
The USIP Learning Agenda: An Evidence Review

Women's Participation in Peacebuilding in Contexts of Pervasive Insecurity and Natural Resource Competition

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This report presents the findings of an exploratory evidence review of the circumstances that promote women’s participation in peacebuilding in contexts of pervasive insecurity and natural resource competition. The study focuses on the identification of the factors and actors that promote women’s meaningful participation, defined as the capacity to influence processes and outcomes, emphasizing the role of women environmental peacebuilders as decisionmakers at the local level. This emphasis on meaningful participation responds to recent findings highlighting the limited representation and formal decision-making power of women, further concluding that the mere presence of women at the table—for instance, through the enforcement of quotas—is not by itself sufficient to ensure that their voices are heard and incorporated into the peacebuilding process.

While acknowledging gender considerations that involve women, men, and other non-binary identities, the analysis highlights women’s experiences. Despite being heavily affected by the convergence of insecurity and natural resource competition, which are increasingly exacerbated by climate impacts, women are often ignored or marginalized in these efforts to prevent violence, equitably manage natural resources, address crises, and build peace. Their critical role in community welfare and the potential of their meaningful contribution in finding sustainable solutions thus remains insufficiently recognized.

This report begins with a summary review of research on women’s participation as it relates to the United Nations women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda, as well as the emergent field of environmental peacebuilding and its intersection with gender. The gaps identified in this review, in turn, inform the three case studies—of Colombia, South Sudan, and Honduras—that form the central component of this evidence review. Each case study entails analysis of two civil society initiatives as illustrative examples of women-led peacebuilding in contexts of pervasive insecurity and natural resource competition.

Participation and the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

The women, peace, and security agenda is the most prominent global framework seeking to advance women’s participation in peacebuilding. This agenda is concerned with the ways in which women’s roles in peace and security have been shaped by, and perceived in light of, gendered stereotypes that neglect or misrepresent female agency.¹ Particularly pervasive in conflict-affected contexts, this pattern of misrepresentation distorts interpretations of women’s engagement in armed struggles and peacebuilding efforts.² Inaccurate presumptions about the motivations, needs, and contributions of women and girls, as well as social norms and institutional practices that reinforce structural inequalities, have served to limit engagement with female actors in both peacebuilding and environmental governance.³ Without a strategy for positive transformation informed by an evidence-based understanding of these interlinkages,

gender equality and peacebuilding will be construed as separate from environmental security goals. It is therefore critical to underscore the importance of applying a gender lens to environmental security, conflict analyses, and peace initiatives to ensure the meaningful participation of women in the adoption of policies and implementation of programs.

The experiences of all people—women and girls, men and boys, and gender and sexual minorities—in both conflict and peace are strongly determined by gender or, more precisely, by how the rights, roles, responsibilities, capabilities, and attributes associated with being female and male are defined within a particular social context.⁴ Relatedly, the responsibility commonly ascribed to women for natural resource management hinges on prevalent gender divisions of labor. The common division of labor disproportionately assigns to women the responsibility for providing food, water, energy, and other resources critical for household and community subsistence, particularly in rural settings, where there is greater dependence on natural resources for livelihoods.⁵ Women and men thus have gender-differentiated knowledge, capacities, and responsibilities relating to the use, management, and conservation of natural resources. When pervasive insecurity, fragility, and violent conflict disrupt the availability of, or access to, these vital resources, women’s and men’s experiences are also markedly different.

Despite being on the front lines of peacebuilding efforts and directly impacted by violence, women—of all backgrounds but to varying degrees—are politically and economically marginalized and excluded from existing conflict resolution and mediation mechanisms that address disputes and grievances, including those over natural resources. Their roles in formal decision-making or resource management processes may be further constrained by cultural taboos, religious mandates, and high rates of illiteracy, and their insights undervalued because of their relegation to the domestic sphere.⁶

Although these exclusionary patterns remain the norm in much of the world, trends toward positive gender transformation have become more common in recent years. Women are contributing to both adaptation and mitigation efforts and are creating innovative and localized solutions to build resilient communities.⁷ Partly because these are frequently carried out on women’s own initiative and without the benefit of external assistance, their positive contributions are not always recognized or documented. Interventions around natural resources, environment, and climate change provide significant opportunities to empower women politically and economically and to strengthen their contributions to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in conflict-affected countries. As identified in the US Institute of Peace’s *Gender Inclusive Framework and Theory*, “Examining the relationship between conflict, power, and gender offers greater insight into sources of tension and opportunities for peacebuilding that otherwise might be missed.”⁸

Resting on a commitment to equity and decades of research, this evidence review takes as a given that the meaningful participation of diverse women in peacebuilding and environmental governance is integral to positive and sustainable outcomes. Its focus is on identifying

what facilitates or impedes the meaningful participation of women—specifically, their participation in decision-making and capability to influence processes and outcomes—in peacebuilding at the local level in contexts of pervasive insecurity and natural resource competition.

Key Terms: Definitions and Significance

Gender: Gender is a dynamic organizing principle in society. It is the socialization and internalization of the prescribed roles and expectations that a society finds most appropriate and valuable in a person—men, women, boys, girls, and sexual and gender minorities. Peacebuilding activities, processes, and movements that foster gender equality are those that allow for the greater participation of women. Where the exclusionary and inequitable practices that exist in wider society manifest in peacebuilding, women’s meaningful participation is hindered. This reflects the reality that beyond women’s inclusion and representation, what is necessary for meaningful participation is transformation of unequal gender relations and power dynamics. Gender is of central significance to the theory of change underlying this report, going beyond women in particular.

