronavirus and other similar information. However, my aunt will send other news or videos of the same type which can explain how one can be cured of that unfortunate infection in just one day.

One of the positive outcomes of Quarantine Day is when my daughter, noticing the reflection of the wonderful sunset on my wall, runs to me to give me instructions to take a photo. I immortalize the moment, post it on Instagram and Facebook, then move on.

And at the midnight, when everyone is asleep, I study the data of different countries in details, trying to understand in which country the spread of the infection is declining

and where the numbers are rising. I am more attentive to the countries where I have acquaintances or friends. Russia's numbers are growing rapidly and I worry about it as many of my relatives are there.

I look at the numbers of Azerbaijan, since I worry about it as well. No, I have no friends. I remember the words of the daily news anchor of one of our media outlets, when after presenting the official numbers of Azerbaijan, he considers it his duty to say that they are only official numbers, in fact there are more, and Azerbaijan hides them. I get annoyed again: "why does the newsreader do that?"

And the thread of my questions begins: why do people pay attention to such kind of things? Now we all have a common enemy: Covid-19, don't we? What is the difference for those whose mother or father, brother or sister became the victims of that infection, whether they are Chinese, Azerbaijani, Russian or representatives of other nations? This virus targets everyone.

I was born and lived in Karabakh. I saw two wars 1991-1994 and April 2016. I lost two brothers and a friend and many of my acquaintances had similar losses. Human life is above all for me and I will never want anyone, no matter in which part of the world he/she lives, to mourn the loss of a dear one.

We will overcome Covid as well. This is another war and we must come out of it without human losses.

## STORY 34



**Author:** Barween Mohammed Ameen\*

**Country:** Kurdistan region, Iraq

Peace activist, member of the Iraqi Higher Commission for Human Rights, Member of the Administrative Board of Baghdad Women's Association

My name as Barween Ameen and I am a human rights activist for twenty years, still active until this day. As a human rights activist and a proud feminist, I have set a goal that includes three personal aims to face and resist this worldwide pandemic known as Covid-19.

1. Avoiding this virus on a personal level.
2. Spreading awareness throughout my family, relatives, and beloved ones.
3. Working as a human activist which is my duty to spread awareness in the community.

The world faced the pandemic in the beginning of 2020. It first began to infect people in Chinese city of Wuhan as we all know. As usual, I am following the news, regarding Covid-19 especially those published by the World Health Organization (WHO). Therefore, I prepared myself as soon as I heard the news that the virus has reached our neighboring countries, since it was just a matter of time that it would spread to my country as well. When I took this into consideration, I came up with a plan that consisted of three different goals regarding Covid-19 on how to avoid it, spread awareness, and engaging in personal activities.

**Avoiding COVID-19 on a personal level.** By following the rules and the regulations of WHO I have learned to avoid many unnecessary activities that would have raised the chances of me getting the virus.

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\* Barween Mohammed Ameen is a laureate of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2017.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.



**Fortunately, I got my travel permission by Iraq Human Rights Commission (IHRC) during quarantine curfew period. This was a great opportunity for me to support my family and those who are in need.**

**Spreading awareness throughout my family, relatives, and beloved ones.** As soon as I heard about the virus and the pandemic, I contacted my family and relatives to spread awareness about the virus and make sure they follow the rules and regulations of WHO. Keeping constant contact and making sure that my family members are safe was hard, since my father's relatives are based in Erbil and my mother's relatives in Sulaymaniyah. The distance between two cities is 400 km. I had to travel between the two cities three times a week to raise awareness and support them with all the necessary protection supplies such as gloves, hand sanitizers, face masks, and cleaning supplies. The relatives from my father's side were especially in need of supplies and they were not aware of how serious the situation is. **Due to the reason that they live outside of Erbil, it was harder for them to get cleaning and protection supplies. In addition, most of them are widows who lost their husbands during the regime of Saddam Hussain and the Kurdish genocide. Hence, they were more vulnerable and did not have much financial support.**

**My duty to spread awareness through the community.** As a board member of the Human Rights Commission and a member of the board of Baghdad Women Association (BWA), through these two organizations, I have done monitoring, reporting, trying to spread awareness as much as possible throughout

the community regarding the situation with Covid-19.

The following activities have been carried out:

- **Spreading awareness through my community and the people in the city.** This activity included forming online groups with different people such as the youth of the city, social workers, official medical groups.

- **Sending information flyers and supporting women.** When I say supporting women, I mean making them aware of the regulations and rules on how to avoid the virus. Women are the strong pillars of the household, since they are the ones who makes sure that their children and husbands are keeping protection.

- **I have published guidance** which could help to raise awareness, as well as, advice women and men on how to spend time during the isolation. It included advices on how woman can involve family members in cleaning and running home, cooking, playing, watching movies and sports, reading books and communicating with relatives, friends and neighbors. It also had an information on how through social media, telephone and electronic correspondence women can avoid domestic violence and get assistance.

## STORY 35



*Author:* Josie Christodoulou

*Country:* Cyprus

Gender Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cyprus, Independent Expert on Women's Rights

Home has been the least safe space for many women across the world. Women are injured and often killed in their own houses. This is not new. This has been the case before Covid-19, during Covid-19 and it will still to be the case after the end of this pandemic.

Before Covid-19 we lived in an era of political correctness. It overrides the need to take a hard look at the realities on the ground and human, political, social, economic rights, especially when it is concerning women's rights. Many leaders across the world have integrated women's rights and gender equality in their rhetoric, implementing superficial policies and many times celebrating non-substantial equality. What Covid- 19 successfully did, was to uncover and at the same time highlight inadequate structures and increased gender inequalities across the globe. From structures to prevent gender-based violence and protect the victims to employment (including protecting those women in precarious work), the economy (including gender budgeting in relieve measures).

If we agree that Covid -19 is a matter of life and death, and its aftermath at least an issue of economic survival, then why did we not consider the gender aspect to the strategies and measures to protect front-line workers amongst others? It is indeed true that women comprise the majority of front-line workers<sup>12</sup>,

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12. European Institute for Gender Equality. 01. Covid-19 and gender equality. 2020 July. Accessed August 15, 2020. <https://eige.europa.eu/>

including healthcare workers (76% in the EU), supermarket cashiers (82% in the EU), who have put their lives in danger in order to keep the system going and assist many people.

Let's also put in the equation as following: those women who can work remotely from home are also expected to perform unpaid care work. Yes, this was the reality before Covid-19, when women desperately tried to balance work and private life. With schools and day care closed, the chores of childcare, work, housework and now also teaching is increasing. We do not expect and we do not want an additional burden on the shoulders. **However, we expect and even demand what we have always demanded: substantial, comprehensive gendered institutional structures and policies that will protect women and eliminate inequalities.**

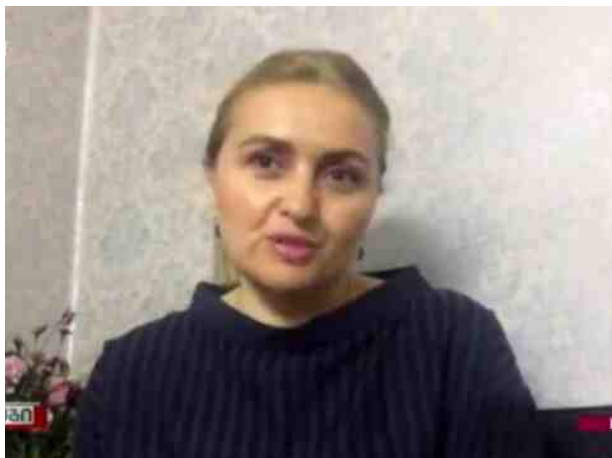
Adding to the above mentioned as evidence shows with Covid-19, domestic violence is increasing on a global level. Nevertheless, we are not surprised, not from the increase in reporting of violence cases nor from the lack of strategies to protect these women. Covid-19 did well in uncovering these realities.

I will also remind us that before Covid-19 the UN Secretary General repeatedly said that when it comes to women's rights and equality between women and men, we must push back against the push back. What about now? With Covid-19 uncovering and perpetuating inequalities against women we need to push back against what? What is the word to describe something bigger than a push back?

All these should be a wake-up calls for us, the feminists across the globe. However, it

should also be time for leaders to take up their responsibility and act upon it. In numerous cases feminists stated that we will never reach equality as long as women and children continue to fall victims of any form of male violence including rape and trafficking, as well as, any form of exploitation. We have to demand that in the same way that most leaders across the world employ political will to combat Covid-19, we can certainly use some of it to reach equality. We need institutional structures. We need to fight harder for this. We have to go back and remind ourselves of the long fights of feminists and demand access and shared, equal power, re-activate our networks to look deeper to what we have fought for throughout the story and come out of this united and stronger. Political leaders should take on their own responsibility and urgently move from words to actions and walk the talk.

## STORY 36



*Author:* Tamara Mearakishvili

*Country:* Georgia

There are lots of people who almost every day complain about their problems, ask me for advice and help for their family members or for transporting their friends to Tbilisi and back home. Previously these needs were related to family affairs, but now to critical health condition. What should we do? There must be way out, is not it? Someone has to deal with this issue. Ossetian people went through it together with Georgians. Has anyone made a record of one-way trip from Mosabruni and Sinaguri checkpoints to Tbilisi, since the pass was closed in September? This is really concerning... I am posting this status upon the request of certain people, whose family members wait for travel permit, in order to get medical care. We would like to ask you for help. Immediately after I had posted this, I got a message.

