

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Statement by Ms. Kaavya Asoka**  
**UN Security Council Open Debate on Protecting Participation**  
**18 January 2022**

Madam President, Excellencies, civil society colleagues,

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to brief you today. I am Kaavya Asoka, and I represent the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, a civil society coalition of 18 international NGOs who, for more than 20 years, have worked to promote women's rights and their full, equal and meaningful participation in peace and security.

In preparation for today's discussion, we spoke last week with our civil society colleagues from Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, women who deliver critical services to their communities, who broker ceasefires and participate in peace processes, women who have dedicated their lives to the relentless pursuit of peace, justice and human rights. Many of them have addressed you in this chamber, and many have paid the price for doing so. It is their voices that you are hearing today, and they are asking you for help.

There would be no women, peace and security agenda without civil society, particularly the women who live and work through the daily realities of war. Their views and their active participation are central to achieving our collective goal of peace and security.

But this participation comes at a cost we should not be asking anyone to pay.

We observed in our open letter to the Security Council last October, that to be a woman or an LGBTQI+ person in many parts of the world, particularly in conflict, means having to choose between fighting for your rights, or fighting for your life. This should not be the case. Not anywhere. Not in Afghanistan, where women leaders and human rights defenders who have worked for peace and equal rights for decades now live in fear of being targeted by the Taliban, even as they continue to bravely demonstrate in the streets. Not in Myanmar, where women and LGBTQI+ activists who led protests against the coup were among the first to be targeted by the military, detained, tortured and sexually abused for standing up for human rights and democracy. Not in any of the other situations on this Council's agenda.

And this should not be the case here, in the Security Council. Reprisals against individuals who brief in this very chamber are a symptom of alarming global trends—the increase in the intensity and scale of violent conflict, paired with the closing of civic space, the erosion of human rights norms, and the increasingly misogynistic and militarized environments in which they live and work today. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these already precarious conditions.

Our coalition has worked to ensure that conflict-affected communities are heard by you, policymakers. We welcomed the adoption of Resolution 2242 in 2015, which enabled more women civil society to share their expertise directly with this Council. Yet as the number of briefers has increased, so have the repercussions for speaking up. This is a perfect illustration of the threats facing all women who seek to engage actively in peace and political processes, the topic of today's open debate. The more women assert their rights, the greater the backlash.

The women leaders we work with have faced intimidation, threats and reprisals directly related to their engagement with this Council. They have been censored, threatened and harmed. They have been told to be silent

on issues integral to our work, such as gender-based violence or sexual and reproductive health and rights, because these were considered “incompatible” with so-called cultural or religious values. Their laptops have been confiscated, and their phones and bank accounts hacked. They have been arbitrarily detained by security forces following their briefings. They have been accused of being spies for foreign governments. They have been subject to smear campaigns and defamation. And they have faced intimidation right before sitting in this chair. We have had to relocate multiple women after they have briefed the Security Council, some of whom have yet to return to their homes. In one recent case, an individual was abducted the day after a Security Council briefing. We feared that they were tortured, or dead. For months, we dropped all of our other work to focus on this case until they were released. We asked several Member States and UN agencies for help but received little. It taught us a difficult lesson—nobody, other than our own civil society colleagues, was willing to help an individual who had faced a reprisal for having cooperated with the UN system.

This is unacceptable.

Our experience reflects a pattern. The number and severity of reprisals and intimidation against anyone engaging with the UN has exponentially increased in recent years. About a third of the women we have supported briefing the Security Council since 2018 have faced intimidation or reprisals and about 67% of these cases were perpetrated by State actors. This is just the tip of the iceberg. The UN has publicly documented only a fraction of such cases directly associated with Security Council cooperation—many have not been reported at all, out of fear of further reprisal or a complete lack of confidence that anything will result from their reporting. This gap in information means that policy responses are failing to take into account basic facts on the ground that can determine whether or not a woman lives or dies.

