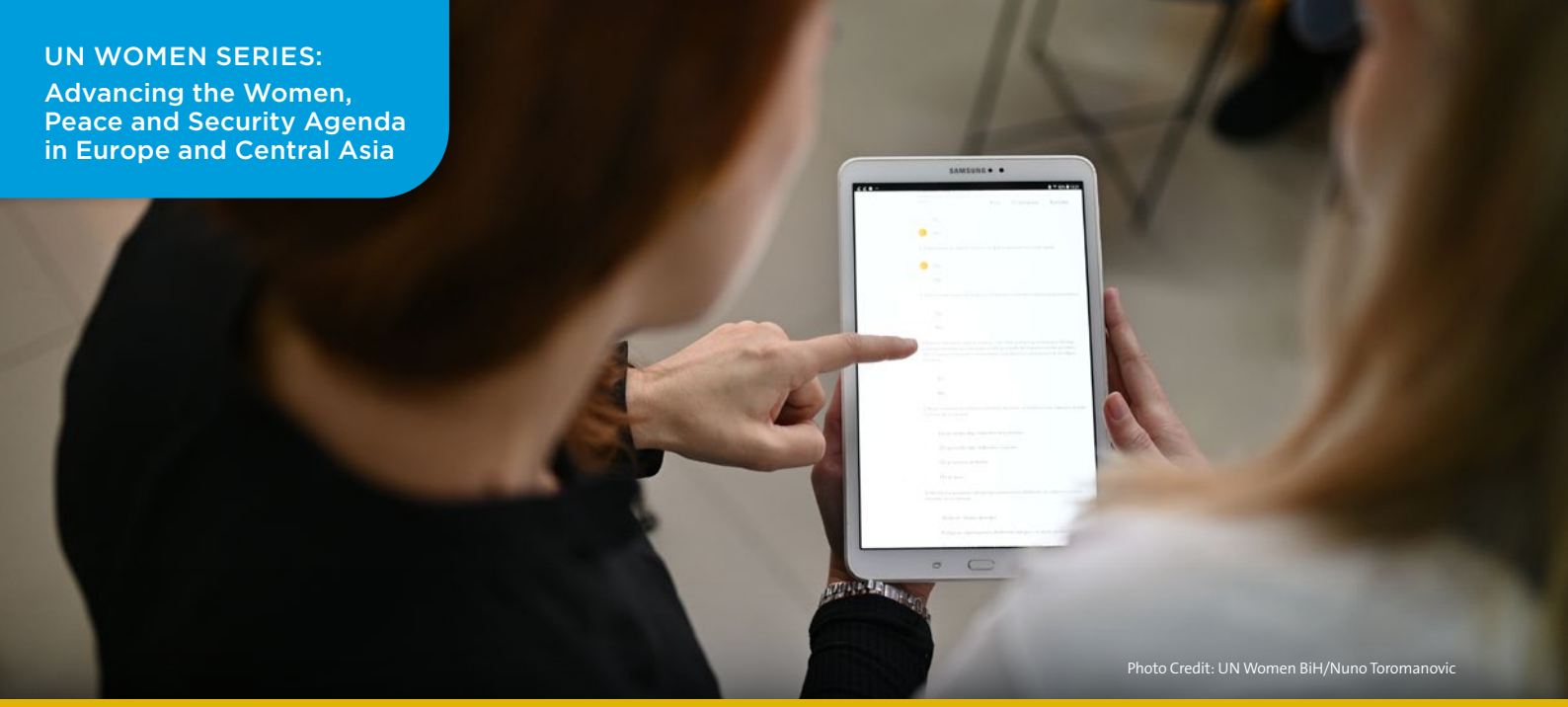
UN WOMEN SERIES:
Advancing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Europe and Central Asia



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DIGITALIZING PEACEBUILDING IN THE EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA REGION: WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY NATIONAL ACTION PLANS

1. Introduction

The interest in establishing links between digitalization and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) framework has significantly increased globally in recent years, but these links need to be further explored, through the development and implementation of national policies on WPS. This brief delves into the issue of digitalization and its intersection with WPS in UN programme countries/territories[1] in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region.

The objective of this policy brief is to explore and analyze how digitalization can be leveraged to enhance the implementation and effectiveness of WPS National Action Plans (NAPs) in the ECA region.

The brief examines the extent to which digitalization is currently incorporated into WPS NAP across ECA countries, explores how digital platforms can facilitate greater involvement of women in peacebuilding processes, including virtual forums, social media advocacy, and digital training programs, and suggests ways to incorporate digital strategies into WPS NAPs with a focus on improving women's participation in peacebuilding, enhancing data collection and analysis, and fostering innovative solutions for gender equality and security. It encourages further research into the impact of digital tools on WPS outcomes and the development of innovative approaches to integrate technology into peacebuilding and security efforts.

[1] UN Programme countries/territories - Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo *(all references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in full compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999))* Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Türkiye, Ukraine, Uzbekistan.

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The WPS agenda is a global normative framework that addresses the disproportionate impacts of armed conflicts on women and girls; and promotes their meaningful participation in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and recovery processes. The WPS agenda was established by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 which was adopted in the year 2000. Since then, it has been further expanded by nine subsequent UN Security Council Resolutions. It has become a crucial framework for international efforts to advance gender equality and promote peace and security.

Overview of WPS four pillars:

PARTICIPATION	PREVENTION	PROTECTION	RELIEF & RECOVERY
Calls for increased participation and representation of women at all levels of decision-making, including in national, regional, and international institutions; in mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict; in peace negotiations; in peace operations, as soldiers, police, and civilians, for example.	Calls for the prevention of conflicts - and its associated gender violations - through both long-term and short-term measures; supporting local women's peace initiatives and conflict resolution processes; inclusion of women in conflict resolution and mediation.	Calls for improving intervention strategies in the prevention of violence against women, including prosecuting those responsible for violations of international law, and strengthening women's rights under national law. Calls specifically for protecting women and girls from conflict-related gender-based violence, including in emergencies and humanitarian situations.	Calls for advancing relief and recovery measures to address international crises through a gendered-sensitive lens, including respecting the civilian and humanitarian nature of refugee camps, and considering the needs of women and girls in the design of refugee settlements and emergency responses, among others.

2. Key trends of WPS and digitalization

2.1. Global gender digital divide and digital inequalities: technical and structural barriers impeding access to digital tools for women

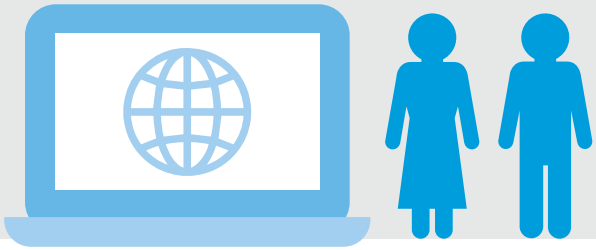
The UN's New Agenda for Peace (2023) mentions that the development of AI and quantum technologies brings to the fore the lack of existing governance frameworks. This is an area that should be tackled in future WPS discussions at the global, regional, and national levels, given the prominence of these questions nowadays.