My grandfather died in Tserovani, my grandmother is there and wants to come for funeral, please help us with this issue. I published this status in the morning. This situation lasts 10 months. Ten months ago, the government of Ossetia closed the border and almost 1500 people were given an ultimatum to settle a political issue and to force Georgian government to remove police checkpoint. **They involved the people, living on the territory and considering themselves their citizens, in political intimidation. We keep living in such an awful situation - without any rights. Situation was not different before, however,**

**by closing the border, we were deprived of the most fundamental right - freedom of movement. Lots of people died due to closed border, because they were deprived of the possibility to get qualitative medical care.** Unfortunately, no one took into consideration condition of these people. Despite of our problems, Georgian and Ossetian governments do not want to negotiate concerning this issue. We live far from our family members, communicating with them only via social networks. I have been living in such conditions for three years.

Three legal cases have been launched against me. Despite the fact, that these cases have no evidence. Court is widely perceived as a tool of the government which helps to put pressure and manipulate people. I had a lot of court proceedings during this period, so I usually have to move from one instance to another, like it is my agenda. I try not to get discouraged and continue to take part in the events remotely. I started to talk about life and problems of the region more actively than before, since something is really going to change. This kind of changes serve as an incentive for me and force to go ahead. I try to take care of myself and stay in shape. After facial treatment I start to read news and received messages. After, I call my mother and a child. I can literally tell, that I live the most interesting life in our region, despite of lack of resources and people. I started to do handcrafts. At first it seemed to be just a hobby, but after some time it also became a source of income. I am writing this text in a rush, because I have to teach ten years old girl to cook cakes and desserts. Unfortunately, I cannot go out

to the street in order to approach the girl's house, due to the fact that if anyone sees us, they will think that she is my informant and cooking cakes is just a cover. A girl also asked me to act like this, because she is afraid that they will not allow me to come again. Today I will gift her a notebook, so she could have possibility to write down and collect new recipes.

## STORY 37



**Author:** Lia Chlachidze

**Country:** Georgia

The chairperson of committee of Gori municipality assembly, founder of “The Museum of August War”

### **My quarantine stories**

I was in a hurry always, kept watching on my watch... always

I ran to attend assemblies, meetings, round tables, different events... got tired ... I wished I could have a rest.

Covid-19 put the world's order upside down.

Time has stopped. The earth is resting forcibly and so am I.

I am trying to get used to emergency situation, curfew and cope with changed lifestyle and new regime in my way...

Many peculiarities have started to happen in our life, remote meetings, remote lessons, virtual birthday parties, even drinking coffee virtually.... closed shops, empty streets...

To say the truth getting used to quarantine was not difficult for me, since I live in a village and in my yard, everything turned green. Plum, almond and apple trees are blooming, together with peach blossoms, which is covered with the April snow.

Village Ergneti, is where I live. It is across the occupied boundary line of Tskhinvali region. "Wire meshes" of so-called border are approximately 200 meters away from my house. So is the checkpoint. Sometimes I see ambulances coming from occupied Tskhinvali bringing severely ill patients to Tbilisi for the treatment...

We are so close to Tskhinvali, the place

where I was born and raised. I was listening to "Den Pobedi" (the day of victory), sang at the parade in Tskhinvali to celebrate 9th of May. We are so close to Tskhinvali and at the same time we are so far...

Having the road blocked to Tskhinvali creates a blind alley here... there is no transport, no human beings, just twittering of birds. This is called natural isolation.

I can hardly remember having so much free time. The TV is on all the day and even at night. I know by heart number of infected people, number of recovered ones, number of tolls, who said what and during which briefing.

The spring is chilly. It is always raining. I am sitting beside the sewing machine in bad weather. I like sewing. I sewed a blouse and a jacket for myself, but where or when will I be able to wear it. I cannot tell... I sewed and distributed face masks. 200 pieces for my neighbours, as presents...

As a member of local self-government assembly, I am performing my duties remotely. During this virus I am trying to support and bring relief to single people living isolated, especially elderly people, people with disabilities. I often buy food, medicines and hygiene products for them, using my own financial resources. I am enrolled in charity activities of several organizations. Every day I host and feed two elderlies. When they are thanking me, I feel ready to burst into tears. So little is enough to do good things, and so little is enough for people, especially for elderlies...

When going to the city I hold several lists; what should I buy in a grocery store or/and in pharmacy and to whom, as there is no store,

bakery or pharmacy in the village...

I have wonderful yard and love working in the garden. I have planted potatoes, beans, cucumber, zucchini, herbs. I did not forget about the flowers as well.

**My yard carries social importance too. In 2017, I arranged "The Museum of August War" in the basement of my war-affected and burned house. The museum holds the exhibits from our latest tragic history. The Russian-Georgian war of 2008. I have visitors permanently and want to have the rest of surrounding well maintained.**

One of the biggest Georgian religious celebrations - the Easter was during the quarantine and due to this no service was practiced in our small church. On Monday, after the Easter, it is the service day for the ancestors. On this day I go to the boundary line, light a candle on the green wire mesh, pray, put flowers, traditional red eggs and Easter cake across the mesh to honor the graves of people who passed away, those whose graves are occupied and which we are not allowed to visit. It became a tradition for me. I have not seen my father's grave for already 12 years. The occupants do not let us there. This year I was visited by the Russian soldiers. While lighting the candles, they were three or four meters away from me, observing in silence. Thanks God they did not disturb me...

Staying at home made me gain some weight. Currently, I am trying to lose it and return to previous weight. Do you want to learn how to lose weight? I can share... ten or twenty times a day open the fridge, take a look and close it without taking anything out. Believe me it is



really helpful...

I continue communication with TV stations and media representatives remotely. I try to continue in a regular pace, however, the reality is different and very challenging now.

On my opinion it is real examination!

#Stay at home, state safe

## STORY 38



*Author:* Lali Devidze

*Country:* Georgia

Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality.

### **Covid-19 and the days full of my feelings**

In January 2020, when the information about the new virus Covid-19 was confirmed, probably no one could imagine that one day this invisible enemy would completely paralyze the world. When Covid-19 was officially declared a pandemic by the WHO, we moved to remote work. I realized that the agenda and regime of my normal life would change completely. During the coronavirus crisis, from morning to evening, I was hysterically tracing for the information. Through the social networks, I called the people for responsibility to warn each other. The pandemic was already considering its unpredictability, putting the worldwide population at risk.

**"Today we need to put great efforts into two main directions for the human security. These directions are: health care and economic security" - I wrote this text for the next post on the social media.** At the same time, I was reading the information about ongoing processes in Tskhinvali and Abkhazia regions.

Since March 15, 2020, de- facto authorities of Abkhazia closed the Enguri bridge for all citizens. This has been done due to increasing number of Covid-19 patients in Georgia. The closing of Enguri bridge crossing-point created serious problems for the citizens living in Abkhazia region, especially for those who were from Gali district. Many people from Gali were moving to Georgian-controlled territory to receive various services and assistance, which

had critical importance for them. I received a message: what can we do? Who will help us? Georgia declares a state of emergency until April 21st to prevent the spread of the virus. On March 23rd, when I was reading my birthday wishes under conditions of self-isolation, I received a call from Sukhumi - "Please, my mother is alone, she does not feel well, she has temperature, however, she does not go to the doctor. I am afraid she could have a virus". Of course, I started acting right away and everything fortunately ended well. She had flu-like symptoms. I was in contact with my friends and acquaintances almost every day. We were sharing the information and encouraging each other, - "Lali, I have a feeling that I will soon have the first coronavirus patient" - said me the doctor from Gali district by the phone. It was her presentiment! On March 29th at 21:19 pm, I had no incoming calls. Four minutes later I read the message - "Call me, it is urgent". I called immediately. The doctor was convinced that her patient had symptoms of Coronavirus. A woman, who was an ethnic Georgian from Gali, travelled from Moscow to Adler, crossed the "Russian-Abkhazian border" and on the same day, in two or three hours, she went to the local hospital in Saberio village after having virus symptoms. Despite all the difficulties, the patient was transported from occupied Gali district to Zugdidi, which is Georgian-controlled territory. She got positive test for the coronavirus. The woman was the first patient from Abkhazian region. Saberio's doctor is a strong woman. Despite the security challenges caused by the Russian occupation, she is always trying to save the lives of her patients. She told me - "The gold standard

is the time which is needed to transport the patient to the medical institution". Late in the evening, she called me from Sukhumi and wrote about this fact. Suddenly, in one of the groups on social networks, I saw uploaded passport of the woman who was infected with Covid-19. I read various comments. Some of them were negative underlining her ethnicity, some were positive, as people were wishing her soon recovery. Her rights have been violated. I was offended and wrote to some of my Abkhazian friends about this.

## STORY 39



**Author:** Zara Hovhannisyan\*

**Country:** Armenia

Public activist, publicist, journalist

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\* Zara Hovhannisyan is a laureate of The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award of 2013.

Democracy Today NGO. n.d. The International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.democracytoday.am/peace-award>.

I thought of women who were in a difficult situation during quarantine, and I played the violin in the memory of 1.5 million victims of the genocide.

Our life changed dramatically when restrictions came into force. It was clear that all the problems that already existed were exacerbated. Difficult economic situation, loss of jobs, education of children, care for the elderly; all these issues fell on the shoulders of women who have been burdened with the additional work.

But I was thinking about women who are subjected to domestic violence, and who, in this situation, do not even have an opportunity to call someone, get help and support. Despite this, the number of calls to the hotline of Coalition to Stop Violence against Women has grown by 30%. Women were calling and asking for social, as well as, psychological and legal help. And those who could not call, just ran away from home, sought for help, quite often having no idea whom to approach.