Intersecting identities: Variance exists in how, when, why, and which women participate in peacebuilding. Women are not a homogenous group. Women’s diverse identities have deep implications for their access to resources, rights, autonomy, and the inclusion or exclusion of their unique knowledge and perspectives. Gender as a social *construct* intersects with other structures of inequality related to race, ethnicity, class, and so forth both to deepen marginality and exclusion for different women and to create diverse positionalities and perspectives that are critical to sustainable peace and justice. Intersecting identities are central, therefore, to understanding what enables the meaningful participation of a greater diversity of women.

Meaningful participation: For the purposes of this report, meaningful participation is defined as the capacity to influence processes and outcomes. Emphasis is placed on women’s participation as decisionmakers. Moreover, the focus is on peacebuilding in settings of violent conflict and pervasive insecurity, while recognizing that women’s participation as decisionmakers and agents of change in natural resource management and governance are often entry points into peacebuilding.

Natural resource competition: This report draws on M. K. Schellens and Arnaud Diemer’s widely accepted definition of natural resource conflict as a “social or political conflict where natural resources contribute to the onset, aggravation, or sustaining of the conflict, due to disagreements or competition over the access to and management of natural resources, and the unequal burdens and benefits, profits, or power generated thereof.”⁹ However, this report examines the broader context of competition over natural resources that is likely to be present in most conflicts of the twenty-first century, whether in contexts of heightened scarcity, owing to climate change, environmental degradation, and increased consumption, or of relative resource

abundance. It focuses on competition over, and constrained access to, fresh water, forest resources, and arable land, especially as women are more likely to be involved in and impacted by governance issues related to these resources because of prevailing gender roles that associate women most closely with household reproduction and community welfare at the local level.

Peacebuilding: Going beyond a focus on formal peace processes, this report adopts J. P. Lederach’s definition of peacebuilding as “an array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships.”¹⁰ At the heart of this understanding of peacebuilding are three transformative processes: striving for social justice; ending violent conflict; and building healthy, cooperative relationships in violent and conflict-prone societies as prevention against the emergence or recurrence of conflict. One advantage of adopting Lederach’s construction is its focus on prevention and its broad applicability to violent, fragile societies, whether in situations of active conflict or otherwise. In this process of social transformation,¹¹ women often play a significant but seldom recognized role through grassroots initiatives seeking to facilitate dialogue and transform conflict narratives.¹²

Local peacebuilding: The focus on local peacebuilding and grassroots initiatives in this review is an acknowledgment that it is at the local level that many women enter peacebuilding and navigate the consequences of natural resource competition and insecurity. It is also at the local level that opportunities exist to bolster community ownership and collective action and to connect firsthand insights and experiences to processes and platforms at other levels. It is not that women’s participation should be confined to the local—indeed, factors resulting in this act as barriers to meaningful participation—but that the potential of action and knowledge generated at the local level has yet to be fully realized and used to strengthen broader processes. As this report further illuminates, more research is needed to both analytically and programmatically link local-level initiatives to systematic structural change. Change needs to happen at every level, not just the local, but the local ought not to be undervalued, either.

State fragility: State fragility can be described as the breakdown or absence of a social contract between people and their government. This report addresses women’s participation in peacebuilding in contexts that fit this description and result in multiple constraints with which women must contend, including pervasive insecurity and the threat of violence. However, the collapse of social and political order in response to violent conflict, natural disasters, population displacements, and other societal disruptions can, paradoxically, provide opportunities for societal change. The women-led initiatives examined here are illustrative of efforts to advance such change.¹³

Structural violence: Violence manifests in multiple forms, including personal (direct, behavioral) violence, cultural (symbolic) violence, and structural violence. This report gives particular emphasis to structural violence and related factors impeding women’s participation, while acknowledging that all forms of violence are inextricably linked.¹⁴ Structural violence emerges from the unequal distribution of power and resources and, as used by Johan Galtung,¹⁵ refers to aspects of social structures and institutions that keep individuals from meeting basic needs.

Global Agendas and Summary Literature Review

THE WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY AGENDA AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

In 2000 the UN Security Council passed one of its most transformative resolutions—UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security (UNSCR 1325)—addressing the impact of war on women and the importance of women’s participation in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response, and postconflict reconstruction.¹⁶ Security Resolution 1325 led to nine additional resolutions and a global agenda drawn on by policymakers, activists, practitioners, and researchers around the world seeking to advance more inclusive peacebuilding.

The women, peace, and security agenda inspired a growing body of evidence on the positive outcomes of women’s participation in peacebuilding.¹⁷ Research has also shown that the participation of women contributes not only to the successful conclusion of peace talks but also to the implementation of peace agreements and the sustainability of peacebuilding processes.¹⁸ Laurel Stone has found that when women participate as official actors, such as signatories, mediators, or negotiators in peace processes, the resulting agreement is 35 percent more likely than others to last at least fifteen years.¹⁹ According to UN research, a critical mass of female peacekeepers of 30 percent or higher has had a civilizing effect on peacekeeping forces and has helped mitigate instances of sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by peacekeeping troops.²⁰ Even a small change makes a meaningful difference: Mary Caprioli and Mark Boyer have found that a 5 percent increase in women in legislature decreases a nation’s likelihood to use violence by 500 percent.²¹

