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New Columbia Program to Help Define Women's Roles in Peace and Security

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(From L to R): Graça Samo, Elena Ambrosi, Alaa Murabit, Chirlane McCray, Allison Julien, Leymah Gbowee, Mikaela Luttrell Rowland.

NEW YORK, October 27—Women on all different levels, from households to the highest ranks of government, are striving to gain a seat at the table when it comes peace and security. A new program launched today at Columbia University will help define what those roles might be in order to have a sustainable and meaningful impact on decision-making. Led by Nobel Peace Laureate Leymah Gbowee, the Women, Peace, and Security Program will advance the visibility and capacity of women peacekeepers and practitioners – locally and globally – and share lessons learned from their experiences and participation.

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“I had just won the Nobel Prize,” said Gbowee, “and I was asked by a colleague, ‘What next?’ This started a long journey. We wanted a program that would benefit the women who are on the front lines of peace and security in the world. We went on a listening tour from Mozambique to New York. We asked women in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ghana what kind of program could support their peace work and activism? We learned that security is more than militarization. Security is about clean water, shelter, insurance, and more than just guns and bombs.”

The [Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict and Complexity](#) (AC4) at the Earth Institute, Columbia University held its inaugural symposium at Low Memorial Library. The event featured remarks, a keynote address, and a panel discussion by prominent female activists, policymakers, and academics who support the mandate of AC4’s Women, Peace and Security Program to magnify the impact and contributions of everyday women peacebuilders.

“Right here in the largest, safest city in the United States – with cultural roots that spread across the globe, and certainly across our country, there are still too many women filled with fear and insecurity. If a woman cannot feel safe and valued inside her own home, her workplace or her community – there is no peace. There is no security. We have to get the right women in our halls of power. We must take on the mantles of leadership, and use our voices if we are to have the peace and security that reflects the reality of our lives,” said First Lady Chirlane McCray, Co-Chair of [NYC’s Commission on Gender Equity](#).



Gloria Steinem. Photo credit: Tod Seellie

Women’s rights activist Gloria Steinem reminded the attendees about whose voices matter most. “Someone who has experienced the problem, knows the problem,” she said. “That is why this initiative today has the potential to change academia and philanthropy. Change, transformation, peace and security are like trees — planted and grown from bottom-up. Eventually we will have a forest that shelters us all.”

The aim of the symposium is to forward and showcase a global and intersectional approach to Women, Peace and Security (WPS). The keynote address delivered by Graça Samo, a feminist grassroots activist and International Coordinator of World

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March of Women, Mozambique. She spoke about land rights, militarization, and **women's informal mobilizations and how these too often get left out of a formal Women, Peace, and Security agenda.**



Grača Samo. Photo credit: Tod Seelie

“Today when we look back and ask what have we done,” said Samo, “how we have managed to transform the world. Do we believe we are changing women’s lives? If we look at the global trend today, it’s like we are going backwards. We cannot stop at naming it patriarchy, we need to name it capitalism and imperialism. We need to name it colonialism and new-colonialism.”

The symposium featured reflective remarks from Gloria Steinem, writer, lecturer, political activist, and feminist organizer; Lakshmi Puri, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women; Joni K. Seager, Professor of Global Studies at Bentley University and scholar and activist in feminist **geography and global environmental policy**; **Elena Ambrosi, Colombia’s Delegate of the Peace and Victims’ Rights Protection, former Thematic Director of Colombia’s Office of the High Commissioner for Peace**, and a representative of the Colombian government in recent peace negotiations; Alaa Murabit, UN High-Level Commissioner on Health Employment and Economic Growth, Phase Minus One Executive Director, and Global Sustainable Development Goals Advocate; and Allison Julien, Dorthy Bolden Fellow / We Dream in Black Organizer with the National Domestic Workers Alliance. The symposium closed with remarks from the First Lady of New York, Chirlane McCray, followed by remarks on the next steps for the Women, Peace and Security Program by Associate Director of the Program, Mikaela Lutrell-Rowland.

In a recent piece for Inter Press Service, Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury of Bangladesh [wrote](#), **“Here I would mention enthusiastically a dedicated Women, Peace and Security Program which was launched last week at New York’s prestigious Columbia University. Led by 2011 Nobel Peace Laureate dynamic Leymah Gbowee, this Program has identified all the key areas which need special attention, particularly emphasizing the human security dimension and grassroots level experiences in WPS agenda. I wish her and the Program all success!”**

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Gbowee discussed her recent trips around the world and the role women are playing on the ground to ensure meaningful peace and security and will discuss her vision and plans for the new Columbia University program.

Over the past ten months, the Women, Peace and Security Program's leadership has participated in listening sessions, workshops and meetings with women leaders in the United States and across the globe in order to learn about the everyday challenges to women's peace and security and the ways in which women have been advocates for themselves and their communities. The valuable lessons learned from these exchanges informed Friday's symposium.

AC4's Women, Peace and Security Program at Columbia University was born from the understanding that women are underrepresented in formal peace processes and their associated political and governance processes, yet women make vital and often unrecognized contributions to challenging violence and injustice and promoting peace, protection of rights, and development within their communities. The symposium aims to recognize the contributions of everyday women peacebuilders and enhance understanding of why, how, and in what ways women have been able to successfully influence peaceful outcomes in their communities.

The exhibition "*Speaking to Peace: Portraits from Maputo and New York*", featuring portraits by [Daniel Jack Lyons](#) and stories from women in Mozambique and New York City, was on display to highlight the perspectives and lived experiences of everyday women peacebuilders.

About AC⁴: AC⁴ is a research center housed within the Earth Institute at Columbia University, and is focused on issues related to sustainable peace, constructive conflict engagement and sustainable development. By connecting leaders in the field of peace and conflict resolution, AC⁴ aims to build opportunities and apply its research with the view to generate solutions for some of the most pressing social and environmental challenges.