On April 24th, I got a call saying that a woman from a village reached Yerevan on foot. She lived with her husband for 25 years, experiencing regular violence from his side, which have been intensified during the period of quarantine. He beat her every day. A woman ran away from home, in home clothes and slippers, walked for several hours to get to Yerevan and approached the first police officer she met, asking for help.

Unfortunately, the policeman suggested her to go to the local district of police department, where she, naturally, could not return. The poor woman stood in the street until some good people came up to her and helped to get to the Women's Support Centre. However, it is very scary to imagine how many such kind of women need help, who cannot even make a phone call. These days, it is difficult for women to use telephone, as our experience shows that the telephone numbers of women who are experiencing domestic violence are usually registered under the names of their husbands and, thus, are strictly controlled. Nowadays, when everyone is at home, this control increased and women often cannot even make the most necessary calls.

There is also a high risk that women who survived domestic violence and left the rapist can return to their offenders and become a victim of repeated abuse, as many of them lost their jobs and are deprived of any financial means required for living. After reorganization of all our programs we were able to provide them material assistance as well.

Today is April 24th. For the first time in many years, I could not go to the Tsitsernakaberd memorial complex to commemorate the victims of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 which was committed in the Ottoman Empire. I performed "Krunk" by Komitas<sup>13</sup> on my balcony, in the memory of 1.5 million Armenians who died during the first genocide of the 20th century. During quarantine in many countries, musicians

played on the balconies of their apartments to support their neighbours and fellow citizens. I also wanted to support everyone who was in isolation and could not express their feelings about historical injustice, as well as, expressions of violence which are taking place today. We will come through all these too!



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13. Factor TV. 2020. In a memory of 1.5 million innocent victims. Human rights activist Zaruhi Hovhannisyan plays "Krunk" by Komitas. 24 April. Accessed June 20, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7JwCd5ACo>.

## STORY 40



*Author:* Antonia Monadi Sani  
*Country:* Italy  
Coordinator for WILPF<sup>14</sup> Italy

If we look back over the last 4 months, we will realize how many "sudden" changes and obedience the coronavirus has introduced into our usual behaviours.

While hundreds of coffins are silently transported in the cities of Northern Italy (Bergamo and Brescia) composing gloomy parades in March, in Rome and Naples entire families, invited to stay at home to avoid the virus were meeting from balconies, terraces, windows, with musical instruments, choruses relaunched from one apartment to another, hymns with unfolded voices. A great desire to live with an unexpected and extravagant event helps all to recognizing themselves as "friends", even if normally people do not know each other even those who live inside the same building ...

The presence of an unknown virus created this absurd contradiction. In Italy, the "imprisonment" would have lasted at least forty days, the so-called quarantine...

The songs of the first few days gradually faded, people suddenly disappeared, both from the balconies and from the streets, where did they end up?

The Roman monuments immersed in the charm of solitude... What was happening?

Three scenarios: the leap into the front row of the National Health Service; solidarity - generosity shown by the population; the incredible diffusion of technological tools.

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14. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Health suddenly proves to be the first objective to be preserved and with it the rediscovery of the value of public health, so offended during the recent decades by the dazzle of private health.

Public Health soon became the point of reference for messages, posters, solicitations to claim the role of the State, as the Constitution of the Italian Republic had established.

And not only in the field of Health, but also in Education... Associations born with different aims meet for the first time on a common implication.

The concreteness of an economic crisis caused by the inevitable closure of workplaces brought companies, workers and women workers to their knees. In addition to the self-sacrifice of the health care personnel, represented above all by nursing mothers, women assistants, women medical workers, with their children at home without being able to see them for weeks, bent over in the intensive care wards fighting a mysterious virus that took young and old without being able - as is now finally happening - to immediately adopt the most appropriate treatment... In addition to this tireless handful of "heroes and heroines", there are voluntary associations and people who, in the name of solidarity, are ready to bring packs of packaged food to the homes of health care staff, unemployed people, etc. Alongside with this, women skilled in sewing come up with their own initiatives of sewing masks (on which would then flourish a real-world market, not always in the name of honesty ...).

But the characterizing aspect of this historical era is, and will remain, the enormous diffusion

of digitization technology in environments where it was almost ignored.

Let us virtually move within the myriads of homes where living together in isolation has become the rule of the life.

We meet lonely women and men who are disposed to an unforeseen, or rather forced solitude, in which they can have their time without any kind of control. A huge white sheet of paper to fill, in addition to the work performance without a compass.

The result is an unprecedented communication, often a source of fragmentation, the result of a finally revealed protagonism, readings, investigations, sharing and opposition, fantasies, expression of one's own point of view on the nature of the virus, "jumping species", birds, bats, entered our bodies... Endless texts due to the suspension of work at the office and the infinite space for the manifestation of oneself.

What does not cease to surprise in this context, however, is the courage, the drive of emerging women here and there with lively aspirations towards revolutionary changes projected into a future whose traits cannot, must not, be the repetition of the recent past, in a common will to react to the effects of the crisis, which will be devastating especially for women.

Let us move on to the other situations, in which entire families manage a cohabitation, shown on TV with inviting colors and loving dialogues between parents and children, while what happens (barely leaking out) in narrow spaces, where women suffer daily violence from their companions at home, work and ubiquitous children. In Rome there have been



2 massacres. Very little has been said about it, not to discourage quarantine (one was the case of son who attacked mother, the other case when partner attacked the partner) ...

Let us now move on to the education aspect, which in Italy more than in other European countries, benefited for the entire school year from DAD (distance learning).

Lessons held by the teachers in the classes have been replaced by "squares" on the computer screen in which pupils and the teacher appear from their homes. Parents allow themselves to intervene in their child's "square". There are those who offend the teacher whose lesson they have followed in their child's square, those who try to approach... There are also those who do not have a solid cultural background and take advantage of the lesson addressed to their child. Parents are eavesdropping from home to hear their child's questioning ...

Really unacceptable mixture of the role of parent and the teacher. Earlier, schools have always kept it distinct in our country.

**Beyond these episodes, it should be noted that the physical separation of pupils and students, isolated in their homes for such a long period, the closure of common areas for the usual celebrations, non-participation in cultural and sports events caused "instinctive re-appropriation of their spaces". This created a challenge to go against the bans, which has not been the case before the coronavirus!**

**Finally, a specific attention, in a particular moment of global social and economic crisis, should be dedicated to those who during this pandemic have "no roof" (terrible to hear "Everybody home" on the TV all the time!), to**

**those who do not have the possibility to own a computer and cannot access digitization. Pupils from outside the European Union, whose parents are not able to provide them with equipment usually disappear from the "squares" on the screen. So, it was the case before COVID-19! Education is open to everyone, our Constitution says, but the DAD does not guarantee it. Here lies the second major contradiction created by this virus.**

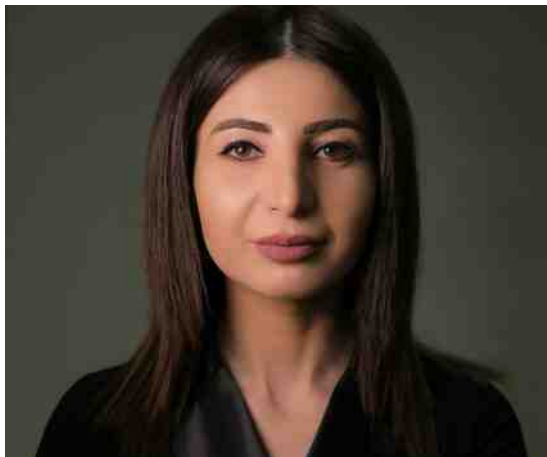
We are going through of ups and downs that the continuation of the emergency could enhance. The virus, appears more weakened and more curable, at least in European countries but what impresses is the confusion that reigns supreme... Workplaces are reopening a bit like the skin of leopards, but the resumption of a "normal" life out of the emergency is even more frightening. Everyone hopes to find a vaccine, however, the expected dates vary depending on the sources of information. Meanwhile, millions of masks with a thousand of hieroglyphics are suddenly thrown into the streets, parks and rivers with no concern for the risk of pollution. Their use is now of less interest to the population, which has moved on to "phase 3".

But the impressive thing is the confusion that exists. What seems to us to be particularly noteworthy is the habit that is -ahimupleasantly consolidating to avoid meetings in presence, but to manage meetings from home, cutting travel expenses. The virus created new way of dealing with each other. Restrictions for the use of public places from fear of contagion persists to some extent; this communication system will continue to exist even when the virus will be eliminated. With the exclusion

of interesting meetings in unknown countries, contacts with unknown traditions, which will be replaced by one's own image with the background of shelves of books from your own home.

In view of the summer, the foreground problems are different: the possibility of being able to enjoy some holidays! At the same time, you deliberately shudder from the prediction of a tremendous autumn which will probably bring virus enhancement. But autumn is still far away...

## STORY 41



**Author:** Anush Ghavalyan

**Country:** Artsakh, Nagorno Karabakh

Former adviser to the President at the National Assembly of the Republic of Artsakh

### **A life in the COVID-19 pandemic in a country that does not exist**

My name is Anush Ghavalyan and I am from Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh). Today, alongside with other women in the world, I also face a lot of challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, my case "slightly" differs from theirs - some politicians keep believing that the country where I live simply does not exist. Nevertheless, let's leave politics behind and talk about an ordinary life, firstly for a human being in general and then for a woman in particular.