> **....fully leverage the use of data and digital technologies to effectively track conflict trends, understand local sentiment, enable inclusive dialogue, monitor impact and help guide evidence-based decisions.**
>
> **Our Common Agenda: Policy Brief 9**
> **"A New Agenda for Peace", July 2023**

It is essential to clearly understand digitalization, information and communication technologies (ICTs), and cybersecurity. Digitalization involves integrating digital technologies into various aspects of life, including peacebuilding initiatives. There is a growing interest in connecting WPS with digital and cybersecurity issues (Hofstetter and Pourmalek, 2023; Buzatu et al., 2022).

Worldwide, 70 per cent of men are using the Internet, compared with 65 per cent of women.

This means that globally, there are 244 million more men than women using the Internet in 2023.

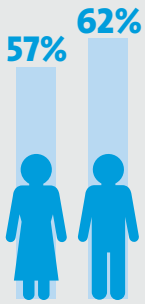


The global gender digital divide, digital exclusion, and digital inequalities pose significant challenges to achieving gender equality worldwide, particularly in the ECA region. Women face numerous technical and structural barriers that limit their access to digital tools and ICTs. These barriers include insufficient connectivity infrastructure, high costs for internet access and devices, inadequate digital literacy, and patriarchal norms that discourage women's participation in the digital space.

According to a report from the International Telecommunication Union presented at the CSW67 Expert Group Meeting, 57% of women worldwide use the internet, compared to 62% of men.

While the digital divide is less pronounced in the Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region (with 79% of women compared to 81% of men using the internet), significant barriers still exist

(ITU 2022, 3)



Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the intersectionality of these challenges, as women from marginalized groups face significant barriers. Intersectionality recognizes that gender interacts with other social identities, such as race, ethnicity, class, age, citizenship, sexual orientation, and disability, resulting in complex experiences of privilege and oppression (Tabet et al., 2023). Evidence indicates that factors such as location, education level, and income significantly affect access to ICTs (Gillwald 2022). For example, women in rural areas, those with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and members of LGBTQ+ communities may face extra challenges in accessing and benefiting from digital technologies. They may also encounter specific threats while using these technologies such as harassment or bullying online, which can be amplified by their marginalized status; misuse of personal information shared online, leading to increased vulnerability to cyber exploitation; risks of attacks by hate groups or individuals who promote discrimination, harassment, or violence against disabled individuals; etc.

Digital technologies are not inherently empowering for women; instead, they are double-edged swords. On the one hand, **they can provide women with opportunities for economic empowerment, civic engagement, access to education, and the ability to connect with others**. For women peacebuilders and human rights defenders (HRDs), digital tools can serve as unique ways to connect with other activists across the world, facilitate their daily tasks, and amplify and communicate their advocacy to broader national and international audiences in new innovative ways. On the other hand, **digital tools can perpetuate exclusionary and discriminatory practices**, reinforcing existing gender inequalities. Factors such as online harassment, cyberbullying, and the reproduction of gender stereotypes in digital spaces contribute to the negative impacts of technology on women's lives. Research has shown how women and other vulnerable communities are often disproportionately targeted and affected by online violence like cyberattacks, doxing (disclosing personal information online), cyberstalking, spreading fake or false information, and violations of privacy. The consequences of these acts extend beyond the digital arena, affecting individuals' mental and emotional health, as well as their ability to fully engage in public discourse (Brown and Pytlak 2020). The very design of digital tools itself, particularly with regard to rapid new digital advances such as AI and algorithms, can also perpetuate gender stereotypes and exacerbate inequalities. For example, algorithms on social media can promote content that reinforces existing prejudices to maximize user engagement, leading to echo chambers and the spread of harmful gender stereotypes. The absence of comprehensive regulation represents significant risks for women and other vulnerable communities in cyberspace (Hofstetter and Pourmalek 2023). Politically engaged women, like politicians, activists, or journalists, are also deliberately targeted, limiting their freedom of expression and advocacy efforts (Thakur and Allen 2022).

Furthermore, the notion that the 'online' and 'offline' realms are distinct has become outdated with the rapid global digitalization witnessed in recent years, facilitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital space is now understood as an *extension* and a *continuation* of gender-based violence (GBV) and structural inequalities already being present in the 'non-digital' space while also creating new ones (Hofstetter and Pourmalek 2023). Individuals and groups with political objectives can use digital platforms to spread misinformation in order to manipulate public opinion and promote their interests. This can have tangible consequences, influencing voter behavior, shaping public policy, and even inciting violence or social unrest. Online harassment, hate speech, and threats can overflow into the physical world. For example, public figures, political activists, or journalists who are targeted online may be subject to threats and physical attacks in the offline world. The anonymity offered by the digital space can encourage individuals to adopt detrimental behaviors that they would not adopt in offline interactions.

"... hate speech, disinformation, and misinformation have helped foment violence in election and transition periods, have exacerbated ethnic and religious discord, and have been used as a tool for minority persecution and GBV.

....efforts to detect and counter hate speech have already contributed to early warning and preventive action in electoral contexts. There also appeared to be scope for such programming to contribute to conflict prevention, greater rights empowerment, and improved social cohesion in other peacebuilding contexts. However, the findings suggest that such programming could be even more impactful if greater attention were paid to the root causes driving hate speech and disinformation (often rights deprivations), and a more long-term, rights-focused perspective was adopted. Paying greater attention to guidance on human rights standards would also help ensure that technological tools used for monitoring speech are developed with appropriate safeguards related to protection of lawful speech and privacy rights".

2024 PBF Thematic Review: Synergies between Human Rights and Peacebuilding in PBF-supported Programming

Addressing the global gender digital divide and inequalities in the ECA region requires multifaceted strategies encompassing technical, social, and policy dimensions. Efforts should focus on enhancing digital infrastructure, reducing the cost of internet access, promoting digital literacy programs that are inclusive and tailored to women's needs, and challenging societal norms that perpetuate gender disparities in the digital sphere. Additionally, it is essential to foster safe and inclusive online environments through measures such as combating online harassment, ensuring the development and audit of ICTs, promoting digital rights, and encouraging gender-responsive content production and representation. By addressing these issues, policymakers can work towards harnessing the potential of digitalization to advance gender equality and empower women in the ECA region, while also ensuring that cybersecurity strategies are in line with international law and human rights conventions. National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS can help those strategies come to life.

2.2. How women peacebuilders use digital tools - good practices

Digital tools have revolutionized the work of peacebuilders and women activists worldwide, empowering them to mobilize, advocate, and engage on a global scale. Social media and online platforms have become valuable channels for raising awareness, organizing campaigns, and facilitating dialogue. Digital tools also aid peacebuilders in documenting human rights abuses, exposing injustices, and fostering collaboration and knowledge-sharing among activists across different regions and contexts. While digital tools offer new opportunities, they also present challenges, including online harassment, surveillance, censorship, and data breaches (including hacking and doxing). Therefore, ensuring digital security becomes crucial to protecting those engaged in peacebuilding and activism in the digital sphere.