The evidence suggests that when women meaningfully participate in peacebuilding, they offer perspectives and solutions that include more comprehensive approaches to issues that are often overlooked by their male counterparts, resulting in more durable outcomes.²² Ranging from ceasefires and transitional justice concerns to matters of health care, housing, education, transportation, child welfare, and natural resource management, issues prioritized by women affect the entire community as well, and impact the well-being of future generations.²³

At the same time, criticisms of the WPS agenda and related literature point to certain limitations pertinent to this report. These include an overly narrow lens on the protection agenda; assumptions about the category “women” that tend to essentialize, thereby ignoring diversity and intersectionality; overemphasis on women’s representation in formal peace processes and hard security rather than peacebuilding more broadly; and, relatedly, dichotomous thinking that privileges national and international levels as centers of power without adequate consideration of the importance of local-level peacebuilding and how local initiatives can potentially be connected to broader structural change.

Of particular relevance to this review is the narrow focus on the protection agenda, especially related to sexual violence in conflict situations, which eclipses broader consideration of the structural and environmental violence that affects women's lives.²⁴ Implementation of the WPS agenda has continued to reflect a perception of women primarily as victims in need of protection and to make assumptions about women's responses to sexual and gender-based violence as a shared experience and basis for organizing, which merits more empirical research. Researchers also note the ways in which the WPS agenda has overlooked the complex relationship between the "participation" and "protection" components of the Pillars for Action established by UNSCR 1325.²⁵ This perpetuates a false binary between the participation of women as leaders with agency and the protection of women as victims. It also misses the gendered, context-specific, and conflict- and insecurity-related protection risks that accompany women's participation. Finally, it obscures the critical link between the harms women experience and their low levels of representation.

In addition, qualitative evidence draws out important distinctions between representation and meaningful participation with respect to women's inclusion.²⁶ Scholars note that women's representation in various spaces is necessary but not sufficient to effect change toward gender equity and other positive peacebuilding outcomes.²⁷ It is only when women can meaningfully participate that change occurs.²⁸ Meaningful participation takes place when women are not simply present in decision-making spaces but are able to inform and influence decisions.

There is also research showing that women included in formal peace processes do not necessarily represent the interests of their gender and are sometimes made mere instruments of tokenism, thwarting their meaningful participation.²⁹ When only politically elite women, women of a particular ethnic group, or affluent women are represented in peacebuilding, for example, their meaningful participation may not facilitate desired outcomes or, more important, provide the diversity of perspectives and inclusion of those impacted by conflict necessary for achieving sustainable peace. Recent research also points to ways in which "elite" bargains in peace processes can produce valuable results, including important gender provisions, when the women represented in decision-making are connected and responsive to grassroots movements.³⁰ Examining which women are present at the decision-making table, who they represent, their diversity of perspectives, and under which circumstances they can make autonomous contributions can provide important insights into advancing meaningful participation and durable peace. These concerns reflect the need for more research on the ways in which intersecting identities facilitate and impede women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding.

Furthermore, while notable research exists that examines women's participation (mainly representation) in peace processes or lack thereof, the same cannot be said for peacebuilding writ large. When limited to formal peace talks and negotiations, women's participation fails to account for the many contributions that women can and do make across the peacebuilding

field, including in community and national dialogues; peacekeeping; constitutional reform; and informal, communal, or other noninstitutionalized forms of governance at the grassroots level, as well as at different stages of conflict when women act to prevent and sustain peace.³¹

While the underrepresentation of women at any level of governance and decision-making results in a democratic deficit, failure to recognize women's local-level contributions is particularly detrimental to peacebuilding processes and community ownership. As noted in a UN Women–commissioned report, “The international community neglects so-called track 2 negotiations at the local or sub-national level, where many women are already brokering peace or shoring up community resilience, while narrowly investing in track 1 negotiations with political and military elites that are predominantly male.”³² It is also often at the local level, including in the context of households, that gender relations need to be transformed so as to allow for lasting social change and peace.

In relation to this, a gap remains to be filled in research on the significance of local peacebuilding in relation to broader peace processes. Women's participation in decision-making at the local level, often as an entry point, needs to be linked to engagement in peacebuilding more broadly. Empirical research has an important part to play in getting past dichotomous thinking: in this case, either when the local is undervalued or conceptualized in terms of the feminine extension of women's relegation to the domestic sphere or when local-level engagement is seen as a catch-all solution, separate from larger systemic and structural change.³³

NATURAL RESOURCE COMPETITION, GENDER, AND ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING

Available empirical research shows the ways in which climate change, environmental degradation, and increased consumption are leading to competition over natural resources such as fresh water, arable land, forest products, and wildlife, in contexts of both heightened scarcity and of resource abundance.³⁴ Separately, or in combination with other factors, this is already negatively affecting ecosystems; destabilizing economies; exacerbating gender-based violence against women and girls; and undermining global peace, security, and development.³⁵ Moreover, when government agencies, corporate entities, armed actors, and others hinder the equitable sharing and management of natural resources without due consideration for communities or context, the resulting tensions can escalate into violent conflict or feed into and exacerbate preexisting conflict dynamics. Especially at the local level, natural resource management and its associated institutions are key arenas in which access and usufruct rights are negotiated and inequalities redressed, perpetuated, or deepened.³⁶ As is the case with violent conflict and pervasive insecurity, competition over natural resources is an increasingly common feature of local contexts, where many women enter into peacebuilding and the basis for meaningful participation can be strengthened.

