Peace, Gender & Care in Cambodia

Women's meaningful participation is critical to efforts to build and sustain peace, as recognised by the **Women, Peace and Security (WPS)** agenda and scholarly evidence.[1] However, women continue to be underrepresented in these efforts. In UN peace operations, for instance, women only comprise 7.8% of uniformed personnel, according to latest statistics from the UN Department of Peace Operations. One of the biggest barriers to women's participation is the gendered, undervalued and overlooked nature of unpaid care work.

Research led by Monash Global Peace and Security centre (Monash GPS) has shown that women peacebuilders often find it difficult to remain within or return to the sector when they become mothers, and often feel less valued by management and colleagues.[2] This marginalisation of women from the sector harms women and also undermines efforts to build and sustain peace and security because it:

- Drives women's underrepresentation
- Limits diversity, which compromises responsiveness and effectiveness
- Sustains harmful workplace cultures that undervalue practices and relationships of care – including self-care and care for others – and contribute to stress, burnout, safeguarding cases

61% said it is difficult for people with caring responsibilities to work in the sector.

70% said training opportunities had been impacted (17% said they had been "significantly" impacted).

78% had to leave or change their work in the peacebuilding sector (a further 9% said "no but I have considered it")

80% said networking opportunities had been impacted (14% said they had been "significantly" impacted).

88% said deployment opportunities or where they worked had been impacted (41% said they had been "significantly" impacted).

89% said their career progression had been impacted (27% said it had been "significantly" impacted).

Where women with caring responsibilities are marginalised from peace and security work it affects how security and peace are conceptualized, whose security is prioritized, and the type of peace that is built. It also results in peace and security efforts being less inclusive and less diverse, and thus less likely to be responsive to a diversity of needs and less able to enjoy broad-based public confidence and trust. Conversely, when women with caring responsibilities are supported and able to engage in peace and security efforts, these efforts are better able to respond to increasingly complex and interconnected challenges because they can utilize a diversity of skillsets, knowledges and networks.

"We want to have a better world for our next generation, and that needs all of us, and not just one half of the skies... we want to foster a better way for women today and also in the future. And not just women, but all of us, every one of us."

Caring responsibilities refers to the essential – and usually unpaid – activities that care-givers undertake for others, and themselves, in response to a specific need. Such responsibilities typically include caring for children and other family members and can include practical tasks such as cooking or housework or providing physical and personal care for someone.

Research has been recently undertaken on gender, peace and care in Cambodia by Women Peace Makers (WPM) and Monash GPS with key stakeholders in Cambodia, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA); National Peacekeeping Force, Mines and Explosive Remnants of War Clearance; and representatives of civil society organisations and international organisations, including the UN. This research underscored the critical importance that women can and do have in security and peace work, not least because of their unique experiences and needs as well as the diversity of skills, knowledges and capacity they possess. It also highlighted the significant barriers to women's engagement that arise through care work. This is because of:

→ The gendered nature of unpaid care work - women undertake most care work (90% in Cambodia)[3] meaning women have less time, less capacity and often less resources.

→ Gender normative assumptions about unpaid care work and peace and security work as sometimes being incompatible.

→ Maternal bias (assumptions about the capabilities and commitment of mothers) and discrimination against women with caring responsibilities curtailing engagement, recruitment, retention, training and promotion prospects.

→ Practical obstacles (e.g. limited access to affordable childcare, lack of flexibility at work)

→ Insufficient institutional or organisational support.

This research provided recommendations to better support carers in peace and security work:

