

Advanced Consortium on  
Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity  
EARTH INSTITUTE | COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



# Women, Peace and Security PROGRAM

## LAUNCH SYMPOSIUM REPORT

*Photo Credit: Nobel Women's Initiative*

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The Women, Peace and Security Launch Symposium took place on October 27, 2017, at Columbia University's Low Memorial Library, in the company of approximately three hundred guests, with university students, faculty, and staff participating alongside diplomats, policymakers, researchers, and activists from the greater New York City area.

Marking the launch of the new Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Program at Columbia University, the Symposium brought together international and intersectional perspectives, and gave space for the program's leadership to present its mission and underlying principles. All too often, security is primarily associated with states and state borders and formal war and conflict. The WPS Program believes in the need to expand the concept of security to include issues of everyday safety, structural inequality, and sustainability. The symposium presented a global yet intimate conversation on these themes, showcasing the work and expertise of grassroots women's organizing and activism.

The remarks given by twelve different guest speakers from around the world highlighted the spark that inspires the WPS Program and the four guiding principles necessary for the program to achieve its mission.



# 1

## The need to increase visibility of grassroots women peacebuilders and shed light on the types of peace work and diverse strategies they employ

Women are disproportionately affected by violent conflict, poverty, structural inequalities, and environmental crises, and they are simultaneously largely underrepresented in formal peace negotiations and related political and governance processes. The WPS Program believes in the need to expand the recognition of grassroots women, bolster their expertise, and amplify their voices. This requires not only greater representation of women in formal peace processes, but also a commitment to make visible the diverse informal contributions by grassroots women to peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding that frequently go unrecognized.



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Of the role of grassroots women in Colombia's peace process, panelist **Elena Ambrosi Turbay**, Peace and Victim's Rights Protection Delegate, Office of the General Inspector, Republic of Colombia, stated:

*"Women in Colombia united and gathered themselves in nine large platforms, one year after discussions were initiated. They held a great forum that had the participation of more than 500 women from all over the country, and they ended up demanding three things from the government: 1) We would not leave the table until we reach a final agreement, 2) Women wanted not only to be the issue of discussion, but wanted to participate in the discussion as well, 3) That the agreements had to comply with the needs and desires and wants of the women. Two months later there were two women deemed negotiators on the part of the government, and six months later we created a sub-commission on gender that revised everything that had been reached already in order to incorporate a gender perspective."*

**Gloria Steinem**, Writer, Lecturer, Political Activist, and Feminist Organizer, underscored the importance of a bottom-up approach:

*"Because peace and security grow from the bottom up, like a tree [...] and because Leymah Gbowee, who proved this by leading a peaceful revolution in Liberia, is leading this Women, Peace and Security Initiative- it has the potential to transform the current top-down errors of both academia and philanthropy. The truth is that, only if we all work and nurture the tree closest to us, will we have a forest that shelters us all."*



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## 2

### An approach that frames issues of security beyond only militarization and war

Security is often associated only with states, state borders, war and large-scale conflict.

The WPS Program at Columbia University believes in the need to expand the concept of security beyond state-level matters of war and peace to include problems of everyday safety, structural inequality, and sustainability. Grassroots women influence peace and peace activism in formal and political spheres, but also in everyday spaces: homes, communities, schools, neighborhoods, and now, even virtually.



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Executive Director of the WPS Program, Nobel Peace Laureate **Leymah Gbowee**, spoke about security in this way:

*“Security is not just about militarism, security is not just about war; security is about clean water, security is about affordable housing, security is about insurance. Security is about many other things than just guns and bombs.”*

Panelist **Alaa Murabit**, Phase Minus One Executive Director, UN High-Level Commissioner on Health Employment and Economic Growth, and Global Sustainable Development Goals Advocate, agreed:

*“Security is subjective. One of my colleagues is a three-star general, and his definition of security was that everybody came home safe and alive- everybody in his unit. My mother’s definition of security— she’s a mother of eleven children— ... is that her kids can go and come back safely. And her resources for security are fundamentally different than a military general.”*



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# 3

## A commitment to strengthen and develop new analytical tools

New analytical tools are needed to understand what “counts” as women’s participation in peace activism across the globe. The WPS Program is committed to education and research that is designed with input from grassroots women peacebuilders themselves, rather than seeing women only as objects of study. This new approach is committed to global, interdisciplinary research that encourages new modes of inquiry and study.