Gender is increasingly acknowledged as “a relevant category both for the analysis of (de)escalation processes in violent conflicts and for examinations of the different vulnerabilities

and adaptative capacities of women and men to environmental change.”³⁷ At the local and grassroots level, women, human rights, and environmental activists across the globe have persistently drawn attention to the connections between peace, security, and competition over natural resources. It is well recognized that women, men, and gender minorities are differently impacted by resource scarcity, and environmental degradation and shocks owing to climate change, as well as by competition over natural resources in circumstances of abundance.³⁸ Navigating and responding to natural resource competition presents different challenges and opportunities to people based on their position in society, which is dependent on gender, among multiple other variables.

Research indicates that vulnerability to environmental insecurity and conflict is not only a result of environmental shocks and stresses but is also shaped by the adaptive capacities of affected individuals and communities to respond to them.³⁹ This vulnerability is greatest where governance and social cohesion are weak and insecurity pervasive. Resource shortages and environmental degradation resulting from climate change, for example, can make different groups, particularly women and girls, more vulnerable to abuse and recruitment by extremist groups and to human trafficking, sexual exploitation, theft, violence, and forced early marriage.⁴⁰ Control of various environmental resources by armed groups are also used to sustain and fund conflict.⁴¹ In such contexts, Indigenous and rural women are rendered particularly vulnerable by social, political, and economic exclusion and their reliance on the natural resources under threat.

Because of gendered norms and roles ascribing to women responsibility for household and community subsistence and reproduction, women are at the front lines of local communities’ use of natural resources. They face risks to their physical safety when collecting natural resources and are increasingly in the cross fire of raids and other violence exacerbated by natural resource competition. Despite this, they are often excluded from decision-making and existing conflict-resolution mechanisms, such as traditional mediation councils. They are also frequently denied ownership, inheritance, and usufruct rights to land, water, and forest resources. Meanwhile, women play a critical role in their communities as they mobilize to conserve natural resources, adapt to climate change, strengthen social cohesion, and attend to the needs of the most vulnerable.⁴²

Nonetheless, beyond a reference to climate change as a cross-cutting issue in UN Security Council Resolution 2242, the WPS agenda has been slow to connect gender, environmental peacebuilding, and natural resource competition more broadly.⁴³ As of 2020, only seventeen of the more than eighty WPS national action plans included climate change considerations.⁴⁴ In the way that it is generally understood and implemented, “the WPS framework will not be sufficient in confronting the complex ways in which the environment intersects with conflict, gender, and people’s lived realities and ecologies.”⁴⁵ There has also been limited recognition of how the continuum of violence against women and against the natural environment operates through gendered power structures that result in violence against women defenders of

environmental rights.⁴⁶ In patriarchal societies, where the relationship both to natural resources and to women (and anyone deemed “other”) has been characterized by domination and exploitation by those in power, women’s voices and legitimacy are challenged from the start, and their bodies and lives are subjected to violence.

At the same time, as Keina Yoshida and L. M. Céspedes-Báez note in a 2021 special issue of *International Affairs*, environmental peacebuilding has emerged as a field of practice and research parallel to, but separate from, the WPS agenda.⁴⁷ Consequently, research and scholarship on gender and environmental change, including competition over natural resources, and on gender, conflict, and peace, remain largely disconnected. Moreover, gender—and its implications and associated structures of inequality—has not until recently constituted a priority consideration in environmental peacebuilding practice or research.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, a trend toward integrating insights is increasingly noticeable in some of the literature on the gender-environment-security nexus, especially so in work focusing on climate change.⁴⁹ For example, the 2013 flagship joint UN report, *Women and Natural Resources: Unlocking the Peacebuilding Potential*, underscores women’s access to natural resources as a key component of peacebuilding and conflict prevention.⁵⁰ Two other related joint UN reports discuss a case study illustrating the applicability and contributions of integrating natural resource-based interventions as a tool for strengthening women’s participation in peacebuilding, broadly speaking.⁵¹

It has also been pointed out that participation in decision-making, related to natural resource management or ensuring greater access to natural resources, for example, is but one element—a starting point—for including the perspectives and concerns of those most vulnerable in contexts of pervasive insecurity and environmental fragility.⁵² The inadequacy of outdated “Add women and stir” approaches to women’s participation in environmental peacebuilding reflects a persistent failure to understand and respond to the complex ways in which the environment intersects with conflict and gender.⁵³ Furthermore, such initiatives do not always consider the needs and priorities of women themselves. Consequently, the unrealistic view of women as peacebuilders that is thereby promoted is not only often tokenistic but may also serve as a pretext for instrumentalizing women and as a strategy for eliciting their support for the interests of others.⁵⁴

Another expanding theme in the gender-environment-security literature explores the links between gender-based violence and control over natural resources. Direct and indirect linkages have been found to connect gender-based violence and extractive economies more broadly, particularly where high-value natural resources such as oil, gas, and minerals are involved.⁵⁵ Gender-based violence serves to keep gender inequalities intact, to the detriment of livelihoods, biodiversity conservation, human and environmental rights, and peacebuilding efforts. A recent report by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature concludes that “failure to address GBV [gender-based violence] issues undermines the success of sustainable development programming, biodiversity conservation, and peacebuilding, too—as GBV affects survivors’ potential for participation, resilience, and agency.”⁵⁶