Actually, I do not know how to start my story not to repeat myself, as the problems caused by coronavirus are almost the same around the world. Although the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 are not high in Artsakh (as of July 15, Artsakh MoH reported 153 cases, 124 of which have recovered), the government makes restrictions on organizing mass events, social gatherings, as well as on traveling, and more. Moreover, the emergency situation has been prolonged three times since April and it is expected to last until August 12. However, the situation in Artsakh is different from other countries, including Armenia - the only country we have open borders with. Whether this relatively simple situation is caused by the small number of population (150,000) or the country's landlocked status or something else, it continues to be under control, and the government is adopting policy

measures to support those citizens and sectors that have been impacted the most.

Although the pandemic has a global impact, the risks of coronavirus are not equal for each of us. The situation is more critical for people that come from conflict-affected countries. The UN has set special measures (The United Nations COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan<sup>15</sup>) to address humanitarian needs of people living in conflict zones, but along with a number of other restrictions in humanitarian field, the people of Artsakh do not have full access to WHO or similar organizations that provide foreign aid considering their political status. The only country we can and ask help from in this crisis is Armenia, which by the way, has the highest COVID-19 rates in the region and needs support on its own. Meanwhile, this is not about politics but about basic human rights, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>16</sup> (Article 25).

Nevertheless, let's consider the situation from a woman's perspective. Having keen interest in women empowerment and gender equality issues, I passionately follow most of the developments that take place both in my country and around the world. The data derived from reports of UN Women about the challenges that women face during the COVID-19 pandemic is disturbing. From this perspective, I would particularly mention women's safety issues, which should be a

top priority in every community. Though, I fail to believe that Artsakh is a place where women experience gender equality and do not experience domestic violence, I still think that Artsakh is surely a place where public safety is ensured for the public in general and for women in particular. These are not just idle words, but a real practice (I have been in many countries and lived abroad for a while, so I have something to compare with), which is a valuable achievement, taking into consideration the ongoing conflict and many other problems caused by the lack of the international recognition of my country.

This may sound weird but, in this situation, we need to learn to live with the COVID-19 pandemic as we learnt to live with the Azerbaijani-Karabakh conflict for the last three decades.

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15. United Nations office on genocide prevention and the responsibility to protect. n.d. "Responsibility to protect." <https://www.un.org/>. Accessed 08 29, 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.shtml>.

16. United Nations. 2015. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." <https://www.un.org/>. Accessed August 15, 2020. [https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr\\_booklet\\_en\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf).

## STORY 42



**Author:** Salimata Lam

**Country:** Mauritania

Activist, human rights defender

I am Salimata, an activist and human rights defender from Mauritania, born in Saint Louis city of Senegal on April 2nd, 1956 under colonization of Mauritanian nationality.

At an early age, I entered a college with the demand of better study conditions, fighting against social injustices by joining the national democratic movement of Mauritania and the party of Kadihines of the time.

After deportations of 1989, being in exile I joined the Solidarity Committee with the Victims of Human Rights Violations. Alongside with that, I took part in all the struggles for the improvement of management of human rights and citizenship. I fought for eradication of slavery, adequate resolution of humanitarian liabilities, against discrimination of Negro Mauritaniens in the field of social equality and citizenship.

My activities consist of designing, managing and evaluating.

Covid-19 was surprise for all of us. Stay at home, lock yourself up when you are used to stand in the most remote places to observe, ask, raise awareness around certain topics, train, inform, collect opinions, stories and perspectives from victims, populations, support in a search of solutions. It is not easy to find yourself.

Indeed, beneficiaries and activists find themselves in a dynamic where the occasional survival needs take precedence and obscure strategic interests. The corona virus crisis is

shaking up the lines challenging both decision-makers and activists to revise visions and approaches creating dynamic of collaboration, joint work and unprecedented solidarity.

It is in this context that we invest ourselves on a daily basis despite of the concern of social distancing and limitations. In addition to the imperative of individual protection by the mask and personal hygiene, restrictions remain the best alternative and we are there trying to find new, innovative ways to implement our work. For instance, organizing a demonstration without moving of all of us together, with a banner on which each activist comes to stick his/her own photo and leaves. This banner is displayed for 2 days in front of the Ministry of Justice and two days at the door of the parliament. Or having women dressmakers trained by our organization who make masks which we then distribute to victims and vulnerable members of the community at the lowest possible cost. There are situations when we ignore everything and still carry out advocacy with television programs around the bill on violence against women. Visiting the delegate of TAAZOUR, the Minister of Justice, in order to Provide them with our proposals on how to improve the organization's participation in actions to fight slavery and in the fight against the pandemic.

## STORY 43



*Author:* Zuhall Morcati

*Country:* Turkey

*Organisation:* Purple roof

I have been working on a full-time social work at the solidarity center of the Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation. When the pandemic process started, we all started working from home. We are working from home since March 16th. We have one mobile phone, and we direct that phone to social workers as of March 16th.

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Since June 1st, a normalization process has begun in Turkey and among my friends and colleagues there have been people who started to go to the solidarity centre, without being too crowded, however I never went.

I could not go to the centre at the beginning of June because my house is far from the centre and using public transportation was risky. Then, together with my family, we came to my sister's summer house which is located by the sea, in Banakkale. I have always communicated with my colleagues over the phone and Zoom. I miss them so much. Being together would always help to feel safe, it would make us to share our anger, sadness and happiness. Of course, working alone during the pandemic was challenging in this sense. We were in a collaboration which always included sharing, thinking and discussing together, as well as, sharing all the responsibilities up to the end. But the conditions have changed and we are at the point where we can never stop fighting violence against women. Need is more than ever. We know that houses are not safe for women and it is necessary to hold on and



fight even more.

I will tell you about my day here. We start the work at 09:30, however, we open the phone line of Purple Roof's solidarity centre at 10:30. Thus, we start receiving calls after 10:30. When the phone is directed to me, I answer and receive an application. If the phone is in the hands of another social worker, she receives an application. I also follow the emails and the correspondence on telegram and WhatsApp groups which we have for the communication. We always keep in touch with each other about the applications we receive. Even if I do not receive an application by myself, I have to follow them all. There are issues that social workers need to discuss with each other. We follow them from our WhatsApp groups. Similarly, we have another group where we communicate with our social worker friends. We communicate there. In addition, we have an office group where we are all are involved as Purple Roof employees. From there, we are writing about the management of the foundation, any requests or employee needs. At this group we have full-time workers of Purple Roof and feminist women who are active volunteers. Together we make joint policy for the organisation. We also inform each other about current issues, news or campaigns and discuss political issues. We discuss and decide on formal affairs or political debates of Purple Roof. We may also discuss the issues we could not conclude during our weekly Tuesday meetings. Apart from that, we also have regular meetings every Friday at 3 o'clock, which are held over Zoom.

After eating and sitting at the garden among the sounds of greenery and crickets in

the evening, I realize that looking at the stars is much better than getting stuck between four walls in the city.

## STORY 44



**Author:** Nika Diarte

**Country:** Spain

**Organisation:** Action Against Hunger

### My testimony

When I visited the Saharawi refugee camps at the beginning of February this year, I could never imagine that I would not be able to return at the end of March as planned. It was my first time in the camps that have existed for more than 40 years in the Sahara Desert in Algeria. I spent 11 days there, and during each of these days I heard the testimony of the refugees, authorities and population, men and women, whose exercise of their fundamental human rights is extremely limited by the chronic conditions of refugee, isolation and complexity of an international crisis and conflict perpetuated over time.

On each of those days, I remembered Gaza, from my friends and colleagues, from the Palestinian people. The feeling was again the same I felt in Gaza, but now on the territory of the Saharawi refugee people. It was a feeling of isolation in time, in space, under dominant and unjust rules, but at the same time it was recognizing an overwhelming feeling of dignity, self-determination, self-recognition, memory, solidarity, and struggle for human rights, which for today's dominant world Sahrawi population is dispossessed. But is not dignity and collective memory one of the most valuable possessions?

On my return to Spain, at the airport, I was able to see the first measures taken with the travellers and I remembered that news about a new virus that was already threatening some

parts of the world.

What was far away, in 1 month the virus had arrived in Spain, in Madrid, my city, where I live and my office was moved to my house, my trip to the Sahara was cancelled and our lives changed. My country declared a health alert and a state of emergency. In addition, Madrid local government did not apply the right of access to health care for vulnerable people, the elderly dying without being treated in hospital, and the principle of non-discrimination was violated as well as the dignity of our people. Now the isolation was also in Madrid, for each of us.

There is no time, no space, we can be dispossessed at any time, of our right to health, we can be Saharawi's, Palestinians, with restricted movements, without the availability of our livelihoods, dependent on those whom they call and make us dispossessed.

I continued to work with my remote control computer, every day, at home, during the state of emergency, for the right to health of the Saharawi refugee population, but also for all communities, for other people, identities, living beings, from the sense of building solidarity because the recognition and exercise of the human and living being rights is an universal statement, international and solidarity movement, of all for all.

## STORY 45



*Author:* Maria

*Country:* Peru

Her name is Maria. She could be from anyway. Her story is not different from the stories of other women – victims of domestic violence. Unfair wages, almost no opportunities, vulnerable and accustomed to somehow making ends meet to feed her three children.

She works in homes, washing, ironing, cleaning, cooking, cleaning windows. Never stops. Is it well and fast? Much better than the former worker, a man, who spent more time and grumbled too much.

One day I noticed a concern on her face. I asked what was the trouble. She then unfolded the story of her life. She had three older children from a former partner, then she was abandoned and later had a second relationship with three more children, the youngest of whom was just 3 years old.