In the past years, there has been a growing interest in observing how ICTs and digitalization can be used positively for peacebuilding purposes, from conflict prevention to transformation and "cyberdiplomacy" by diverse State and non-state actors (Hofstetter 2021). According to Hofstetter (2021, 13-14), "digital technology's application in peacebuilding is usually differentiated in two categories: the *non-strategic use* of digital tools that innovates operational processes; and the *strategic use* of digital technology that pursues a specific peacebuilding goal, the latter thus defining a new field of practice, 'digital peacebuilding.'" The following section shows how women peacebuilders use digital tools for their work.

Peacebuilders and women activists worldwide have increasingly embraced digital tools as essential resources for their work in promoting peace, justice, and equality. Digital technologies have provided new avenues for communication, mobilization, and advocacy, amplifying the impact and reach of their efforts. By leveraging these tools, peacebuilders and activists have overcome traditional barriers, connected across borders, and engaged diverse audiences in their work. One of the key ways in which digital tools are utilized is through online platforms and social media networks. Peacebuilders and activists leverage these platforms to raise awareness about pressing issues, share stories, and disseminate information to a global audience on different platforms. Through the power of social media, they can rapidly mobilize support, organize campaigns, and engage with individuals who may not have been accessible through conventional means. Using hashtags, viral campaigns, and multimedia content, they can spark conversations, challenge narratives, and inspire collective action.

For peacebuilders, digital tools can be helpful in formal and informal peace processes and day-to-day peacebuilding activities like trust-building, awareness raising, or people-to-people diplomacy (Buzatu et al. 2022). For mediators, for example, using digital tools can help their efforts with conflict analysis, engaging with the different conflict parties, and strategically communicating the steps of the negotiations to the public (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2019). Digital tools such as virtual reality (VR) technologies could help transform peace processes (referred to as cybermediation[2]) before, during, and after the negotiation table through immersive experiences, perspective-sharing, and for training and educational purposes. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the Secretary General have also recently noted the immense potential and threats that AI technologies pose to global peace and security.

Nowadays, the digital realm has the potential to shape every aspect of conflicts, from their root causes to their aftermath, amplifying the importance of addressing gender inequalities and violence holistically across both physical and digital domains. Research has shown that conflict-affected settings bring additional cyber challenges. Indeed, in times of conflict, women are more vulnerable and prone to cybercrime. Furthermore, in the event of an outbreak or normalization of violence, the risk of physical assault and offline sexual violence towards women as a result of online violence and misinformation increases considerably. (Hofstetter and Pourmalek 2023). However, digital tools can also provide new opportunities in those contexts precisely because "in conflict-affected countries, many stakeholders have little opportunity to voice their needs and interests because of the high costs of participation. By providing simple and cost-effective means to engage, digital technology can also amplify the messages of a larger number of stakeholders and thus increase the public support for processes." (United States Institute for Peace 2020, 21)

Lightshow about Ukrainian women scientists during the war. Photo: INSCIENCE.

Good practices on strengthening capacity of female mediators through digital tools

UNITAR has conducted pilot projects on how digital tools and innovations can help the work of young African women mediators. The project included:

- establishment of a digital community of practice for young African women mediators to enhance experience sharing, collaboration and peer learning
- provide targeted capacity building and capacity development packages, specifically aimed at strengthening the knowledge and skills of young African women mediators.
- enhancement of technological innovation on mediation and peacebuilding to address the specific challenges that young African women mediators face in building and sustaining peace.

The United Network of Youth for Peace and Diplomacy (UNYPD) offered peacebuilding training to young women in Nigeria. When Covid-19 interrupted the in-person training, UNYPD used grant money to buy equipment and software subscriptions to offer the training online. As a result, the women who were trained have set up in person peace clubs to continue to act as agents of peace, teaching peacebuilding skills to others and complementing their new digital skills.

[2] The DiploFoundation (2020) notes the existence of VR systems and projects in Uganda, El Salvador, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Israel and Palestine. See also Gregory (2020).

Moreover, the United States Institute for Peace (2020, 2) has found that "**digital inclusion can serve such strategic purposes as strengthening the legitimacy of peace processes** and their outcomes, empowering women and marginalized groups, transforming community relationships, and reducing threats to vulnerable groups or risks to a peace process." Indeed, digital exclusion and disparities are still significant barriers limiting women and other vulnerable communities from benefiting and actively participating in technologies and, thus, digital peacebuilding activities. As mentioned earlier, these barriers are linked to broader structural, cultural, and technical barriers.

Regarding good practices, digital tools also enable peacebuilders and activists to **document and expose human rights abuses and social injustices**. Through smartphones and other portable devices, they can capture and share real-time evidence of violations, providing critical documentation that can be used for advocacy and accountability purposes. For example, local peacebuilders and activists' use of mobile technologies to collect and document evidence can be complemented with other tools like CCTV and satellite images in order to also help investigators and media outlets to triangulate violations and crimes. By leveraging digital platforms, they can also share these stories with the world, amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and shedding light on often overlooked issues. Digital tools can help document cases of human rights violence and evidence of crimes (Buzatu et al., 2022).

Furthermore, digital tools offer **collaboration and knowledge-sharing opportunities** among peacebuilders and activists across different regions and contexts. Online forums, virtual conferences, and webinars enable them to exchange experiences, strategies, and best practices, fostering a global network of solidarity and support. This digital connectivity transfers knowledge and lessons learned, empowering local actors with insights and tools that have proven effective elsewhere. Additionally, it enables the formation of coalitions and partnerships, facilitating joint efforts to address common challenges and advocate for systemic change. Those wider networks of collaboration can, in turn, provide peacebuilders and activists with greater opportunities for resources and funding, for example through crowdsourcing and crowdfunding platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic has particularly accelerated the digitalization of peacebuilding, and it has forced women activists and mediators to learn new ways to conduct their work, for example, through ICTs and digital platforms. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic increased connectivity but it also furthered the divide between those who are online and those who are not (Buzatu et al., 2022).

Networking and Collaboration

Women peacebuilders and activists use ICTs to **build empathy and trust** between conflicting communities and create greater social cohesion. GNWP Research participants from **Armenia and Azerbaijan** shared that ICTs allow them to connect to each other in a context where offline meetings are not possible or carry security risks. A participant from Moldova shared similar sentiments on using ICTs to connect women from different regions in the country. The use of ICTs for this purpose is not a new phenomenon; women in Northern Ireland used a similar approach with ICTs available in the 1960s and 1970s to communicate across peace lines. Research participants also noted the **key role of youth in facilitating the use of ICTs to create social cohesion**, as they help older generations adapt to new digital platforms.