Women peacebuilders and human rights defenders face intimidation, threats and attacks because of who they are and the work they do—this means all women who defend any human rights, as well as people of all genders who defend gender equality. Let us be clear—reprisals are designed to silence them and stop them from doing their work. These risks are compounded for marginalized groups like LGBTQI+ activists and women with disabilities, and their effects impact not only individuals, but families, communities and civic space. These repressive measures not only harm those who choose to speak out anyway, but will deter other advocates from doing their important work. Unless you put a stop to it now.

Last week, we talked about what women human rights defenders and peace activists need to continue their work in the face of these challenges. They told us that they need funding, to support urgent needs such as personal security, relocation, making their homes and offices more secure, paying legal fees; and they need responsive institutions that they can reach out to directly in their hour of need. We discussed the challenges of their activism, the toll their work has taken on them, and most of all, their waning faith in the international community’s willingness to act on their concerns. Their clear message to you is that while such protection measures can keep them safe temporarily, only genuine political support for their work can ensure their long-term security. If you are truly committed to ending attacks against women human rights defenders and peacebuilders, it is critical to address the root causes of conflict and gender inequality, not only their consequences.

The Security Council has already called on Member States to enact measures to protect women civil society and to create an enabling environment for all those who defend human rights and advocate for peace. Yet in your very own chamber, you have failed to consider the price paid by the civil society you claim to support.

Excellencies, silence is complicity. You cannot afford inaction if you are to fulfill your obligations under the women, peace and security agenda.

We therefore call on all Member States, UN leadership and Security Council members to:

- Stop intimidation, attacks and reprisals against all human rights defenders, peacebuilders and civil society leaders.
- End impunity and ensure accountability of all perpetrators when such acts occur.

- Your political support can keep a human rights defender at risk alive by deterring attacks and raising the costs for perpetrators. Publicly support the work of human rights defenders and peacebuilders, swiftly condemn all attacks against them, including in the Security Council, and use your diplomatic channels to raise these issues with States that have committed reprisals.
- Call on Secretary-General Guterres to model his own stated commitment to this issue by ensuring all UN staff, especially UN leadership, including the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, publicly champion the important work of women peacebuilders and human rights defenders, and that the UN provides all necessary protection and practical support to those at risk and their families. This means providing rapid, flexible and targeted resources for women civil society at risk, and directly funding their organizations. This means establishing clear protocols for how UN entities are required to respond to individual cases. And all these protection measures must be developed in partnership with the individual at risk, whose views and needs must be at the heart of any response.
- Provide OHCHR with the necessary financial support to carry out its work on reprisals, including better monitoring and reporting and critically, providing support to civil society at risk and proactively following up on individual cases. The burden must be shifted away from individuals who have faced attacks, to the system with the capacity to protect them.
- Ensure that all peace operations are fully resourced and empowered to monitor and provide practical, gender-responsive support to all human rights defenders and peacebuilders at risk. Peace operations must fully implement their protection of civilians mandates, which includes protection of all human rights defenders.
- Ensure a safe and enabling environment for civil society, including by eliminating laws that restrict or criminalize their lives, access to essential healthcare or their work, including counter-terrorism and national security laws, and enact legislation that protects the rights of women human rights defenders, peace activists and humanitarian personnel in line with international human rights standards.

I would like to underline one final point: The risks women face should in no way be used as an excuse to exclude them. To do so would be to let those who wish to silence them win. Instead, Member States and the UN must prioritize and actively support the full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership of women, in all their diversity, in all aspects of peace and security. This includes providing political and financial support to women civil society to regularly and safely brief the Council, and ensuring your decisions truly reflect their concerns.

Madam President, Excellencies,

Today you have a choice. As members of the Security Council, you can show us, and indeed the international community, exactly where you stand. You can choose to support us by taking action, or you can continue to put our lives at risk by doing nothing. We urge you to challenge those who believe it is not a woman's place to question authority, to speak out against abuse, or to defy power and patriarchy, by responding that a woman's place is exactly where she decides it should be—whether fighting for human rights, participating in a peace process, protesting in the streets, or sitting in this chamber with you.

Thank you.