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Keynote speaker **Graça Samo**, Grassroots Feminist Activist and International Coordinator, World March for Women, highlighted why new tools are needed:

*“We have to teach the capacity to question and challenge. How do you do that? We say that we need to decolonize knowledge— decolonize education. Leymah was saying that we need to look at knowledge that is both from the community and the grassroots; for you to do that, you need to decolonize your mindset, your methodology, your framework, and so on. How do you do that? You still learn from the people, from the women there, [however], not in a classroom but sitting under the tree and having conversations.”*

**Mikaela Luttrell-Rowland**,

Associate Director for the WPS Program, also emphasized this point:

*“When we say there is a need to actually listen to women who are at the front lines of these multiple and intersecting forms of violence... we are talking about the urgent need for new formats and platforms and mechanisms for strengthening the work that women peacebuilders around the world— including within the United States— are already doing. We are talking about creating collaborative research and providing cutting edge data that makes visible such work in new ways and that is based on their voices and expertise.”*



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Panelist **Alaa Murabit** expressed that this is crucial to the success of the program:

*“Oftentimes corporations and governments will talk about women’s rights, and they will bring a uniform set group of women, and often times not bring women of low income, of different races, of different religious backgrounds, of different ages, and so we have to be cognizant of that. If this is going to be an effective program, if it’s really going to break the mold, it first and foremost is going to have to go to women who look and sound and work and act differently.”*





# 4

## A belief that women's peacebuilding and mobilizations happen on a local-global continuum

Given today's evolving forms of globalization, technology, and communication, new modes of inquiry are required to make women's peace work visible. Modes of understanding that move beyond locating women solely within the nation-state are central to this aim.

Structures that operate beyond boundaries and borders (such as environmental degradation, climate change, migration, structural inequality, etc.) affect the security of women's lives worldwide. An intersectional approach to women, peace and security, therefore, requires moving beyond a way of thinking that sees women's formal peacebuilding work as only happening at the United Nations or international policy levels, or their informal peacebuilding work as only happening at local levels. Instead it must recognize and account for the structures that affect women's lives along a local-global continuum, and the ways grassroots women's mobilizing often defies rigid notions of "local" and "global".<sup>1</sup>



Panelist **Allison Julien**, Dorothy Bolden Fellow/ We Dream in Black Organizer, and Spokesperson for National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), stressed that:

*"NDWA partnered with international labor organizations, and through those conversations we're able to build relationships with domestic workers across the globe: in Mexico, in Trinidad, in Jamaica, in Hong Kong. It's important that when we think of domestic work here in the U.S., we're bridging these gaps with domestic workers across the world, and what we see is that our conditions are mirror-imaged."*



## Women, Peace and Security PROGRAM

The WPS Program's mission is to contribute to a greater understanding of the diverse roles women play in successfully influencing sustainable peace and human security through everyday activism. Through education, public service, outreach, and research, the WPS Program will advance the visibility and capacity of women peacemakers and practitioners – domestically and internationally – by codifying and disseminating lessons learned from their experiences and participation.

To learn more about the WPS Program at Columbia University, contact [womenpeacesecurity@columbia.edu](mailto:womenpeacesecurity@columbia.edu)

Visit our website at <http://ac4.ei.columbia.edu/research-themes/women-peace-and-security/>

<sup>1</sup> For an expanded discussion on the importance of the local-global continuum see Darian-Smith, E., and McCarty, P. (2017). *The Global Turn: Theories, Research Designs, and Methods for Global Studies*. Oakland, California: California University Press.



“This work is very important because we all share this small, blue, fragile place in the vacuum of space, and it is very important that it be a place of peace. You really can’t have a sustainable planet – it really doesn’t matter what we do about climate change and all the other problems that we face – if we can’t keep people from killing each other. And so this initiative is a critical part of the Earth Institute mission. The new Women, Peace, and Security Program is a natural fit for the Institute because of how essentially it places questions of sustainability in everyday security.”

— Steve Cohen, *Executive Director, The Earth Institute*

“Today I am coming to Columbia with a strong message of support to this new program, by which we feel very re-affirmed. We want to be fully there for you in whichever way you want us to support you and partner with you. I entirely agree that whatever you do in this program should be about bringing up the power of the grassroots, and I love the analogy of the tree growing bottom-up.”

— Lakshmi Puri, *Assistant Secretary-General, United Nations and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women*

“Right here in the largest, safest city in the United States, an international community with cultural roots that spread across the country, 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 in her own home, workplace, or her community, there is no peace, and there is no security.”

— Chirlane McCray, *First Lady of New York City*

“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!”

— Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury of Bangladesh, *former President of the UN Security Council*

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