In **Georgia**, the meetings of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), which address violent incidents along the Administrative Border Line with the breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions, are now conducted online. This allows for greater direct participation of civil society, including women peacebuilders (GNWP).

The Asia Foundation's "PeaceConnect" project used social and traditional media to promote **peace messaging** in the **Philippines**. The Facebook-funded "Team Pakigsandurot" initiative has also used positive messaging on social media in a similar manner to address violent extremism and Islamophobia online. According to Sajida Abdulvahabova from the Women's Problems Research Union in Azerbaijan, using ICTs in this manner creates the potential for the Internet to be used "as a site of resistance to violence." (GNWP).

Indeed, it is essential to acknowledge that **the digital landscape has challenges and risks for peacebuilders and activists**. Online harassment, surveillance, and censorship threaten their safety and security. The very tools and technologies that peacebuilders use can also be used against them by repressive governments and extremist non-state actors. State and non-state actors may target them for their advocacy work, leading to risks of intimidation, digital attacks, or even physical harm.

Presentation of the 'Tell Me' app, designed to support survivors of gender-based violence, at the Summer Camp for Young Peacebuilders in Moldova, July 2024. Photo: Eduard Bizgu

Consequently, digital security measures and strategies are crucial to ensure the safety of those engaged in peacebuilding and activism in the digital sphere. For example, cases worldwide show that digital technologies can undermine the legitimacy and well-functioning of peace efforts, mediation, and dialogue processes (Kavanagh 2021). Also, the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP)'s research found that "threats emerging from cyberspace, particularly online GBV and misinformation, and disinformation, are the prime contributor to the loss of trust in peacebuilders" (Hofstetter and Pourmalek 2023, 28-29). Buzatu et al. (2022) have found that creating "safe spaces" online with the help of certain secured digital platforms has helped women peacebuilders and HRDs stay safe from cyber violence.

Here are some examples of how secured digital platforms have facilitated women's engagement:

- **Signal and WhatsApp applications** offer end-to-end encryption, allowing women peacebuilders to communicate securely without the fear of interception. Networks of female activists use Signal to share sensitive information about their work and coordinate efforts safely;
- **Slack or Microsoft Teams** allow women peacebuilders to create private channels for discussions. For instance, groups like Women Peacemakers Program use these platforms to collaborate on peace initiatives, share resources, and support one another while maintaining privacy;
- **Mighty Networks and Discord** platforms allow for the creation of private groups where women can share experiences and strategies without revealing their identities. Women's rights organizations have used these forums to create peer support networks for sharing best practices in advocacy;
- **Private Facebook Groups:** Groups dedicated to women peacebuilders can share resources, strategies, and support without public exposure. These private spaces allow members to discuss issues freely while keeping conversations confidential.
- **Apps like Haven** allows users to turn their smartphones into security devices that can monitor their surroundings. Women can use it to feel safer when attending events or meetings, providing an extra layer of protection;
- **Digital Helplines - s**ome organizations have established online support services that allow women to report cyber violence anonymously. For instance, the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative offers resources and support to victims of online harassment while ensuring their safety and anonymity.

Monitoring violations

The Ushahidi platform allows for data collection and generation of **reports of violent incidents** from multiple sources – including text messages (SMS), emails, and Twitter. The platform has been used in over 160 countries to inform the planning and design of interventions and to document and report cases of human rights violations and abuses. For example, activists have used the platform to document instances of police brutality during the Black Lives Matter Protests in Portland. Similarly, research participants from Colombia have shared that ICTs were an important tool in documenting police brutality and attacks on women activists during the recent wave of protests (GNWP).

Outside of a protest context, the Center for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD) in Syria shared that the organization conducted online interviews with detainees to **document human rights violations**. Based on this documentation, CCSD is currently providing legal and psychosocial support online to those who need it. Some government security forces have also increased the use of ICTs to facilitate **reporting of violations of women's rights**. For example, in Georgia and the Philippines, the police have begun to use ICTs to enable **easier reporting of domestic violence**. Reports can now be submitted easily and directly through online messenger or text messages (GNWP).

In protecting women against sexual violence and harassment, initiatives like the Harassmap tool (**Egypt**), which four women developed, used SMS13 to **collect information about attackers and their locations**. This information helps to **identify sexual harassment hotspots**, and security officials are deployed to guard these areas. Such first-person reports help mediators, peacebuilders and policymakers to understand and develop data-driven intervention mechanisms for the protection and prevention of sexual violence in conflict. These accounts and information also help debunk stereotype and people's relationship and perspective of sexual-based violence and are central to developing campaigns and community mobilization. Harassmap and similar technologies are great examples of how technology-enabled crowdsourcing can help to include women in data gathering and crisis mapping as prevention and protection mechanisms.

As such, digital tools have revolutionized the work of peacebuilders and activists worldwide, empowering them to engage, mobilize, and advocate on a global scale. It can also provide historically marginalized communities with influence and take part in peace processes. They can raise awareness, document human rights abuses, and build solidarity networks through online platforms, social media networks, and collaborative spaces.

Virtual Reality (VR) as a tool for sharing new perspectives

BeAnotherLab: VR system designed to experience the world from the perspective of another person. A good practice is given by a project with women refugees in Jordan, who recorded their memories as VR stories.

The Distance between Us: VR installation that creates a digital room in which participants can interact as avatars to engage in conversations and storytelling. In some situations, the use of avatars, which can hide who the user is (anonymity), can help people express themselves more freely, and potentially removing judgement. In The Distance Between US, all users' avatars were the same, thus levelling the playing field in terms of appearance. In that particular application, it was noticed that women in VR were more willing to engage in a combative conversation, while in the real world, their way of interacting was different.

However, addressing the challenges and risks associated with the digital landscape is imperative to ensure the safety and security of those leveraging these tools. By harnessing the power of digital technologies responsibly and inclusively, peacebuilders and activists can continue to make significant strides in creating a more just and peaceful world within a safer environment.

Good practices to support peace processes

In both **Colombia and the Philippines**, women used ICTs prior to the **start of the peace negotiations** between the government and MILF, to foster a culture of peace and tolerance. Different organizations, including those led by women and indigenous peoples, used radio, mailing lists, and websites to **disseminate peaceful messages across communities** (GNWP).

Despite these challenges, the **use of open online platforms to allow broad-based participation in peace negotiations is an increasingly popular strategy**. Similar initiatives were seen in the **Donbas** region in Ukraine, where the online tool was combined with offline inclusive community meetings on the topics selected through online participation. The tool is primarily used to facilitate the communication between people from separatist and government-controlled areas. Similarly, GNWP's partner, IDP Women Association Consent in **Georgia**, has used Zoom to **inform women from conflict-affected areas** about the progress of the peace process, and to allow them to make concrete recommendations to the peace negotiators during the Covid-19 pandemic. The examples of Georgia and Ukraine suggest that ICTs' potential to decentralize communication and enhance the inclusivity of peace processes is maximized when online platforms are complemented with direct, targeted engagements – both online and offline.