While still embryonic, the literature connecting WPS to environmental conflicts and environmental peacebuilding is increasingly reflecting global concerns over the confluence of these factors. Recent comparative analyses have examined the impact of climate-related shocks and stressors—such as disasters, water scarcity, and food insecurity—as they relate to conflict and fragility.⁵⁷ Similarly, a number of recent reports by various universities and international institutions disentangle how climate change intersects with the WPS agenda,⁵⁸ how environmental stress affects women’s and girls’ right to peace,⁵⁹ and how women confront the combined challenges of climate change and violent conflict.⁶⁰

These recent exceptions notwithstanding,⁶¹ gender analyses remain the exception in research, policy, and programming.⁶² Dominant perceptions of women as passive victims in conflict settings inhibit their leadership in natural resource management roles. In turn, failure to recognize women’s ability to effectively leverage natural resources in conflict prevention and recovery contributes to their disenfranchisement and discourages future efforts.⁶³ While peacebuilding can present a springboard for gender equality,⁶⁴ the failure to place gender equality at the heart of environmental peacebuilding risks entrenching gendered power structures and disregards women’s leadership role and knowledge of the environment. Consequently, environmental governance in postconflict settings can have the unintended effect of reinforcing gender inequality rather than being understood as an opportunity to empower women.⁶⁵

Consistent, meaningful, and effective implementation of gender-inclusive approaches in environmental peace and security endeavors remains elusive despite expanding frameworks. The WPS agenda and related scholarship, as well as the literature and practice of environmental peacebuilding, must be more efficiently integrated if we are to better address global environmental change, foster gender equality, and build sustainable peace.⁶⁶

EXPANDING THE EVIDENCE BASE

This review of the WPS agenda and literature related to gender, natural resource competition, and peacebuilding brings to the fore several conclusions that act as guideposts for further contributions to the evidence base for women’s meaningful participation in peacebuilding. The bulk of WPS-related research on women’s participation has been focused on three issues: how women’s participation contributes to positive peace outcomes, formal peace processes and negotiations at the national and international level, and women’s representation. More process-oriented research is needed that examines what allows for meaningful participation and goes beyond formal peace negotiations. At the same time, pervasive security and natural resource competition are increasingly representative of the context in which women live and engage in peacebuilding activities. However, WPS and emerging environmental peacebuilding research and frameworks are not integrated. More needs to be learned, therefore, about what facilitates and hinders meaningful participation in peacebuilding in contexts of pervasive insecurity and natural resource competition, giving attention to the significance of local-level engagement.

Given that the literature at this nexus is still limited, and given the need to go deeper into the factors that facilitate and impede women’s meaningful participation, a case study approach was identified as an effective means to contribute to the evidence base.

Theory of Change and Methodological Considerations

This exploratory evidence review contributes to the understanding of how women’s meaningful participation in peacebuilding can be advanced, with particular attention to the constraints and possibilities resulting from increasingly common circumstances of pervasive insecurity and natural resource competition. The review feeds into a broader research agenda tied to women, peace, and security aimed at synthesizing evidence on factors that promote women’s agency and decision-making power in achieving durable, positive peace outcomes. This includes the local level, where women are on the front lines of challenges related to natural resource governance and insecurity amplified by violence.

The underlying theory of change in this report is that when women, in all their diversity, can freely and meaningfully contribute to peacebuilding in their local contexts, unequal gender relations and power dynamics will be redressed, and human and environmental security threats will be mitigated. It follows that understanding the factors that contribute to women’s meaningful and inclusive participation in such contexts can inform policy and programming in support of women peacebuilders and more effective initiatives.

With consideration of this theory of change, the central research question of this report is the following: What factors facilitate or impede the meaningful participation of a diversity of women in peacebuilding at the local level in contexts of pervasive insecurity and natural resource competition?

A case study approach was adopted to contribute to the growing evidence base on women’s meaningful participation in peacebuilding in a way that attends to women’s agency and the constraints women face in contexts of pervasive insecurity and natural resource competition. This approach seeks to foreground women’s lived experiences, with attentiveness to common pitfalls and gaps highlighted in the earlier review of the WPS and environmental peacebuilding literature.

The case studies in this report are within the context of an evidence review, meaning that evidence in the form of existing reports, research literature, interviews with key informants familiar with the country context and initiatives selected, and the prior field experience of the lead researcher were drawn on as sources of data. Given the limitations of time, resources, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, original field research (beyond virtual interviews and communications) was not conducted. It is hoped that this report will prompt future process-oriented research that draws on extended fieldwork and use of methods such as process tracing to further unpack the complex and context-specific factors influencing women’s participation in peacebuilding.

The three countries that are the focus of this report—Colombia, South Sudan, and Honduras—were selected as representative of a universe of cases in which women are seeking to contribute to peacebuilding in contexts of pervasive insecurity and natural resource competition. Not only are these cases reflective of the context in which women peacebuilders increasingly operate, but they also allow for examination of the relationship between protection and participation, as key elements of the WPS agenda, and an opportunity to go beyond an either/or approach.

Moreover, the initiatives selected in these three cases are positive examples of women’s meaningful participation in peacebuilding. This report is not an evaluation of the initiatives but rather relies on available accounts to examine what factors have allowed for such participation by different groups of women, as well as the obstacles confronted. While the women involved in these initiatives may not always self-identify as peacebuilders, these initiatives demonstrate a variety of ways that women are, despite constraining gender norms and structural challenges, leading efforts tied to peacebuilding and equitable natural resource governance writ large.

