The future of advocacy

Women's
Major Group
Creating a Just & Sustainable Future

womensmajorgroup.org

Objective

Feminist, women's and girl-led movements and organizations are facing intersecting crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened systemic barriers as well as introduced new challenges to advocacy at all levels. However, members of our collective, around the world, have truly demonstrated feminist tenacity and creativity in adapting their advocacy to respond to the pandemic. After the virtual 2020 High Level Political Forum and over 7 months of advocacy amid the pandemic, the Women's Major Group thought it would be good time to take stock of the diverse tools our members use to do advocacy online and offline. With the goal of mapping out which tools have proven to be effective or ineffective in a world moving online, we held a brainstorming session with our members and conducted a follow-up survey.

This briefer summarizes our findings, detailing how feminists are adapting their advocacy tools in response to a virtual world when not everyone is online. Our hope is that this briefer will support our members and allied feminist networks in continuing to adapt their advocacy to ever-changing circumstances as well as raise important questions around inclusivity, systemic barriers, and the future of advocacy.

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Methodology

We hosted a two-hour virtual brainstorming session for the members of our advocacy working group. We also sent the brainstorming questions as a survey to our larger membership, giving them one week to respond. The survey was conducted through Google Forms and was translated into English, French, Spanish and Russian. We had participants from 43 organisations and 28 countries respond either through the survey or the call. Of those who responded to the survey, 51% of them were from Europe, Canada and the US, 24% from Latin America and the Caribbean, 7% from Asia and the Pacific, and 17% were from Africa. We asked about global, national and local advocacy tools, as well as both digital and offline tools. The data from the virtual meeting and the survey forms the basis of this report.

Only 30% of those who registered for the virtual meeting showed up. There can be various reasons as to why so few attended the brainstorming session. Potential reasons include: the digital divide and lack of internet access; the influx of meeting invitations and asks across communications channels since the outbreak of COVID-19; the technology used was new to many (Miro); language restrictions; or care work and other pressing responsibilities. We also asked people ahead of the meeting to come prepared, which is an additional burden in times of Zoom fatigue. The brainstorm also happened parallel to the UN General Assembly, so some of our members might have been attending that session instead. In addition, only a small portion of the membership responded to the survey even though there was targeted outreach to members from the underrepresented regions.

It was, however, very exciting that the 14 participants who joined the brainstorm were very active throughout the meeting, showing that brainstorming in smaller groups can be more successful than in bigger groups. The discussions were more focused and there was actual interaction among the participants, and no passive participation. We held a software training on Miro at the beginning of the call which proved very helpful.

We asked

1 Are your advocacy methods/tools working during COVID-19? Is advocacy easier now, or was it easier before COVID-19?

2 What advocacy tools have been less effective after COVID-19? What tools have been more effective after COVID-19? What makes tools effective or ineffective?

3 What advocacy tools have you come up with to respond to conditions imposed by COVID-19, and in what aspects have they been useful?

4 What do you think is the future of advocacy? Where is advocacy heading?

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75% report advocacy is more difficult after COVID

About 84% of our members reported that their main advocacy tools and methods are still working for them. However, for 75% of our members, advocacy is reported to have been easier prior to the pandemic. One of our members shared in the survey:

"Because of the digitalisation, we need to leverage our already existing contacts, so it's not easy to make new contacts. One way to go around, is to bring young and new people into meetings with already established contacts of the organization."

Less effective tools

"COVID-19 has provided an opportunity for decision-makers to engage less with civil society… Advocacy is therefore more challenging."

The decreased ability to meet in-person plays a key part in why many tools were reported as ineffective. 21.7% reported that mobilising civil society through rallies and demonstrations is more difficult, and 16.7% reported similarly regarding face-to-face meetings. 11.7% found it difficult to be present in spaces where decisions are taken, and 10% reported that they are struggling to have bilateral meetings with decision-makers and UN Agencies. Other tools that were also mentioned included: community activities (6.7%); webinars (6.7%); media visibility (5%); meeting with funding organisations (3.3%); writing letters to decision-makers (3.3%); monitoring decision-makers (1.7%); states' financial priorities (1.7%); lack of internet connection (1.7%); care work (1.7%); meeting new people (1.7%); legal cases (1.7%); emails; communication over WhatsApp.

What makes some tools ineffective according to our members?