Improving access to information and using strategic communication can give rise to new (and wider) forms of engagement across different phases of conflicts. Hofstetter (2021) has found their relevance for early-warning systems and conflict prevention, conflict transformation, as well as transitional justice and reconciliation. Other good practices related to digitalization include storing, collecting, and analyzing data and information more efficiently. Investing in women's digital literacy through needs assessment training are crucial first step to implementing good practices[3] (Buzatu et al. 2022; Robertson and Ayazi 2019).

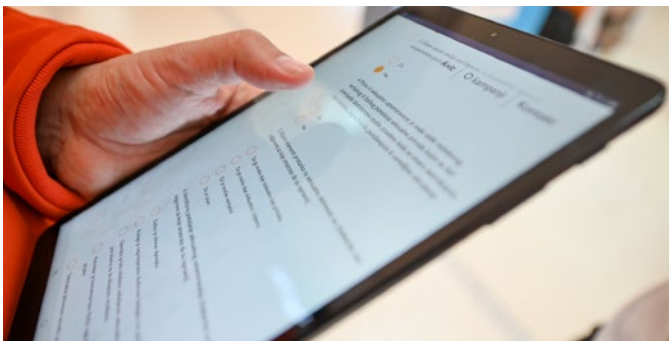


Photo: UN Women BiH/Sergej Cukovic

Improving information access

ICTs facilitates data collection, making it easier for women peacebuilders to plan and inform their work. For example, Julia Kharashvili from the IDP Women's Association "Consent" noted that "during the [**Nagorno Karabakh conflict** that erupted in September 2020], it was vital to be online to understand the needs of Armenian and Azerbaijani women." Using online data collection, her organization was able to **map the needs of women** in each country and provide appropriate support, such as psychosocial and legal assistance (GNWP).

Youth activism to build trust and confidence:

The "Youth for Peace and Equality" program, run by NGO "Initiatives 4 Peace" with UN Women, OHCHR and UNDP in Republic of Moldova, empowers youth across both banks of the Nistru/Dniester River. Key activities include IT courses for girls, the Young Women for Peace Leadership School, a Hackathon/Peace Accelerator Lab, and a Summer Camp for Young Peacebuilders. A notable success is the 'Tell Me' app developed by Elena and Daria from Tiraspol, which supports survivors of gender-based violence by connecting them with women's organizations for anonymous reporting and quick assistance. Collaborating with Ion Chislaru from the right bank, they further developed the app and showcased it at the Summer Camp in July 2024. This initiative exemplifies how digital tools can enhance peacebuilding and support across communities. Read more here.

[3] For example, UNITAR (2020) has conducted pilot projects on how digital tools and innovations can help the work of young African women mediators.

3. How WPS NAPs can effectively contribute to digitalization for peacebuilding

NAPs on WPS are policy frameworks voluntarily developed by Member States to implement the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions on WPS within their specific national contexts. The NAPs play a pivotal role in integrating gender perspectives into peace and security processes at the national level. These resolutions recognize the disproportionate impacts of conflicts on women and girls and their critical role in international peace and security efforts, such as conflict prevention, defense and security sector, peacebuilding, relief and recovery, and post-conflict reconstruction. NAPs on WPS can provide a comprehensive strategy for integrating a gender perspective into peace and security processes at the national level. They are usually multi-year documents, and the most effective WPS NAPs are developed with clear objectives, indicators (baseline and targets), a budget, and a monitoring and evaluation mechanism.

A well-crafted NAP on WPS acknowledges the specific challenges confronting women and girls in conflict-affected settings and outlines concrete actions and objectives to address these challenges. For example, they typically include provisions for women's participation in peace negotiations and/or decision-making, protection from gender-based violence, access to justice and services, and promoting gender equality in all peace and security efforts. NAPs on WPS also emphasize the importance of data collection and analysis on gender and conflict and monitoring and reporting mechanisms to track progress and identify gaps. While there is an increasing interest in linking WPS with digitalization, NAPs on WPS can play a crucial role in addressing the gendered impacts and opportunities of technology in conflict and post-conflict settings. The analysis shows a few ways in which WPS NAPs can help tackle questions of digitalization:

- **Promoting access to ICTs and digital literacy:** NAPs can advocate for policies and programs that improve women's access to digital technologies, internet connectivity, and digital literacy training. This can help bridge the digital divide and empower women to utilize digital tools effectively for their own protection, empowerment, and participation in peace processes and other peacebuilding efforts.
- **Ensuring gender-disaggregated data collection and analysis:** NAPs can provide for the collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data related to digitalization. This data can help identify gender disparities and develop evidence-based policies and programs addressing women's challenges and opportunities in the digital sphere. Also, the digital platforms and tools could be used for collection of data for gender responsive conflict analysis.
- **Harnessing digital platforms for advocacy and participation in the defense and security sector:** NAPs can encourage the use of digital platforms and social media as channels for women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding and decision-making processes. This can include supporting initiatives that amplify women's voices, facilitate dialogue, and promote gender-responsive policymaking in digital spaces. Digital platforms can also engage the wider civil society on those questions and normalize the representation of women in the defense and security sectors in societies where this is traditionally not common.
- **Ensuring digital security and privacy**: NAPs can address the specific digital security risks women peacebuilders, activists, and vulnerable communities face more generally. This may involve developing guidelines and resources for enhancing digital security, promoting encryption technologies, and advocating for the protection of women's privacy and anonymity online.

Photo: UN Women Moldova

- **Addressing technology-facilitated gender-based violence:** NAPs can prioritize strategies to prevent and respond to online harassment, cyberbullying, misogynistic hate speech, the spread of false information and disinformation, slander campaigns targeting women public figures or feminist organizations, and other forms of digital gender-based violence. This may involve raising awareness, strengthening legal frameworks, and providing support services to survivors in collaboration with the security sector.
- **Supporting women's digital entrepreneurship and economic empowerment**: NAPs can include measures to support women's economic participation and entrepreneurship in the digital economy in a frame of policies and actions on economic recovery. This can involve providing access to training, financial resources, and mentorship opportunities, enabling women to harness the economic benefits of digitalization. This is especially important in contexts of post-conflict recovery as well as for trust- and confidence-building among conflict sides. A first step to women's leadership and participation in technology development for peacebuilding purposes, including AI, could be to increase the number of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.

By integrating these considerations into WPS NAPs, governments can create comprehensive policy frameworks that address the gendered dimensions of digitalization for conflict prevention, and in conflict and post-conflict settings. This holistic approach ensures that the opportunities and risks presented by digital technologies are recognized and effectively utilized to advance women's rights, gender equality, and sustainable peace on a continuum. In turn, digital tools can facilitate and improve WPS implementation. ICTs' application can improve the reach, inclusivity, and participatory dimension of consultations with civil society for policy-making, such as in the NAP elaboration and drafting processes.