The selection of countries and initiatives was also informed by the expertise of the report’s lead researcher, Marisa O. Ensor, who has conducted extensive fieldwork on a variety of issues related to the gender-environment-peacebuilding nexus in these three countries before work on this project. She drew on her country knowledge, her expertise on these issues, and her networks to advance the objectives of this report beyond what was possible within its limits as a desk research project. The data-collection component involved a series (fifteen in total) of key informant interviews and extensive additional communication with individuals and groups possessing expert or direct knowledge of the context in each case and of the factors relevant to the specific initiative being examined. These were supplemented with six additional interviews involving three case-specific experts and three leaders of women’s rights groups. Open-ended interview guides were followed for consistency and were adjusted to reflect the specific circumstances of each of the respondents.

In addition to country-specific literature, background information on the current situation in Colombia was informed by a combination of multiple in-country (before the onset of the pandemic) and virtual (Zoom and email) conversations with colleagues from various organizations, including the Environmental Peacebuilding Association; the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security; the Global Green Growth Institute; the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration; the Universidad Javeriana; and the Universidad del Rosario.

The material on Honduras similarly draws on longitudinal in-country fieldwork conducted by the author in Honduras since the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in 1998. The most recent field trips took place in the summer and fall of 2021, which, while carried out in conjunction with different unrelated projects, yielded additional relevant information on the Defenders Network (La Red de Defensoras) and the Civil Council of Popular Indigenous Organizations

(Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras, or COPINH), the two main initiatives discussed in relation to this case study.

Background information on the current situation in South Sudan was informed by a combination of multiple in-country (before the onset of the pandemic) and virtual (Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp) conversations with colleagues from multiple organizations, as well as with participants in the projects discussed later in this report. The organizations consulted were the Assistance Mission for Africa, PAX-Netherlands (Juba Office), the South Sudan Peace and Reconciliation Commission, the South Sudan Transitional Justice Working Group, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, UN Women (Juba Office), the United Nations Development Programme (Juba Office), and the US Agency for International Development's Viable Support to Transition and Stability.

Case Studies: Women-Led Peacebuilding in Contexts of Pervasive Violence and Natural Resource Competition

Advancing political commitments and integrating policy frameworks into the complex dynamics governing the intersection of gender, peacebuilding, and natural resources depends on the availability of a comprehensive and relevant evidence base. This, in turn, demands policy-relevant studies of local-level dynamics at this intersection in the everyday lives of women and girls while also considering the roles played by their male counterparts. As noted earlier, there is a tendency for research and policy to address the dynamics between paired components of gender and peacebuilding, gender and natural resource management, and natural resources and peacebuilding; and to focus more heavily on outcomes than on the processes potentially involving women's participation, which this report seeks to examine.

The case studies presented here contribute to efforts to build the available evidence base by highlighting the ways women have actively engaged in various modalities of peacebuilding and activism at the local level in three countries: Colombia, South Sudan, and Honduras. As elaborated earlier, the initiatives selected for study in these three countries are representative of the many examples around the world of women's participation in peacebuilding at the local level in the face of pervasive insecurity and violence and against a backdrop of resource competition, exacerbated by the conflict and adverse effects of climate change.

In Colombia, formal peace processes have prevailed at the national level while displacement, violence, economic and physical insecurity, and land disputes figure prominently at the local level, as does continued conflict-related sexual violence and impunity for perpetrators. In South Sudan, one of the newest and most fragile states facing violent conflict and challenges of peaceful reconciliation,⁶⁷ women continue to face high rates of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence and challenges to securing economic empowerment through natural resource-based livelihoods. In Honduras—a country that, like Colombia, suffers one of the

highest rates of murder of environmental activists⁶⁸—Indigenous and Afro-descendant women are contending with multiple forms of violence, widespread corruption, organized crime, and militarization, all of which are compounded by recurrent environmental extremes and climate change.

With attention to the specificities of each case, this study identifies common factors facilitating or impeding women’s meaningful participation in local peacebuilding. In all three cases, in various ways, these factors emerge in relation to three prominent themes: leveraging collective power and building capacity, navigating intersecting identities, and responding to state fragility and structural violence.

In this section, the country context and women-led initiatives in each case study are described, as well as the significance of each case in relation to one of the three emergent themes. Section 5 then discusses the specific factors and actors related to the three overarching themes as evidenced across the country case studies.

COLOMBIA

Context

Fought between the government of Colombia, far-right paramilitary groups, crime syndicates, and far-left guerrilla groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo, or FARC-EP), the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or ELN), and the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación, or EPL), the five-decades-long Colombian armed conflict was a result of deep-rooted social and political conflict with environmental implications that go beyond the initial land-reform issues.⁶⁹ These include deforestation, increased land degradation, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of villagers. Despite the country’s huge natural wealth, many Colombians have continued to live in poverty, particularly in rural areas. While 30 percent of people living in urban Colombia live below the poverty line, the proportion rises to 65 percent in rural regions. As a result, Colombia is one of the most economically unequal countries in the world. As concluded in a 2021 study by the Georgetown University Institute of Women, Peace and Security, “Colombia’s legacy of natural resource fueled—conflict and continued environmental degradation have created adverse gendered impacts, but also opportunities for women to emerge as environmental peacebuilders.”⁷⁰