I asked why, why so many? She said no one taught me anything different, no one gave me an advice. I did not know anything better.

I was meeting her when she was coming home to work once a week, doing the hardest cleaning with the old dirty stuff that needed to be cleaned. She was good, a good person, and as she spoke, I realized that she had learned to be defiant.

She had thrown her husband out of the small living quarters in which the family lived. She sought the support of the police filed charges and was not ashamed to seek help from officialdom. She was alone to face

the world, just this time without the signs of physical assault, as well as, a wounded heart.

Her landlord, being a man, did not hesitate to express his opinion. He did not want to have any issues with the police. She was causing trouble and he did not want to take part in this scandal and finally, she had to leave. Luckily despite being thrown out to the streets, a kind woman came to the rescue her and offered a modest shelter. So, outfitted as an astronaut from head to toe, She was wandering across the public transport system, trying to dodge the infection. So far this had worked and she made a living.

Then she was tested for Covid-19 and came out positive. She had to quarantine herself with no financial means to feed her offspring.

My husband and I provided her food and moral support to get through this hardship. And no doubt she will. She is a proud fighter and her determination is unbreakable. A true example of a woman warrior in a third world during the pandemic of 21st century which affects women and children more than any other segment of population.

To all Marias of the world, - we feel proud to share the same gender with you. We all look forward to more equal world with less suffrage and more growth for all.

## STORY 46



*Author:* Ann Graham

*Country:* USA

Hoboken, NJ

July 31, 2020

Personally, I have been fortunate during the COVID-19 crisis, but I am deeply discouraged and alarmed about what I see across the United States and the world. COVID has created a warm, enjoyable family experience with my husband and sometimes my daughter who lives nearby. I have work at home, food and drink, a pleasant home, friends to talk to (through zoom) and play bridge with and books to read. An organization I started nine years ago raising funds for and awareness of the local family planning clinic is thriving (this year we are planning a Don't Come to My Party party). My work as a gender and governance specialist in developing countries has, for 30 years, given me immense satisfaction. Working with and meeting amazing women throughout the world and listening to their stories have enlightened my life. Now, I want to know who hears their stories as they confront this crisis. Are many of these women affording the resources they need to support one another now?

Although I am lucky and blessed in my own little world, I live in the United States in the State of New Jersey (across the river from New York City) which, at the beginning of the pandemic, was one of the worst states hit. We were in lockdown for months, and the cases and the deaths rose every day. Friends were stricken (I know no one who died), and, while my state's governor valiantly told us

to stay home and wear masks, our national government did nothing. Our president is incapable of leading on anything, let alone managing a crisis. For him, if he can't "deal" it away, it doesn't exist. Many other parts of the country did not take science seriously and, as a result, the United States is the leader - not in diplomacy, international cooperation or democratic ideas, but sickness and death.

As a leader and team member in many government-funded trainings and assessments to help integrate gender into international programs, I am often bothered by what right our country has to encourage and insist that another (in order to receive funds) adopt our "democratic" values. It often seems hypocritical when the United States has so many problems of its own and doesn't take gender as seriously as we insist others to do. Our legislatures are not gender equal, women earn less than men, and the poverty rate among women, especially women of color and children, is alarmingly high. I just completed a gender and governance training with participants from a country enduring very difficult times and felt somewhat inadequate and presumptuous touting "our" formulas. Formulas we, as a government, do not take seriously ourselves. With our current leadership, government militias provoking legitimate anti-racial protests, and increasingly cruel legislation that may force those who lost jobs and health care, and who do not have enough food on the table, to be evicted from their homes, my words ring superficial to me even as I personally believe strongly female empowerment.

So, I retreat again into my own world and take my morning walks while trying not to

become enraged with the few who refuse to wear a mask to protect themselves and me. I worry about my daughter who works in a crowded public, predominantly minority school in the Bronx as they try to plan for the rapidly approaching school year with little guidance from school district administrators. As the virus rages, I feel even more inadequate to do anything, but try to hold on to a little bit of hope for an election in the fall. Home is the perfect place from which to make phone calls.



## STORY 47



**Author:** Annemarie Sancar

**Country:** Switzerland

**Organisation:** Peace Women across the Globe

**“The closure of public space - can it strengthen feminist politics?”**

**Some reflections and thoughts from a peace activist.**

Here in Switzerland, peace politics happens on the street. We demonstrate against the export of war material to countries such as Saudi Arabia. We collect signatures for a referendum against the purchase of expensive military jets. At events we show our solidarity with the population living in regions where the rich states of the Global North are struggling for a position of supremacy in proxy wars far away from the home country, for the best access to dwindling resources, where they seize geostrategic locations.

I was lucky enough to start my new job as a network coordinator at Peace Women Across the Globe (PWAG) in the middle of the lockdown. Together with the PWAG worldwide-network activists, we share monthly digital Tea-Time sessions, listen to the stories and realize how privileged we are here in Switzerland, while the options for women in Brazil, India or Afghanistan to implement their peace politics projects are so restricted!

The conditions in the conflict regions are complicated to be able to cope with everyday life to some extent. Now the pandemic is added to this. Strategies are needed, often the fear of poverty prevails, and health takes a back seat. But the care work remains, people must be able to live, eat, sleep and talk. Women

often play a decisive role here, all over the world, including in Switzerland. The public here should know what women do and how little appreciation this work receives, a scandal, indeed. As feminist peace activists of PWAG, we show how women in conflict regions manage their everyday life, the care for their dependent relatives. But we also point out that Switzerland, as an exporter of war material, is part of the conflicts. We criticize the extremely profitable arms industry and the government for wanting to spend a lot of money on military aircraft, preferring to forego any investment in social security, care, and support, for reasons of economy! The appreciation in killing machines is greater than that of care work, for which the women receive thanks for their diligence, sacrifice, selflessness and reap clapping, which is not only cheaper but also consolidates the traditional patriarchal role patterns.

Then the lockdown comes, and thus also a (provisional) end to debates and disputes in public space. The information flows through internet, the exchange is digital, physical encounters are almost impossible. What does this mean for me, for all those peace activists who have been engaged in peace activism for more than 40 years? Many of them have little experience with digitalization. They are used to direct encounters, "online" is scarcely an option.

At the same time, the closure means opening windows for reflection, time to reflect and to deal with puzzling issues, maybe a luxury? Anyway, I take my time for this. Ideas pop up while jogging. My mobile phone serves as a memory box. At home, I write them into my "Corona Diary".

Digitalization is a heavy word, for some years already. But what does Corona and lockdowns with it? Committed as feminist I want to and must know more about the impact of digitalization on gender relations. What may be the Impact of the changing conditions on the labor market? Which gender identities, roles, narratives are becoming entrenched? Will the securitization policies which are reinforced with the narrative of "protecting public health" influence the gender identities? Do we already live a reinforcement of masculinities generating and transporting new hard forms of patriarchal contents? Will this also accelerate the militarization of civil spaces? How are the concepts of security changing and what scope is surveillance gaining? Well, maybe the masks thwart the surveillance and new strategies of "preventive punishment". There are enough tricky questions to dare a mental expedition - which implies the knocking at the doors of digital rooms for discussion and exchange.

Digital spaces certainly offer advantages, but they have their dark sides worth to be lighted up from a feminist perspective. One core question is about the relevance of gender in the organization of the digitalized labor market. Nowadays, women do most of the care work, the personal services. Home office is no option. Working online, setting up your "home office" needs space and infrastructure, for people living in small apartments with limited access to internet this is no option neither. So, who is on the winner's side of the home-office trend? Well-educated, postmodern white color people used to do their work mainly with the computer have a place on the sunny side of digitalization for sure, although there

are many of them, who live new forms of exploitation of their own labor force. In the platform economy new forms of manipulation and precarisation: poor pay, uncontrollable flexibility, lack of social benefits and often these are women from the global South.

The health of the people is central to peaceful social development. However, health has many facets and the options to live a health live varies a lot. According to economic, social, political power, along gender and age lines the access to public health services is limited if not closed completed. In Corona times the differences gain evidence, global, regional, even local (down to district levels) facts and figures shed light on it.

As the coordinator of PWAG-network I listen to activists from the Philippines, Indonesia, Brazil and the USA, women telling Corona-stories in their contexts. There are differences, of course. However, there are some alarming similarities: The strategies to deal with pandemic are mainly elaborated by male researcher and communicated by male leaders who take the crisis as an opportunity to consolidate their power and exercise their authority as strong men. The side effects are evident: patriarchal images of masculinity, narratives of women as caring members of the society diligently providing services for their next and for the nation (didn't we have this before...?), while the male members are there to defend the national unity, inventing their own unique nationalistically underpinned authentic strategy to defy the virus. In their discourse, they pretend to protect the weak, such as women. Is it a pure rhetoric trick? At least, as far as we can see, these big words

leave no traces in the financial contributions.

Many questions, thanks to Corona. This would be too nasty, sitting as well on the side of privileged. Still, I think as feminist peace activist we should use our resources, share with others, generate new actions, based on our own and the collective experience. We are indeed challenged, during and after the pandemic exceptional situation! With the PWAG network we have a good space to amplify our voices and translate them into political action for change towards a gender just society.

## STORY 48



*Author:* Anna Ishkhanyan

*Country:* Armenia

*Organisation:* Democracy Today

The world is transforming rapidly. Covid-19 brought new huge wave of changes. For some people this became an opportunity to stop and reflect, while for others it brought many new challenges and unexpected changes, which seemed almost impossible just a few months ago.