According to the GNWP's research findings, most WPS NAPs that do mention cybersecurity and digitalization tackle those issues as tools for peacebuilding or their association with cyberviolence. The increasing use of technology-related language in WPS NAPs since 2000 reflects the evolving approach to peacebuilding, as technology is omnipresent in various aspects of life. However, progress at the intersection of WPS and digitalization is still too slow (Hofstetter and Pourmalek 2023, 19). As such, their research demonstrates that very few NAPs worldwide engage *sufficiently* and *thoroughly* with the topics of both digitalization and cybersecurity.

3.1. Analysis of Digitalization Effort for Peacebuilding in NAPs on WPS in selected countries in ECA region

Most of the current **NAPs in the ECA region do not sufficiently tackle questions related to digitalization**. NAPs on WPS play a crucial role in shaping policies and strategies to harness the potential of digital technologies in WPS implementation. Most mentions of digitalization or ICTs are brief, vague, or insufficiently funded. Following the typology of Hofstetter (2021), most of the mentions are 'non-strategic' rather than 'strategic' which means that digital tools are a *means to an end* rather than a topic to tackle in itself to transform peacebuilding through digital tools. For example, they are used to improve the operational efficiency of specific daily tasks and NAP objectives such as data collection, awareness-raising, or facilitation of training. It is also worth noting that none of the NAPs analyzed address issues related to AI technologies and the roles they might play in global challenges.

The main commitments and actions on digitalization planned by the NAPs adopted in 2023 are mainly focused on prevention of online violence against girls and women and the misuse of technologies affecting women. In some NAPs, it is found that certain state and non-state actors, including violent extremist groups and individuals, increasingly misuse and exploit technology to lead gendered disinformation campaigns against women in public life, including politicians, activists, and journalists. These actions can suppress democratic movements and reduce women's participation in peace and security decision-making. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) can precede and carry over into physical settings, following women into their homes and communities. Furthermore, online misogyny, which may share roots with other forms of hate-based violence, including racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism, threatens national security and the personal security of women and girls. The lack of a safe and enabling environment for women to participate equitably and safely online has negative consequences for democracy and international peace and security.

Although good practices are arising in the region, the mentions of digitalization, cybersecurity, or ICTs use are usually brief and lack a strategic focus, which means that digital tools are used mainly for *non-strategic* purposes and operational effectiveness rather than *strategically* for new ways of peacebuilding.

Armenia NAP II (2022-2024)

The document mentions the gender digital divide and the possibilities of IT-based innovations in WPS implementation. In addition, the document includes the implementation of measures to increase women's participation in cybersecurity and digital solutions to peace and security issues through training, confidence-building, and the creation of a national excellence center for cyber security.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (2018-2022)

Mentions of digitalization-related topics are brief in the NAP. Still, it contains good practices in peacebuilding, such as awareness raising on explosive remnants of war through media. The NAP includes brief mentions of the use of technology and databases for monitoring and evaluation.

Georgia NAP IV (2022-2024)

Despite Georgia being a well-known WPS leader in the region, there are no explicit mentions of digitalization-related issues in their latest NAP. Some activities and output indicators suggest that a digital dimension might be used. For example, the publication of information about public services on governmental websites for awareness raising about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kazakhstan NAP I (2022-2025)

This short five-page document briefly tackles issues of digitalization, mainly in terms of activities (such as online events, distance learning training sessions, and awareness-raising campaigns) and means to achieve them (such as the creation of a database, use of online tools and development of a media plan).

Moldova NAP 1325 2023-2027

By fostering training opportunities through virtual platforms specifically targeting female trainers and promoting online women's roles, the NAP aims to promote their increased representation in management positions. Moreover, the NAP mentions the establishment of a digitalized internal reporting system for discrimination and gender-based violence, and WPS stakeholders' collaboration through virtual platforms.

Ukraine NAP II (2021-2025)

The NAP stands out as one with the most technology-related content among its regional counterparts. One of the foci is raising public awareness about gender-based violence by posting information on the Internet and through mobile applications. Additionally, the document takes a strategic approach to digitalization by approving plans to address digital and information threats. The government utilizes social communication channels and comprehensive assistance platforms to directly engage with affected individuals, ensuring they are well-informed about available resources and support during times of crisis. The document acknowledges the importance of educating the public on cybersecurity and combating cybercrime from a gender perspective. Training through digital platforms emerges as another component of digitalization for peacebuilding efforts in Ukraine. The NAP highlights the development of online courses on the WPS agenda, empowering key stakeholders with the knowledge and skills needed to contribute effectively to peacebuilding efforts.

Uzbekistan NAP I (2022-2025)

Mentions of digitalization-related topics, however, it is the only one that addresses online security concerns related to human trafficking. Indeed, the document highlights the inclusion of the human trafficking topic in the curricula of law schools and professional development institutes, with a specific focus on combating child pornography and child prostitution online.

Finland 4th NAP on WPS 2023-2027

Globally, Finland advocates for the right of all women and girls to a safe online environment, participating in initiatives such as the Generation Equality campaign coordinated by the international UN Women organization, where Finland serves as co-lead of the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality.

UK Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan 2023-2027

As a member of the Global Partnership for Action on Gender Based Online Abuse and Harassment (GP) the UK will support the production, in 2023, of a Global Partnership Paper on Building the Evidence Base on technology-facilitated GBV. This builds on the GP/ UN Women Wilton Park event on the same topic held in 2022.

Continue to support the UK-Gulf Women in Cybersecurity Fellowship Programme supporting FCDO female cyber security professionals from across the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries in their continued self-development as cybersecurity leaders and professionals; to promote them as role models in their respective countries and internationally; and to drive forward projects of mutual interest which would produce sustainable outcomes to benefit the region.

UK will invest in research and pilot projects on gender-transformative approaches to preventing CSSF cyber-related insecurity and violence through the CSSF Gender, Peace and Security portfolio.

UK will deliver an international values-based campaign to champion diversity and gender FCDO equality in the design, development and use of cyberspace, to improve the inclusion of gender considerations in policy, strategy and programmes. It will continue to support early-mid career women diplomats to develop the relevant skills and FCDO participate in UN cyber debates to bridge the gap in women's representation at relevant UN negotiations through the UN Women in Security in Cyberspace Fellowship.

Swedish National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security (2024-2028)

Sweden will continue to strengthen efforts against all forms of gender-based violence, including digital occurrences.

Canada's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, 2023-2029

As a part of the actions to address sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), it is aimed to strengthen its understanding of and ability to respond to technology-based GBV and the connections between violent extremism, disinformation and GBV.