The spontaneity of in-person meetings are a bit lost as we move online. In the UN you could bump into decision-makers in the cafeteria and make new contacts in unexpected places. The digital divide has a massive impact on who gets to participate in online advocacy. Many grassroots members have limited access to technology, and can't travel because of restrictions to places with connectivity. Members noted that it is a challenge to bring community together because of COVID-19 and lack of funds. Some members also reported an increase in gender-based violence online through online harassment and trolling, making it harder to interact online.

COVID-19 occupies States' priorities in their programmatic and financial agendas, and other matters do not receive the necessary attention. Many members have noticed that

decision-makers are avoiding their responsibility to consult with civil society and are difficult to get hold of. In addition, they reported that information was hard to access, one member highlighted the specific information gaps and legal barriers that Indigenous Peoples have faced during the pandemic.
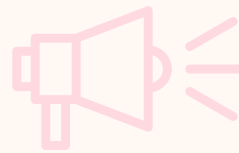
While in the beginning it seemed as though all Zoom meetings were crammed with participants, today Zoom fatigue is a real issue. Too many online meetings, containing repetitive information, are impacting the attention spans of participants. Virtual encounters are often primarily for information sharing, and do not necessarily lead to sustainable relationships. This also makes it hard for events to stand out from one another. Zoom meetings are also commonly very formal, and it is therefore harder to be off the record since they are usually recorded. Discussion in real-time is more spontaneous, grows, and evolves in ways online meetings are less likely to do.

	Total tweets	Total users	Total reach	Total impressions
2020	3,442	1124	894,488	4,233,421
2019	7,489	1397	5,090,986	41,738,822

Many members find it harder now to get media attention. At WMG we have noticed a huge change in the impact of our online campaigning between the in-person HLPF (2019) and the virtual HLPF (2020). We had almost a 90% decrease in impressions during the virtual HLPF, due to the main #HLPF conference hashtag having very little activity compared to previous years.

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More effective tools

34% report that online meetings are more effective

The most effective tools were seen to be calls and online meetings with varied stakeholders, including through digital conferencing software (34% of survey respondents). Webinars were also popular, with 25% of respondents saying that they are now more effective than they were in the past.

Multiple members reported that one benefit of things moving to virtual formats has been that events and meetings are accessible to a wider audience than before, and therefore more inclusive. One person stated that "the world is closer" now. Another person noted that they have observed more "responsiveness" from event participants than in previous times.

Social media, including Twitter and Facebook, was also cited as more effective by 22% of members who participated in these consultations. People reported multiple uses of social media as being more effective, including digital campaigning, targeting decision makers, and organising among activists. 16% of people specifically mentioned the platform WhatsApp, and a few people noted that WhatsApp has been especially effective when used alongside other tools, such as online meetings or events, for deeper engagement. Other responses mentioned online petitions, mobilisations that combine in person and virtual tactics, open letters, publications, and monitoring of decision-makers.

To be more effective in our advocacy, it is important to continually reassess our tactics and modes of working together. As one person remarked, "participatory advocacy would be more effective with digital awareness and knowledge" - a reminder that it is also important to invest the time in learning together and educating others about different tools and platforms.

Reducing webinars, increasing workshops and interactive spaces

Holding a digital consultation through a text-based platform worked for us

Webinars - but adoption of new platforms takes time

Online training of members on media and digital advocacy

Adapting in-person conference with a combination of pre-recorded videos, calls, and WhatsApp chats

Converting webinars into podcasts

Online trainings without having to travel

Adapting our media fellowship programme to COVID

Online meetings with new activists and stakeholders that we have established relationships

Reallocating travel budgets to support new tools, interpretation, and our members directly

Financial support for mobile internet connections

More focus on digital advocacy - online campaigns, webinars

Developing a COVID storybook highlighting the impacts on women

Virtual strategy meetings & using presentations more interactively

Incorporating different audiovisual elements to keep webinars engaging

Virtual platforms to host meetings, events in an interesting and interactive way

Direct messaging in UN meetings through chats

Storytelling through videos/ using newish platforms like Instagram

Bilateral meetings via Zoom

Illustrations! zines, videos, multimedia

Response tools

What advocacy tools have you come up with to respond to conditions imposed by COVID-19, and in what aspects have they been useful?

Digital meetings, webinars and calls and social media have gained more prevalence in the advocacy work of our members (72% of survey respondents). "Basically all that we would do in real life, we transformed to fit the online world," stated one of our members. For better communication and engagement with their partners, some of our members had to organize workshops / trainings to their partners on the use of these digital platforms. More private communication methods in social media, such as Direct Messages and Whatsapp messages have replaced the physical bilateral communications with Un representatives, delegations and funders, and have become important to maintain periodic communication.