1 Recognise and value unpaid care work as critical to societal well-being, resilience and development

2 Raise awareness of care work as a shared responsibility, and requiring a whole-of-society approach

3 Advance an ethics of care in peace and security work, connecting care for others, duty of care and self-care

4 Invest in gender responsive policies and budgeting, and gender-responsive social protection mechanisms

Recommendations

5 Ensure access to affordable childcare and support mechanisms (formal and informal) for carers

6 Expand gender training and address maternal bias in organisations engaged in peace and security work
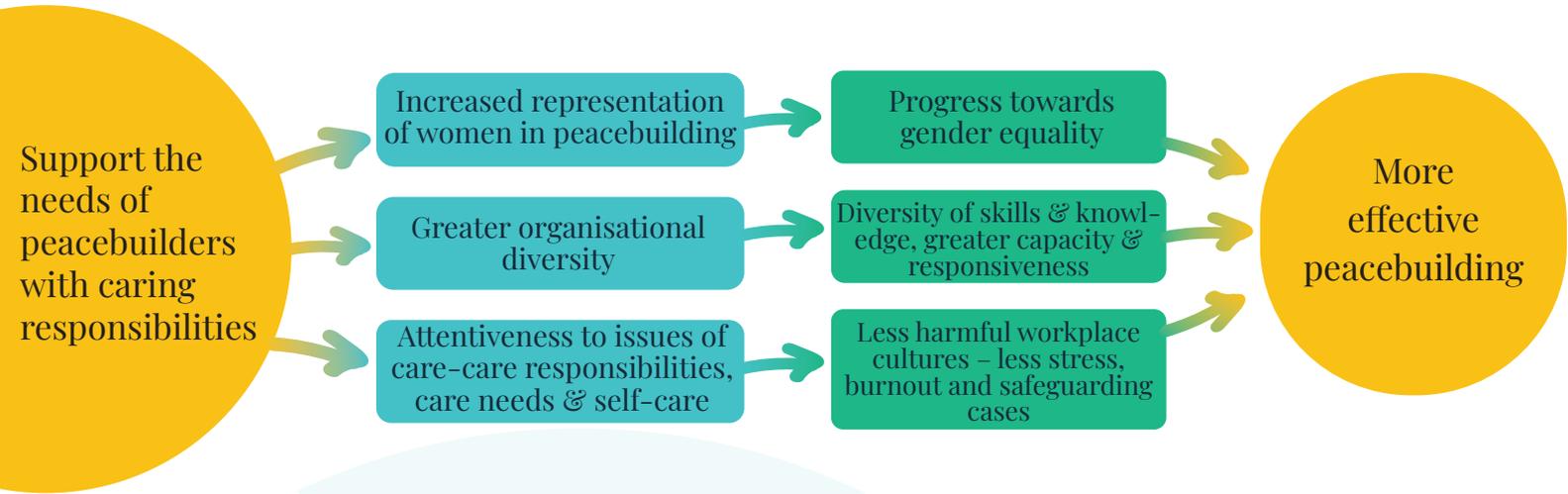
7 Recognise and support the critical role of women in formal and grassroots peace and security work

---

Better support for carers would increase the meaningful participation of women in efforts to build and sustain peace and security as well improve the effectiveness of these efforts. It would also progress efforts towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and gender equality. The human and financial costs of not taking action are significant: gender inequality costs economies up to 20% of GDP[4] while the global cost of armed conflict 2023 was USD 19.1 trillion.[5]

Attentiveness to care benefits all, given men and people of diverse gender activities also have care responsibilities (which are often overlooked) as well as care needs. Broader attentiveness to care can embed an ethics of care in peace and security work that advances policy and practice that is more inclusive, responsive and cognisant of the interconnectedness between people. It can help underscore the importance of care, including self-care, care for others and duty of care, and recognise the critical importance of care work to societal security, peace and prosperity.

Care work is critical to sustaining the well-being and survival of families, communities, and societies, and is especially critical during and in the aftermath of conflict and crisis.

"Without care, we will not be able to promote or ensure peace, either inner or outside ourselves or to family members or to the community or society as a whole."

Support the needs of peacebuilders with caring responsibilities → Increased representation of women in peacebuilding → Progress towards gender equality → More effective peacebuilding

Greater organisational diversity → Diversity of skills & knowledge, greater capacity & responsiveness

Attentiveness to issues of care-care responsibilities, care needs & self-care → Less harmful workplace cultures – less stress, burnout and safeguarding cases

Cambodia's commitment to WPS is evidenced in the adoption of a WPS Regional Plan of Action by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2022, under Cambodia's Chairmanship. It's commitment to care is demonstrated in two recent awards received by MoWA: 2024 ASEAN Care Economy Recognition Award; 2024 Asia Pacific Care Champion. Cambodia plays a large role in UN peace operations, ranking third in deployment of troops among ASEAN member states[6] and remains committed to increasing women's participation. Further, women in Cambodia's vibrant civil society continue to be instrumental to efforts to advance peace, security, justice and development. This is an opportune moment for Cambodia to be at the forefront of efforts to advance peacebuilding innovation and success, implement the WPS agenda, and advance the SDGs, including by responding to the call to recognise, value and support care work (SDG Target 5.4).

Care can prevent conflict and build peace: it is about meeting essential needs, connectedness, protection and responsibility towards others.

[1] Davies, S. and True, J. (2018) The Oxford handbook of women, peace, and security. Oxford University Press..

[2] Monash GPS, University of Warwick, RMIT, University of Sydney [with Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)], UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Swisspeace, Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), Saferworld, International Peace Institute (IPI), UN Department of Peace Operations (UNDPO), UN Women, African Union Commission (AUC), Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC)] (2024) "Who Cares in Peacebuilding: Building Sustainable Peace and Advancing Gender Equality through Support for Peacebuilders with Caring Responsibilities." Monash GPS et al.
https://www.monash.edu/arts/global-peace-security/news-and-events/articles/2024/who-cares-in-peacebuilding

[3] International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)/World Bank (2024) Supply of and Demand for Accessible and Affordable Childcare Services in Cambodia. IBRD/World Bank.
https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099092424012023366/pdf/P178134194793202718f841b6a877d0c5a4.pdf

[4] Pennings, S. (2022) "A Gender Employment Gap Index (GEGI): A Simple Measure of the Economic Gains from Closing Gender Employment Gaps, with an Application to the Pacific Islands", Policy Research Working Paper 9942, World Bank Group.
https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/661cbd80-45a4-5bd9-b90e-71f41ae11841/content

[5] Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) (2024). Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World. IEP.
https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GPI-2024-web.pdf

[6] United Nations Department of Peace Operations (UNDPO) (2025) "Contribution of Uniformed Personnel to UN by Country and Personnel Type: Experts on Mission, Formed Police Units, Individual Police, Staff Officer, and Troops As of 31/01/2025", UNDPO.
https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/01_contributions_to_un_peacekeeping_operations_by_country_and_post_82_january_2025.pdf