Despite this observation from the analysis, there is clear evidence of **good practices emerging in the region, especially in Ukraine and Armenia**. These countries have recognized the potential of digitalization, for example, for early-warning mechanisms, awareness raising, and provision of public services for conflict-affected citizens. They have taken precise steps to prioritize this specific area in their respective NAPs alongside other activities. This is especially remarkable, knowing that both Ukraine and Armenia are conflict-affected countries.

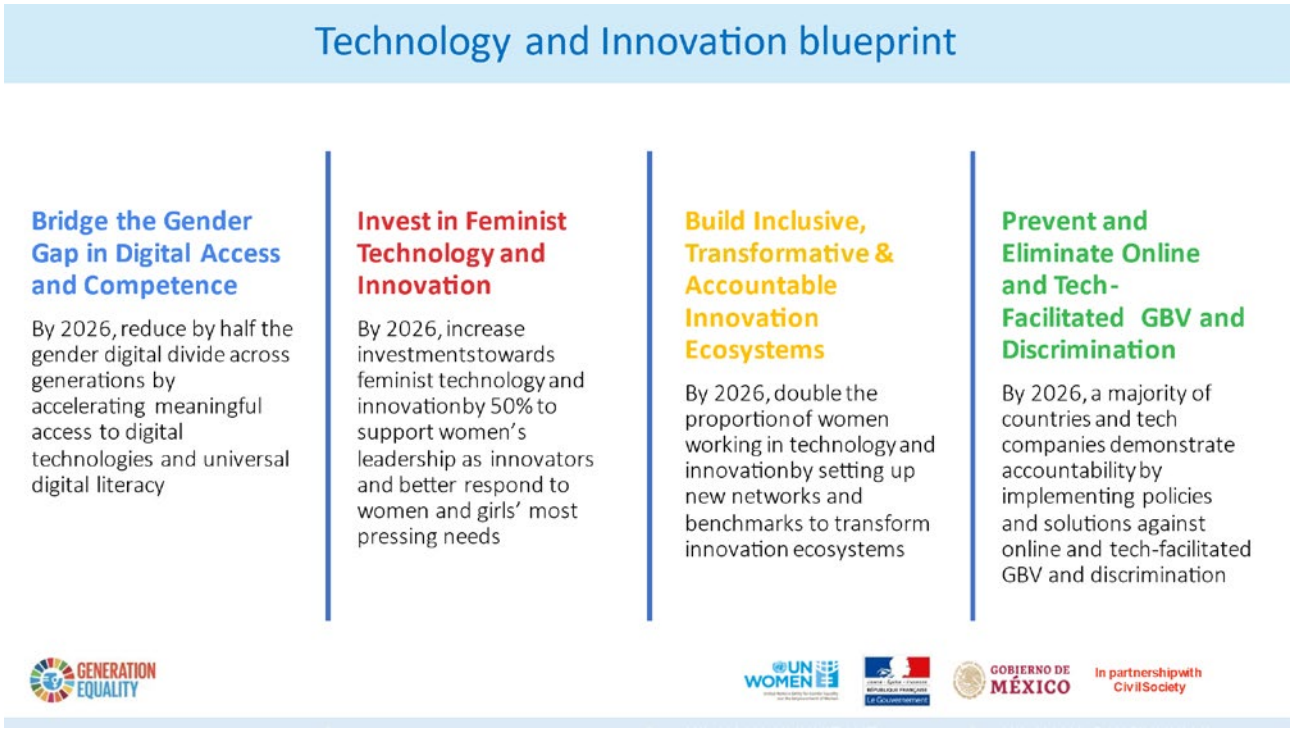
The Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine has been actively involved in supporting women affected by the war through various digital initiatives, including:

- e-government services which streamlined access to necessary documentation and benefits (online applications for social assistance and other support programs, making it easier for women to navigate bureaucratic processes remotely; etc.); .
- digital services that support women, including online platforms for accessing legal aid, psychological support, and social services by improved functionality of government portals to help women easily access information about their rights and available resources;
- initiatives to improve digital literacy among women by providing training on how to use digital tools for accessing services, remote work, and online learning;
- use of digital channels to disseminate critical information - updates on safety measures, emergency contacts, and available aid;
- digital tools for emergency response, which includes apps and platforms that help women report issues, access emergency support, and receive updates during crises.

The Ministry of High-Tech Industry of Armenia also has been involved in supporting women affected by the conflict with a focus on:

- the development of digital platforms that provide critical information and support to women affected by the conflict. This includes online resources for accessing social services, legal aid, and psychological support;
- collaboration with Tech Startups and NGOs that focus on aiding women. These startups often create apps and digital tools for various purposes, such as connecting women with resources, offering mental health support, or providing educational and employment opportunities;
- digital literacy programs to enhance women's skills in using technology, which is crucial for accessing online services and opportunities;
- facilitation of remote work by fostering digital platforms that offer freelance and remote job opportunities, helping women gain financial independence even amidst the disruption;
- developing and supporting digital systems for emergency response, including tools for reporting incidents, accessing emergency assistance, and staying informed about safety measures;
- digital solutions to manage and support needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs), including women, by creating and maintaining databases and online platforms to streamline the provision of aid and services.

In 2020-2021 Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine joined the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality which is a multistakeholders platform of "public and private partners toward bold, collective solutions that spark a world lean towards a gender-diverse digital evolution". The Action Coalition identified four bold action to be achieved by 2026:



The Action Coalition can be instrumental in advocating for and supporting WPS efforts through digital tools by:

- **Raising awareness** about the specific challenges women face in conflict situations and the potential of digital tools to address these issues
- **Contributing to campaigns and educational initiatives** can highlight success stories and best practices
- **Supporting the development of digital tools** specifically designed for WPS efforts, including apps for reporting violence, platforms for connecting women with resources, and systems for emergency response and support
- **Fostering partnerships** between tech companies, NGOs, and governments to create and scale digital solutions that address the unique needs of women in conflict zones
- **Actions to improve** digital literacy among women, particularly in conflict-affected areas
- **Joint advocacy for inclusive policies** that address the barriers women face in accessing and using technology
- **Promoting global standards and guidelines** for gender-sensitive technology to ensure that digital solutions are designed with consideration for the needs and safety of women in conflict settings

4. Key conclusions

The use of digital tools can enhance access to essential services, facilitate advocacy, and create networks of solidarity among women peacebuilders and activists. However, it is essential to recognize that digitalization is not a panacea solution and cannot "replace" offline engagement in peacebuilding processes. One of the significant challenges is the global gender digital divide, which hinders women's access to digital technologies in the ECA region and beyond. Technical and structural barriers, such as limited connectivity infrastructure, high internet access costs, inadequate digital literacy, and patriarchal norms, persist, affecting women from marginalized groups even more severely. Digital technologies can serve as double-edged swords, offering opportunities for empowerment and participation but also perpetuating exclusionary practices and reinforcing gender inequalities. Despite the potential of digitalization, it is essential to acknowledge that data-driven initiatives cannot fix structural inequalities and the continuation of online/offline violence. Significant barriers remain, and efforts to address the gender digital divide must be multifaceted, encompassing technical, social, and policy dimensions.