As a mother of two wonderful children, working women and a wife, due to the huge privilege of having flexible working schedule, I was lucky enough to adjust to the lockdown easily. Nevertheless, observing the situation around, I see that Covid factually affected each and every person in my country.

For Armenia a small Caucasian country, which just started its new path towards democracy and human rights improvements, the pandemic, unfortunately, came very untimely. During the last two years after the non-violent "velvet revolution" which took place in the country, the new progressive and fairly elected government tried to impose many system changes resisting highly corrupted structures created by the former regime, which was ruling the country over 20 years. And now together with all major challenges in different sectors, in anticipation of new improvements and expectation of the results of two-years work, Armenia faces Covid. As a country which has the highest number of Covid-19 cases in the region, the Republic of Armenia faces huge obstacles in different sectors. The government is challenged by

the overload of the healthcare system, while people face enormous difficulties due to social-economic hardships. Many state programs have been initiated to resist the current situation, however, number of issues grow day by day. Due to the pandemic many families either lost their main sources of income, since they were unable to work, or faced violation of their labor rights.

Another major issue which makes this situation even more complicated is the flow of fake news and disinformation. There are many individuals or groups who are actively working in this direction specifically targeting unaware, susceptible groups of people. In Armenia propaganda may have many reasons behind, starting from the political and economic interests to the chase after more subscription and likes initiated between online media outlets. Covid seemed to become a new source of inspiration for those who spread disinformation.

Alongside with all these issues, one is the most painful. In the mid July 2020, ignoring the call of UN secretary general to lay down their weapons in support of the bigger battle against Covid-19, as well as, ignoring ceasefire agreement Azerbaijan initiated new aggression towards Armenia. The most vital and unacceptable fact of this attack was that it took place along the officially recognized Armenia-Azerbaijani border in Tavush province of the Republic of Armenia, which violated all kinds of international norms. The active clashes lasted for a few days, forcing the local peaceful citizens to prepared for the worst, as well as, making the local children and elderly to hide at the bomb shelters. Despite the fact that I

work in peacebuilding for almost 10 years, every time such kind of situation makes me crazy. Knowing personally so many brilliant, smart and creative young people who live in Tavush, I cannot get used to the fact that they have to face this conflict over and over again. Even during Covid, when everything seems to have faded into the background, they still have to continue to defend themselves, protect their lands and homes and every time this seems to be more and more unbelievable.

Many studies from all over the world state that together with numerous technical difficulties, people already face serious psychological hardships caused by the isolation. This situation is even more critical in Armenia, as the country has big number of patients and had to prolong the emergency situation, together with the major restrictions. The overall situation becomes more severe for the members of socially or economically unsecured families, as well as, conflict affected populations which include women, children, elderly people, since this situation targets them first.

Thinking about psychological issues I came to the conclusion that very often people do not even realize that the overall situation affected them as well. Writing about all these challenges and issues which my country and its citizens are facing on a daily basis, I surely understand how lucky am I, since I did not feel the major consequences of Covid-19 on my own skin. And yet, being 32 weeks pregnant I also realize that this pregnancy is different from the previous two ones. Instead of tracing this miracle of how new life emerges, waiting for each and every medical checkup during which I have an opportunity to hear the heartbeat of

my child, see him on the screen of ultrasound device, I get worried over and over again. I worry while visiting hospital, since the number of Covid-19 cases grow day by day, I worry for my mom, who is doctor and faces infected people on a daily basis, I worry about young people in Tavush and the situation on the border, worry about manipulations which unscrupulous politicians are trying to use to destabilize the situation in the country and use the pandemic for their own purpose.

Covid-19 did not only bring the virus, but it also came with a huge package of side effects and consequences which are much more serious and dangerous rather than the virus itself, as it keeps us hostage without any chains...

## STORY 49



*Author:* Angie Bernard

*Country:* Haiti

### **Day of a Haitian woman in the times of Coronavirus.**

I am Angie Bernard - an administrative assistant at the Mobile Institute for Democratic Education (IMED), a 34-year-old human rights organization. Mother of a 6-month-old boy and I am going to introduce you a single day of mine during Covid-19 times.

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5:00 am: I wake up, cook breakfast for the family and the baby, wash my son's bottles;

7:00 am: I am getting ready for the work and give my son a bath;

8:00 am: I leave the house (against my will, but I have to go out for work to earn a daily bread, because finding a job in Haiti is very difficult) wearing my muffler and I take a motorcycle taxi;

8:30 am: I arrive to the office, wash my hands and the undersides of my shoes at the water point in front of the entrance gate to the office;

8:45-13:00: I work, always wearing a mask (which sometimes prevents me from breathing);

13:00-13:30: Break! I lock myself in the office and try to breathe well while removing the mask;

13:30-16:00: Continuing the work and closing of the office;

16: 30-17:00: I take a motorbike to go home;

17:00: Arrived at home;



I take off my mask and throw it in the trash, wash the bottom of my feet and hands before entering the yard. I bathe with a bucket of water, which is placed in the courtyard for this purpose. I go into the bedroom and get dressed. I look at my son without having the opportunity to touch him, because the thought of catching Covid-19 and bringing it home haunts me every day. I prepare the meal, wash the dishes, do the housework. I tuck my son in and put him to sleep, then I fall asleep hoping that tomorrow a miracle cure will be found to eliminate the Coronavirus.

Psychologically, I am exhausted, since the thought of catching the virus extremely scares me. I only go out for work. During the containment period, I was less stressed, as I worked remotely, spent more time with my son and did not have this major anxiety of catching Covid-19. However, now with the end of the emergency situation, I have to go out for work every day. As I said in the previous paragraph, I pray every day that the coronavirus is gone from our lives.

*Port-au-Prince, August 11, 2020*

## STORY 50



*Author:* Virginia Murillo Herrera

*Country:* Costa Rica



The sun appears through the window and the dogs start walking around the bed asking for food and a walk. They wake me up and I get up and make coffee, bring a cup to my husband and get ready. I put on the mask and go out with them for a walk around the neighborhood. When I have a little more time, we go to the lake park nearby where there are other dogs with whom they can play or run a little more. It may be fifteen minutes, half an hour or an hour, but the fact of going out, walking freely and breathing fresh air is appreciated. Depending on my work schedule, I stop at the cafeteria for a coffee and a croissant alone or with my husband. If it is not possible, I buy bread and go home for breakfast.

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I clean the house and get ready to work. I have already scheduled the time to do it. In the times of total confinement, I stayed home working "online". Now I can go to my office and continue with the virtuality. I go by tram, bicycle or car. Riding a bicycle helps me to clear my mind and prepares me to be more concentrated, however, in summer time with so much heat, it is more difficult.

When I arrive to the office, there is an entry protocol, which includes washing hands, alcohol gel and cleaning the desk, as well as, everything I am going to use. I open the windows and if it is too hot, I turn on the air conditioning. After checking the agenda, I open the computer. The good thing is that I

am alone at my office, so when I arrive, I can take off the mask and rest from it, while I am at the office.

I start the day, answering emails, reading documents and/ or preparing documents that are required for the week or for the upcoming meetings, workshops or webinars which will take place in the afternoon. I do not always stay at work for the lunch. It usually depends on a day and in case the working day is going to be long, I come home to eat with my husband and my son.

My job involves coordinating with different stakeholders in Latin America, Europe and other regions, so I have to adjust the schedule carefully, which means that there are days when I have to work very long hours. When this is the case, I try to work from home in the morning and go to the office in the afternoon.

Though, not every day is the same and, luckily, I can arrange my agenda to take some time for myself, like to go to the pottery workshop. On days like today, the arrangements begun at 14:00, with the meeting on methodologies of participation of children and adolescents in the research. At 15:00 I had a call with a panelist who is going to participate in a webinar that we are organizing for next week on the rights of participation of children and adolescents in Article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>17</sup>. At 16:00 an online work session began, with the coordinating team of my office, DNI Costa Rica to give a final

review of the protocols for return "to the new normality" and to discuss the delivery of food packages that will be given to children and adolescents and their families who are directly participating in our programs and to others who have requested support from us through the help lines that we have in different parts of the country.

The pandemic has exposed the precarious living conditions of families in Costa Rica and inequality gap that exists throughout the country. The response measures to the pandemic and the limitations led to the fact that employers suspended many employment contracts, reduced working hours as well as started dismissals. This substantially increased unemployment, leaving families deprived of the most basic resources which they needed to meet their most essential needs. And the issue, which in turn most dramatically affected children and adolescents is the lack of food. Confinement has revealed risk situations for children and adolescents and brought new challenges to their homes and in other spaces where they live together. Among them the situations of violence, including sexual abuse became visible. The interruption of social services and / or the change in care modalities has made the timely and comprehensive response more complex, with those having the least possibility to access social services and complaint mechanisms being more affected. Confinement has shown the dependence of children and adolescents from adults and from the structures. The online education provided by the Ministry of Public Education showed that a significant percentage of children do not have the conditions to be able to follow educational programs online,

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17. United Nations. 1989. "Convention on the Rights of the Child." Office of the High Commissioner on human rights (<https://www.ohchr.org/>). 20 November. Accessed August 20, 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.

which left vulnerable children and adolescents without any possibility to have access to the education. Another impact in the actual context of Covid-19 is mental health, as children and adolescents being in the isolation are more stressed and more anxious. This increases self-harm, eating disorders, low self-esteem and as they have mentioned in the survey we have done, it also brings the feeling of insecurity, loneliness, isolation, among many others.