In such a time of uncertainty and multiple, yet unverified channels of information, providing evidence-based and trustworthy information to their constituencies has become an important part of our members work (14% of survey respondents). One of the respondents stated that they had to rethink all their work in the first two months of the pandemic: "At the beginning it was necessary to make decisions and think about activities. Then at two months, we were already with daily activities." This was true for all members, as they had to find new and interactive ways to continue their work in the new context. Many have utilized more than one methodology, even within one aspect of their work, to ensure the accessibility and effectiveness of the work. Another respondent stated that "At the moment we are not thinking of post-COVID advocacy as we anticipate that we will be working this way at least for the next six months if not longer," emphasizing the continuum of the uncertainty in terms of their work and lives. Regardless of this uncertainty, as one responded stated it is "useful to keep momentum while all the major conferences are now stalled."

Overcoming barriers

Language

Language barriers are a key reason why people may not be able to engage in online advocacy, particularly around global processes. Most meetings, campaigns, and materials are primarily in English. A few tools and recommendations the Women's Major Group has found to promote language justice and greater accessibility:

- Simultaneous translation on online meetings, recording in multiple languages
- Translating advocacy and communications materials (briefs, infographics, social media toolkits, graphics)
- Captioning of videos

Internet access

The digital divide, which reflects inequalities based on location, income, gender, race, ethnicity and more, is a long-standing barrier to engagement in online advocacy. For Women's Major Group members, we see disparities based on gender as well as rural access to digital platforms. To address these concerns, our collective has come across a few creative solutions and suggestions:

- Holding connection and technology test sessions prior to online meetings
- Holding meetings in hybrid formats if possible, with some in-person portions, and some text-based portions
- Financial support for internet connection
- Calling colleagues in to meetings through WhatsApp
- Watching pre-recorded videos and conducting discussions through WhatsApp groups
- Recording meetings and sharing notes
- Converting webinars to podcasts

What is the future of advocacy?

"I think there are opportunities, now more than ever, to bring more grassroots organizations to influence the 'international' scene."

Previously, our digital advocacy work would complement the work we were doing on the ground. Now, it's largely the other way around. We are presented with new barriers as well as opportunities. As the quote above suggests, online meetings allow for greater inclusion and diversity of feminist civil society in UN meetings as they remove resource or other restrictions imposed by travel. We are begining to strategize long-term plans for what our online advocacy must look like, while still maintaining a balance with offline and on-the-ground tools.

Feminist advocacy will continue shifting as we navigate changing circumstances in a post-pandemic world and as we learn and re-strategize over which tools help us build community and movements as well as help us reach decision-makers. As Zoom fatigue sets in, many of our members feel overwhelmed with back-to-back meetings, and adding webinars on top of that has proven to become less effective over time. Similarly, twitter storms, which used to call the attention of decision-makers and get more interaction during in-person meetings, are also becoming less effective. Often, it's our members interacting and tweeting, but our messages struggle to reach decision-makers.

In moving our feminist advocacy forward, we have found that holding online bilateral meetings with our key points and asks has been a more strategic way to reach decision-makers, such as Member States. Similarly, rather than webinars among our networks, which tend to be time-consuming and presentation-based, we have found that more creative, bold, multimedia materials, that are more accessible and less time consuming, have received more traction. This can include multi-schemes, for instance, combining WhatsApp with Zoom meetings, and Google Doc collaborations with social media.

When imagining the future, we see a collective move globally to close the digital divide and overcome barriers to online engagement. We see inclusive meetings both in their modalities and technicalities. We see decision-makers multilaterally and nationally taking measures to tackle gender-based violence online. We see online meetings focused on meaningful interactions and discussions between stakeholders and an end to meetings with only pre-recorded videos. In particular, in this moment of intersecting crises, where CSOs are busier and more exhausted than ever, we see an opportunity for deep movement building and creating advocacy pieces that center art, joy and celebration.

Further reading

▶ <u>Young feminists want system change: Global advocacy toolkit for the Beijing+25 process and beyond</u>, (2020), Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF)

▶ <u>Feminist organizing toolkit: Planning virtual meetings</u>, (2020), Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) & Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF)

▶ <u>Webinar Series: Communications for Gender Just Climate Action</u>,(2020), Women and Gender Constituency (WGC) and Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)

▶ <u>An Open Call for Strong and Inclusive Civil Society Engagement at UN Virtual Meetings</u>, (2020), Women's Major Group

Prepared by

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