WPS NAPs can play a key role in addressing technology-related impacts and opportunities in conflict and post-conflict situations. They can encourage access to digital literacy and ICT, tackle technology-facilitated gender-based violence, leverage digital platforms for advocacy, ensure digital security and privacy, support women's digital entrepreneurship, encourage participation in digital governance, and emphasize the collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data. By integrating these key considerations into NAPs, governments are creating holistic frameworks to tackle the gendered dimensions of digitalization for conflict prevention and resolution. This comprehensive approach leverages digital tools to advance women's rights, gender equality and sustainable peace, enhancing the inclusivity of peacebuilding processes. However, global advances in mainstreaming digitalization and cybersecurity into NAPs remain limited, underscoring the necessity of greater attention to these crucial issues.

Upon analyzing the NAPs, it becomes clear that there is a significant lack of digital-related information and limited initiatives that effectively integrate digitization into peacebuilding efforts. This raises concerns about the ability of these plans to fully leverage the potential of digital technology to promote gender equality, peace, and security.

Furthermore, there is a need to address the threats that digital technology can pose to women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and women peacebuilders in the ECA region. Despite certain countries, such as Ukraine and Armenia, recognizing the significance of digitalization in their NAPs and taking initial steps in this direction, there remains a pressing necessity for more institutionalized thinking of digitalization within the system, more comprehensive, well-funded, and strategic approaches to digitalization within these plans. As the digital landscape evolves rapidly, the significance of transformative peacebuilding through digital tools becomes increasingly apparent, underscoring the necessity for heightened attention and proactive measures in shaping the future trajectory of peacebuilding efforts in the ECA region.

Photo: UN Women BiH/Hazim Aljovic

Digitalizing peacebuilding – actions to consider for NAPs

Recommended actions per WPS four pillars:

PARTICIPATION

- **Support Women-Led Digital Initiatives - e**ncourage the development and funding of women-led digital platforms that promote peacebuilding, human rights advocacy, and community engagement. This could include grants or support for tech startups founded by women.
- **Utilize Data for Evidence-Based Policy -** NAPs could emphasize the importance of collecting and analyzing data on women's roles in peace and security, particularly how digital tools can enhance their participation. This data can inform policies and programs aimed at increasing women's involvement in peace processes.
- **Leverage Social Media for Advocacy - e**ncourage the use of social media platforms for raising awareness about WPS issues and mobilizing support for women peacebuilders. NAPs could outline specific social media campaigns that amplify women's voices and experiences.
- **Strengthen Partnerships with Tech Companies -** NAPs could foster collaborations between governments, civil society, and technology companies to create tools and resources that support women's empowerment in peace and security efforts.
- **Incorporate Digital Tools in Monitoring and Evaluation -** Utilize digital tools for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of WPS initiatives. NAPs could promote the use of online surveys, mobile apps, and social media analytics to gather feedback and assess the effectiveness of programs.

PREVENTION

- Addressing risks of technology-based violence.
- Collecting data on ICT related violence against women.
- Systematic documentation of these violations, including in-depth case studies, is necessary to identify effective remedies and new policies.
- Ensure privacy and safety when using the services of internet providers.
- Create an online culture of zero tolerance to VAW and their responsibility in protecting users' rights.
- Develop and introduce rules on how to ensure personal security online including how to stop the violence, how to remove abusive comments or images from online platforms and prevent.
- Introduce prevention programs targeting youth, and engage youth in the creation of such programs (social media literacy programming led by youth, for youth, on the consequences of sharing sexual images through social media and other forms of cyber-violence against women and girls)[4].

PROTECTION

- **Create Safe Digital Spaces - e**stablish guidelines and protocols for creating and maintaining safe online spaces for women peacebuilders and HRDs. NAPs could advocate for the development of secure platforms that protect users from cyber violence and harassment.
- **Promote Cybersecurity Awareness** - include provisions for cybersecurity awareness within NAPs, ensuring that women peacebuilders are equipped with knowledge about protecting themselves online and mitigating risks associated with digital activism.
- **Engage Men and Boys -** NAPs could include strategies that engage men and boys in digital advocacy for gender equality and women's participation in peace and security. This could involve online campaigns, mentorship programs, and collaborative projects that challenge gender norms.

RELIEF & RECOVERY

- **Incorporate Digital Literacy Training** - NAPs could include initiatives aimed at enhancing digital literacy among women, particularly in conflict-affected areas. This training could focus on safe internet usage, online security, and effective use of digital tools for advocacy and peacebuilding.
- **Promote Access to Technology -** Ensure that women and marginalized groups have access to technology and the internet. NAPs could advocate for policies that expand digital infrastructure in underserved areas, helping to bridge the digital divide.

4

By taking these steps, NAPs can effectively link the WPS agenda with digitalization, creating an environment that empowers women and enhances their contributions to peacebuilding and security initiatives.

To optimize the integration of digitalization into WPS NAPs, it is imperative to link these efforts with established international platforms such as The Compact on Women, Peace, and Security and Humanitarian Action (WPS-HA), which was launched in 2021 to enhance commitments towards gender equality, peace, and humanitarian action, doesn't specifically mention "digital peacebuilding"; although its focus includes leveraging technology and digital tools to advance these goals. Signatories of the Compact are expected to support its principles and objectives, which broadly include promoting women's participation in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and humanitarian response. Actions suggested by the Compact on WPS-HA include monitoring and dissemination of information on the situation of WHRDs in conflict and crisis affected contexts, including threats using digital technologies (for the regional organizations to perform); and provision of support to diverse groups of women peacebuilders by facilitating their access to digital technologies and cybersecurity protections (for the private sector companies).

Linking digital initiatives with the Compact on WPS-HA will contribute to:

Enhanced Coordination: International platforms provide a structured approach for coordinating actions among diverse stakeholders. Integrating digital solutions into these frameworks ensures that technological innovations are aligned with global WPS priorities and are implemented in a coherent and unified manner.

Standardization and Best Practices: International platforms facilitate the sharing of best practices and standardized approaches. Linking digital initiatives with these platforms allows for the adoption of proven methodologies and the dissemination of successful digital tools, promoting consistency and effectiveness across different contexts.

Cross-Sector Collaboration: The Compact on WPS-HA brings together governments, NGOs, and international organizations. This collaborative environment provides an opportunity to integrate digital solutions with ongoing humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts, fostering synergies and amplifying impact.

Monitoring and Accountability: Integration with international platforms supports robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. This ensures that digital initiatives are assessed for their effectiveness in advancing WPS objectives, promoting transparency, and holding stakeholders accountable for achieving results.

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UN Women Regional Office for
Europe and Central Asia
Abide-i Hürriyet Cad. İstiklal Sok. No:
11 KEY Plaza Kat: 8
34381 Şişli, İstanbul, Turkey
eca.unwomen.org