Both conflict and environmental degradation in Colombia are correlated with specific gender-based harms. As they both fuel forced displacement, they expose households to scarcity and imperil the legal relationship that women and men have established with the land. The Colombian Constitutional Court emphasized in 2008, in the context of the country’s armed conflict, that internally displaced women and girls face such risks before, during, and after forced displacement.⁷¹ The resettlement of women in cities and towns to escape the violence of the conflict entraps them in a complex cycle of poverty, with impacts on more than one

generation in their families. Women, their land, their environment, and the discrimination they endure thus all form part of the conflict experience. Women in these circumstances become more vulnerable to gender-based violence, labor exploitation, and impoverishment.⁷²

Studies indicate that only 26 percent of women in rural areas in Colombia have decision-making authority over agricultural production of the land they work, and women rarely have full legal rights to property.⁷³ In the northwestern region of the country, about 90 percent of land is under collective ownership by Indigenous or Afro-Colombian communities and cannot be sold or mortgaged by individuals. Additionally, traditional land uses—generally, environmentally sustainable practices often worked by women—compete with commercial plantations of legal and illegal crops, mining, and logging that result in the destruction of forest and water resources, erosion, and increased community tensions.⁷⁴

From the beginning of the twenty-first century, Colombian women’s-rights NGOs have investigated and reported on the experiences of women in the context of armed conflict.⁷⁵ At the outset, they focused on the humanitarian dimension of forced displacement, and their advocacy aimed at pressuring the government to design and implement specific measures for women. Early on, the perpetration of sexual violence by armed actors became central to their documenting work, linked to forced displacement as cause or consequence, or both. These NGOs maintained that this crime was part of the continuum of violence faced by women during times of both peace and war. The deployment of the transitional justice scheme in Colombia in 2005 to facilitate the demobilization of paramilitary groups complemented the humanitarian approach with one of criminal law. The investigation and prosecution of sexual violence became the most pressing issue for these organizations in the context of the trials against paramilitaries, reflecting the contemporary position in international law and the WPS agenda.⁷⁶

The 2016 Final Agreement to End Armed Conflict between the Colombian government and FARC-EP incorporates gender and natural resources and provides valuable lessons on developing sustainable peace agreements. The accord mandates significant provisions of rural development, with access to and competition over natural resources recognized as drivers of the civil unrest.⁷⁷ The agreement created a narrow window for financial support from international donors and for the development of environmental policies that would encourage sustainable development, contribute to building peace, and preserve Colombia’s natural resources.⁷⁸

On the other hand, neither the peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP nor the Final Agreement used as a reference the UN Security Council resolutions on women, peace, and security, and the Final Agreement does not mention these resolutions. The Colombian government does not have a national action plan for implementing UN Resolution 1325. Nevertheless, significant gender measures have been incorporated with regard to agricultural reforms, guarantees of political participation, truth, justice, and redress for victims, and mechanisms for implementation that incorporate the gender perspective, thanks to the political influence of the feminist-women’s movement.⁷⁹ The peace accord is considered to be one

of the most advanced in its gender-sensitive approach.⁸⁰ Colombian women are identified not only as combatants and victims in the conflict but also as influential stakeholders in the peace process. The accord established a gender perspective as a guiding principle for its implementation and included nearly 130 affirmative measures to promote equal rights for women, emphasizing and requiring the active participation of women in peacebuilding.⁸¹

The government of Colombia has enacted legislation favorable to women's right to land and property, with women and men legally having equal land rights. Legislation also provides for the opportunity, though not the requirement, to adjudicate jointly or to title land to couples (or both).⁸² The 2002 Law on Rural Women, Law 731, specifically recognizes the rights of women (married or in stable cohabitation) to agricultural reform parcels and calls for the participation of women in the allocation of parcels.⁸³ Nonetheless, women's rights to land are often violated, and women are the most vulnerable to forced displacement by armed groups. According to the UN Statistics Division, the percentage of households headed by women in Colombia increased from 26 percent to 34 percent between 1997 and 2010, constituting between 35 and 50 percent of all displaced households. Women-headed households and Afro-Colombian women, often relocating to informal settlements, have limited access to basic services, credit, and subsidies.⁸⁴ Displaced women in Colombia, according to a 2021 World Bank Group policy brief, have between 40 and 55 percent greater chance of experiencing intimate partner violence in the past year compared to their nondisplaced counterparts, and are 30 percent more likely to experience lifetime injury caused by such violence.⁸⁵

Women's rights NGOs, movements, and advocacy groups have played a significant role in finding spaces for participation and for influencing the peace agreement.⁸⁶ Their experiences demonstrate the challenges women confront but also the opportunities they encounter in seeking to participate in and transform male-dominated peacebuilding processes in Colombia.⁸⁷ The emphasis on sexual violence has remained central to discussions of the impact of conflict on women's lives.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, measures aimed at implementing a gender-sensitive comprehensive rural reform, substitution of legal for illegal crops, and the provision of protection for women leaders lag behind.⁸⁹ The prioritization of, and continuing focus on, sexual violence thus fails to capture the range of harms done during the conflict to a range of different groups of women, particularly those from agrarian communities and Indigenous peoples.