At 18:00 following another meeting with representatives of the Ministry of Labour of Guatemala, to review and explain some formats to be prepared for the beginning of an evaluation process and action plan of the national strategy for the prevention and elimination of child labour and protection of the adolescents' workers.

## STORY 51



*Author:* BowmanEre Monique Elaebi

*Country:* Liberia

My name is BowmanEre Monique Elaebi, a Women Empowerment and Peace-Building Specialist working with the ECOWAS Volunteer Program, deployed to Liberia to assist in the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection. I work directly with the Deputy Minister for Gender to assist in technical issues relating to Women, Girls and Children, particularly as regards to SGBV and women and girl's empowerment.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 which became a global pandemic claiming thousands of lives, Liberia is no exception as it faces a scourge of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) cases during this period. While working to curb the challenge of COVID-19, I have been involved in various projects/programs in order to reach out to vulnerable persons especially women and children as they are most likely affected during such kind of situations. During the lockdown period in Liberia which lasted four (4) months, my boss and I with other local community members decided to put together whatever materials and funds we could afford in order to provide basic necessities such as food, water, hygiene materials and so on to communities who are deeply affected by the lockdown as a result of the COVID-19. This project is individually funded through our monthly salaries and presently, we have reached out to more than 24 families and continue to do so on a monthly basis as a way to reach out to more families in the

communities. The reason for the project is the fact that due to the lockdown lots of families lost their livelihoods and have no means to feed themselves. We did not anticipate the enormous impact this would have, as this saved so many families from starvation. I have also been involved in assisting health workers at the hospital to provide support in the areas that need it the most. My colleagues and I from the ECOWAS Volunteer Program cleaned the hospital, assisted in administrative duties and provided counselling for victims affected.



Similarly, as means to relegate the rise of SGBV cases during this period, the Government of Liberia through the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection established a Women, Girls and Children Pillar as spearhead to respond rapidly to SGBV cases which have drastically increased during this time. Under this pillar we have achieved in responding to several cases and have increased public awareness and knowledge on SGBV through various platforms such as production of jingles in English and local dialect to be aired in the counties, toll free messages sent to mobile phones and sensitization programs

held in communities as well as development of a comprehensive roadmap that will guide the government in addressing SGBV issues in the country. Currently, the project achieved the launching of an Intensive Care Centre, One Stop Centers and Safe Homes supported by the One UN system and other partners to cater women and children as well as vulnerable persons who have been victims to SGBV and COVID-19. The project also established a Call Centre where such cases of COVID-19 and SGBV will be reported. The project is still on-going and we hope to achieve more in the coming months.

## STORY 52



*Author:* Alexandra Malangone

*Country:* Slovakia

### **A day in the life of woman peace builder in COVID 19 times**

My 2 children, my partner and I moved to Italy almost three years ago. For me, moving is always a huge change, especially when you had already been rooted somewhere for a longer period of time. As we, and in particular my son who has Asperger syndrome have finally started to get used to living here, the pandemic badly hit the Northern Italy.

It takes tremendous efforts to create your life from a scratch in a new place. The pandemic has slowed us down on our path to build stability in a new country. It brought much more distancing to already way too distant (for my taste) virtual interactions with our solid 'old' social networks, and yet fragile, new contacts here.

Being confined to our apartment for months, my days were essentially filled with creating a routine and a sense of normality for the children. I spent mornings playing with my 5-year-old, while my 13-year-old studied online. I tried to calm him down when he was overwhelmed and meltdowns caused by millions of reasons linked to home-schooling hit. Every day, I pushed myself beyond my comfort zone to be creative with lunch (and with snacks, and with the dinner). In the afternoons, it was time for physical activities. We played badminton, did gardening, and took solitary walks in nature hoping nobody would shout at us from the balconies and call us



names.

At nights, I worked. I studied and read. I wrote appeals and project proposals, I drafted course syllabuses and corrected papers, analysed court judgments, finished a research project, organized aid for families left without income. I tried to plan daytime on-line meetings in the times when the children watched cartoons. I listened to the sound of soundless nights in a deserted town from my balcony. We lived like this from 25 February 2020 to 27 April 2020.

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What stays with me is a quote I put down in my diary on 15 August 2016:

"And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what storms are all about."

*Haruki Murakami, Kafka on the Shore.*

## STORY 53



*Author:* Nadia Al-Jubori

*Country:* Iraq

When the Covid-19 crisis started, as a woman peace builder, head of the Iraqi Women and Future Organization (IOWAF), and intensive care consultant doctor, I, Dr. Nada Al- Jubouri, started thinking about helping patients of COVID-19 outside the hospital and continue working on protection of women, children, IDPs and returnees, and FHHs in Anbar & Baghdad. So, together with my team, I started an online clinic to treat Covid-19 patients remotely, and we started an intensive awareness and advice campaign on Covid-19 online through Zoom and other teleconferencing platforms targeting women and vulnerable communities. As of October 2020, we were able to educate hundreds in Anbar and Baghdad on the methods of protection from the virus and the ways it is transmitted, and support over two-hundred cases to recover from Covid-19 completely.

Meanwhile, I led a meeting with the UNSCR 1325 Alliance in Iraq (a coalition of NGOs working on the WPS agenda) to discuss the Alliance's action plan and adaptation in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. With the rise of GBV due to curfews and movement restrictions, we started an intense online advocacy campaign for anti-domestic violence law to be passed in the parliament.

This is my story as a woman peace builder in the Covid-19 times, and I will not stop my daily activities to help patients and vulnerable women in my country until this pandemic comes to an end.

## STORY 54



*Author:* Gulnara Shahinian

*Country:* Armenia

**My day at the time of COVID. There is hope for change and hope is with women.**

It seems that the world is in the process of tectonic changes with us in the center of this new history, new tomorrow of the world.

For us individuals there is discovery and relearning every day from simple security rules to new communication modes with the family and society and surprises of meeting new compassionate friends in the neighborhood. Today we have many concerns and unanswered questions, but what we mostly want to see tomorrow brighter and safer and keep even the same even very limited achievements that we had before COVID, as the predictions are truly pessimistic. COVID has been recognized as crisis of healthcare, to me it is crisis of leadership of states, humanity and human rights. It will really turn into humanity crisis if the states and International community do not take it as a wakeup call for urgent rethink of the systems of leadership, it's essence, look for solidarity and unity before the universal threat and not competition. COVID provides with unique chance for the states to open up dialogue with the citizens in their own countries and develop new policies of inclusion and recognition of rights of everyone.

COVID came to the very troubled world, that faces numerous challenges: the rise in new patriarchy and traditionalism, new autocratic leadership whose domination is seen in progressive increase of military power and

economy of exhaustion of natural resources, at the expense of human security and potential rise in living standards of its citizens. Just one latest figure according to new data from SIPRI total global military expenditure rose to \$1917 billion in 2019, the total for 2018 represents an increase of 3.6 per cent from 2018 and the largest annual growth in spending since 2010. It came to the world with rising geopolitical tensions and intensifying conflicts uprooting millions of people from their homes. The pandemic came in a world with severe systemic inequalities both within and between communities and decline in human rights and gender equality. Moreover, it came to the world with fragile balance and at the time where people everywhere are losing confidence with political establishments and institutions.

There have been numerous studies predicting unprecedented impact of COVID on geopolitics, global economy and our societies. Our future, our role and professional efficiency and societal ties will be impacted by the influence of it. The new societal changes are predicted to even more deepen inequality, change in style of work, raised role of technology and irreversible change in in our living patters, for us as individuals, as a workforce, and as a society. Indeed these social dimensions of the crisis, including generational frictions and continued stress on people's wellbeing, will be felt by people worldwide and will lead to long term substantial societal consequences.

Can COVID be an alarm call for the world to rethink the previous policies and come up with new tomorrow: inclusive, open, equalitarian, free from fear of violence and war, protected new better societies? Are there

any possible models to avert the negative impact of it?

As a person for a long time affiliated with UN, I was looking forward to the celebration of 75th UN Anniversary and new after COVID political agendas that might be introduced by the state leaders to fight COVID. From the very first days of CORONA UN Secretary General came up with numerous important statements calling the states for cease fire, multilateralism and stronger ties for common good. He particularly said "The COVID-19 pandemic is demonstrating what we all know: millennia of patriarchy have resulted in a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture which damages everyone - women, men, girls & boys,"and "COVID-19 is deepening existing inequalities, including gender inequality. Already we are seeing a reversal in decades of limited and fragile progress on gender equality and women's rights. And without a concerted response, we risk losing a generation or more of gains,"

Statements of UN Secretary general have been supported by numerous researches that have been stressing the need to put gender equality in the center of COVID preventive policy, as deepening inequality of women that is predicted in result of COVID might lead to irreversible results. The research was supported by the economic predictios based on possible trends observed over the past few months, in a gender-regressive scenario, in case of which if no action taken to counter these effects, global GDP growth could be \$1 trillion lower in 2030 than it would be if women's unemployment simply tracked that of men in each sector. Balancing gender equality might

bring economy back to pre COVID times.

I was attentively listening to the political agendas of state leaders the willingness of some states to strengthen cooperation was mentioned, but sadly neither gender equality no climate change have been remarked on, even in the speeches of women leaders.

For me personally pandemic came not only with the faces and concerns for my family, my friends and dear ones, it came with the faces of women and children I was interviewing in many parts of the world: invisible, unseen, exploited and having even no chances of protection from COVID's impact. In my practice where was allowed I photographed women and children to raise visibility of the dare conditions they lived in and irrespective of their living conditions the exceptional massage for life they carried. No evolution touched the way these people lived from generation to generation. I was showing the photos to the state leaders and other officials as dare proofs of the horrible inhuman conditions people are living in their countries. Sadly, I came to conclusion that some of the Governments had absolute disconnect with their people and counted on them only at the time of elections. But the people I worked with are invisible without documents, rightness slaves who according to laws of the states and International obligations the states have taken, do not exist. The legal recognition of abolition of slavery does not in any way mean that socially the phenomenon has been abolished and the relationship of exploitation and ownership have disappeared. How will and if these many thousands of invisible people get protection? Will these people be left to survive on their own? How the infection is going to

be stopped if the people will not receive equal protection?

This collection of stories "One day in the time of Covid" written by women who work in the field in different parts of the world is unique attempt to surface the problems of such people. How the health and other social needs of quite substantial group of such invisible people: victims of slavery, trafficking, undocumented migrants, shuttle traders, those working in informal economy and many other groups, who are mostly women be met?

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The collection also presents practical recommendations to address the needs of these groups and provides with the creative solutions to be met at the time of crisis. I hope the state will use these recommendations.

"Very close to state ministries in Antananarivo on the road to the Ministries, there was a big query. For generations women with their children were coming there to crush stones and get a bowl of soup for that and place to sleep. I spoke to a woman who was working there since she was five, and now she was there with her tiny child wrapped in shabby clothing left sleeping on stones. She knew nothing about Government, about programs, the only person she knew was the boss who gave her food and place to sleep for days and days of hard work without rest."

Faces of four most courageous and admirable women from Haiti were in my mind when I was thinking on protection protocols from COVID.

"These four strong women have been raped by local gang, when they went to the MINUSTSA UN peace keeping military team

to tell their story and ask for protection, these women have been raped again. This time from those who came to their country to provide protection from the gangs and establish rule of law, stability and peace in the country. They understood that there no one to help them. They women did not get into despair and complain on their bad fate, instead they founded the shelter school to protect young restavec girls, who have been send by their parents from rural communities to the city to stay with the rich families in hope of their better lives for future. Instead, these small girls some aged 5 have been raped and used as sexual slaves. With almost no funding these four courageous women were rescuing and giving new live to 150 children (at the time I was there). "(For four years with no luck I tried to find justice for these women, writing to every possible office, speaking to high-ranking officials. Nobody took responsibility for crime investigation)

COVID put entire world before an urgent challenge: to rethink previous approaches and develop new strategies to make unmet pledges realizable. Will 2030 moved again further to archive realization of SDG's and specifically the 5 most important ones? Will these people be left to survive on their own? When are the state leaders going to understand that their power is in the strength and protection and confidence of their people?

According to UN Women Gender inequality is a major cause and effect of hunger and poverty: it is estimated that 60 percent of chronically hungry people are women and girls. Poverty reduction entails more than the lack of income and productive resources to

ensure sustainable livelihoods. This is one of the essential commitments that states never met and promises move from one decade to another. Poverty has complex manifestations including hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion as well as the lack of participation in decision-making. Various social groups bear disproportionate burden of poverty. Poverty perpetuates from generation to generation creating close loop of behavior and believe in impossibility to brake it. The World Social Summit identified poverty eradication as an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of mankind and called on governments to address the root causes of poverty, provide for basic needs for all and ensure that the poor have access to productive resources, including credit, education and training. Irrespective of the fact that there has been some progress made in this area, it is predicted by the World Bank due to the COVID-19 crisis as well as the oil price drop, this trend probably will reverse in 2020.

The COVID-19 crisis will have a disproportionate impact on the poor, through job loss, loss of remittances, rising prices, and disruptions in services such as education and health care. The World Bank estimates that 40 million to 60 million people will fall into extreme poverty (under \$1.90/day) in 2020, compared to 2019, as a result of COVID-19, depending on assumptions on the magnitude of the economic shock. The global extreme poverty rate could rise by 0.3 to 0.7 percentage points, to around 9 percent in 2020. According to the same source and calculations women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to this

crisis than men's jobs. Women make up 39 percent of global employment but account for 54 percent of overall job losses. One reason for this greater effect on women is that the virus is significantly increasing the burden of unpaid care, which is disproportionately carried by women. This, among other factors, means that women's employment is dropping faster than average, even accounting for the fact that women and men work in different sectors.

Access to education is another important pledge that states have not met and like poverty disproportionally affects girls. New figures on the number of children out of school worldwide reveal that, despite decades of efforts to get every child into the classroom, progress has come to a standstill. According to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), about 263 million children, adolescents and youth worldwide (or one in every five) are out school - a figure that has barely changed over the past five years.

And in this area gender equality or rather gender inequality provides us with clear disparities. There is almost no progress in this area. For every 100 boys of primary school age out of school, there are 123 girls denied the right to education. The research also raises concerning tendency as a learning crisis with one in six children and adolescents not reaching minimum proficiency levels in reading or mathematics - the majority of them are in school.

In the area of access to education realities for girls are deploring. Despite all international and national efforts, over half of children out of school are girls. 31 million girls are still out

of school around the world 54 million of the 76 million illiterate young women live in only in 9 countries.

"In Barah community in Madagascar I was interviewing children who have been working since 5 as domestic slaves, as workers, many have been abused sexually.

When asked about their dreams the boy of 7 who was carrying on his small back bottles of 25 liters of water. He had to carry ten such bottles a day to get bowl of rice. When I asked what he was dreaming about he, similar to other children interviewed in many parts of the world, said "I would love to go to school".

The eradication of child labour is another "difficult" commitment which every term is moved into unknown with unexplainable explanations. Irrespective of the fact that almost all the states have ratified ILO 182 Convention and present regular reports on status of implementation the situation is the following: 152 million children between the ages of 5-17 were in child labour, almost half them, 73 million, in hazardous child labour. Almost half (48%) of the victims of child labour were aged 5-11; 28% were 12-14 years old; and 24% were 15-17 years old. With COVID and its economic impacts on people's lives and livelihoods children are first to suffer. The crisis will result in even more child vulnerability and push them into degrading dangerous jobs. There have been many situations when during the economic crisis the employers were replacing adult job with cheaper and almost free child labor. The states have to take lessons of economic crisis of 2008, when children have been used by job brokers instead of parents.



Globally, the lockdown limited the movement of victims and their opportunity to meet other people, find help or flee. At the same time, the closure of schools has pushed many children onto the streets in search of food or income, exposing them to the risk of being exploited or becoming victims of trafficking. The increased reliance on online communications during lockdowns has increased the risk of falling victim to online sexual predators. Like in the situation with women, when during lockdowns women had to stay with abusive husbands, his family and partners, which as have been registered tremendously increased risk of abuse and brought to unprecedented rise in domestic violence, similarly with children staying at home is risk of abuse incest and sell for internet sex. Save the Children in its report underlines that isolation of children and women at homes makes even much harder to reach them and for them to reach out. COVID jeopardized escape routes that would usually be available to many survivors another important research data on increase in demand of child pornography in Europe. According to data of 2019 from 164 countries on trafficking in humans more than 23 percent of 108 000 involved minors. One in twenty cases involved children under eight years old. The COVID-19 crisis has changed the pattern of sexual exploitation, which is now operating less on the streets and more "indoors" or "online". As it was mentioned above majority of children and adolescents involved into trafficking routes are often deprived of their right to education, as ten percent of them have never been to school and about a quarter have not gone beyond middle school.

The COVID-19 crisis has also changed the usual models of trafficking and exploitation. Criminal groups dedicated to sexual exploitation have been very quick to adapt their ways of working by intensifying the use of online communication and exploitation in homes. According to the European Commission, in some EU Member States the demand for child pornography has increased by up to 30% during COVID-19 lockdown. At the same time, the lockdown has forced institutions and non-governmental organizations to deal with greater difficulties in prevention and support activities for victims.

This year is very important for women's rights and even if face to face conferences worldwide have been canceled, they have been replaced with many high-level online conferences and thematic discussions. This is exceptional opportunity once again to raise visibility of enormous importance of gender equality for the sustainable development of the world and that according to many political and economic analysis putting gender equality in the center of policies will smoothen the effects of COVID. What is good for gender equality is good for entire society. Just one other economic research data jobs occupied by women are 19 percent more at risk than male ones simply because women are disproportionately represented in sectors negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis. We estimate that 4.5 percent of women's employment is at risk in the pandemic globally, compared with 3.8 percent of men's employment, just given the industries that men and women participate in. But it will have not only economic impact it will have great societal impact as the both go

hand in hand. Government should base their programs on factual situation, but go deep in addressing it from childhood putting gender equality as central in developing prevention programs. There is still 10 years before SDG goals deadline, according to modern speed of economic and social change 10 years quite long time, the actions must be done now, postponement is ruining. Procrastination is a losing game. The time for action is now.

I spend my day going through the photos and notes I made in different parts of the world and analysis of the obligations that states and International communities have taken to address these issues. Sometimes I am scared to think that like with phenomena of slavery, that has been considered abolished, if there have been law adopted on and later to forget the existence of traditional slavery new blanket political term has been introduced modern forms of slavery that addresses all forms but has no protection for one, these other commitment for sake of the politics will be renamed and new political process initiated. This will be end of our humanism, as we all know problems have no tradition to disappear, they just transmute into new forms.

There is a very positive process that takes place all over the world: rise of young women all over the world for their rights for the freedom of their countries from authoritarians. The process goes from continent to continent involving more supporters. This is encouraging.

This publication is also expression of new creative spirit of women from all over the world and this is our joint input in gender equality and new post COVID democracy.