In Colombia, as elsewhere, the struggle over land rights often pits the cultural and economic interests of Indigenous and marginalized peoples against the governments that are supposed to protect their rights under law. Rural Afro-Colombian and Indigenous women seeking to vindicate their land rights must confront multiple vectors of discrimination: they are members of an ethnic minority, they are women, and they are rural farmers.⁹⁰ Moreover, Colombia continues to have one of the worst records of violence against defenders of peace and human rights, women and Indigenous key among them, with lack of accountability and prosecution for perpetrators.⁹¹ The COVID-19 pandemic served only to worsen the situation. Official lockdowns led to defenders' being targeted in their homes, and government protection measures

were cut. Armed groups enforced their own COVID-19 checkpoints and patrols, exposing women and civic leaders to greater risk.⁹² Nevertheless, women, particularly Indigenous women, are at the vanguard of environmental and human rights advocacy in Colombia.⁹³ Their leadership is increasingly crucial to peacebuilding as climate change and persistent insecurity further stress natural resources in the country, as illustrated in some of the initiatives described here.

Initiatives

One example of a broader group of successful women-led peacebuilding initiatives in Colombia is Coalition 1325, a collective of women organizations that has reported on the implementation of Resolution 1325 in Colombia since 2011.⁹⁴ The National Conference of Afro-Colombian Organizations and the National Council of Indigenous Women of Colombia are among the groups active in Coalition 1325.⁹⁵ The work of these organizations underscores how much of Colombia's five decades of armed conflict took place within Indigenous territories, where women were disproportionately affected by the resulting violence and displacement.⁹⁶ Yet Indigenous women have been largely excluded from formal peacebuilding processes.

In 2017 the coalition issued the "Sixth Report on the Monitoring of Resolution 1325" as a device for monitoring the fulfillment of the implementation of Resolution 1325 in Colombia in the wake of the signing of the Final Agreement. The report provides tools for the analysis and evaluation of the implementation of the gender approach and the participation of women in the development of the agreement.

The report discusses issues of comprehensive rural reform, political participation, the need to find solutions to the problem of illicit drugs, and the development of a gender-inclusive framework plan for the implementation of the peace agreement, setting an agenda for advocacy and programming. In the absence of a national action plan on 1325, and as diverse groups of women navigate intersecting identities and concerns, such shared agendas become particularly critical. The report highlights the importance of adopting concrete and inclusive measures to ensure equal rights for women in the transition to a stable and lasting peace, with special attention to the principles of gender equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination. It stresses that the main barriers to rural women's land ownership are the difficulties associated with access to credit, subsidies, and formalization programs; and it calls for legal advice, special training for women, and recognition of the demands of unpaid care work and its economic and social value to help overcome these barriers. It emphasizes that while the Final Agreement refers to gender, land, and ethnic discrimination, no concrete provisions for the implementation of measures to address specific problems had been established to date. The report also notes that although Indigenous women were represented in the Monitoring of the Gender Perspective in the Implementation of the Colombian Final Peace Accord, Afro-Colombian women, Black women, and members of other minority ethnic groups recognized in Colombia (that is, *palenquera* women, *raizal* women, and *Romani* women) were not, reinforcing the need to address such exclusion at the center of the WPS agenda in Colombia.

Coalition 1325 recognizes the linkages between peacebuilding and equitable management of natural resources as they play out in women's lives and advocates for specific goals in the implementation of the Development Programs with a Territorial Approach. These goals include the provision of at least 50 percent of land individually to rural women; issuance of a copy of the property title to both members of the couple and the implementation of measures designed to resolve family conflicts related to land ownership or other property-related disputes; and a guarantee of the participation of women, with a focus on the inclusion of rural women in all areas of decision-making, facilitating their access to information related to the implementation of the program. This work is strengthened by the activities of coalition members on the ground and at the national level, with the coalition serving as a mechanism to inform and coordinate efforts across levels.

Another successful initiative is Altos de la Florida, an informal settlement (or *comuna*) that forms part of the municipality of Soacha, on the southern outskirts of Bogotá, Colombia's capital.⁹⁷ As of 2019, between 30 and 40 percent of the community of Altos de la Florida, or around 1,400 people, were internally displaced persons from various Colombian departments. The majority had been originally displaced by violence in rural areas, often more than once. They had then tried unsuccessfully to settle in formal neighborhoods of Soacha or Bogotá before arriving in Altos de la Florida.⁹⁸

In informal settlements, work opportunities tend to be more available to women than to men, most of them informal jobs in markets or as cleaners. Lack of reliable childcare arrangements prevent some from accessing income-generating activities. That women find work more easily than men, who are used to being breadwinners in rural areas, increases family tensions and the risk of domestic violence. The vast majority of women earn less than a dollar a day.⁹⁹

Over the years, women in Altos de la Florida have engaged in multiple initiatives aimed at reducing violence and expanding access to necessary resources in the neighborhood. One of the most successful has been the Community Action Board (*Junta de Acción Comunal*), which, led by a female president, focuses on resolving residents' land tenure claims and access to water in addition to mitigating issues of violence and insecurity. Although only a few minutes from the capital, the neighborhood does not have piped water or a sewage system. Having to wait at home for the unpredictable delivery of water also impedes women's ability to work. A steering committee (*comité directivo*) was established that brought together the community, humanitarian organizations, and local authorities, in biweekly meetings, to agree on and implement collective responses. Shortly thereafter, households started receiving drinking water trucked in regularly every two weeks—still less than ideal, but a major improvement. Mitigating water insecurity has been of vital importance to Altos de la Florida residents, especially women, who are culturally seen as responsible for water provision.

Theme: Leveraging Collective Power and Building Capacity

The two initiatives included in the Colombian case study relate to two populations disproportionately impacted by violent conflict: Indigenous and Afro-Colombian women and internally displaced households. Both initiatives have been advanced through engagement of women at the local level, with Coalition 1325 working at multiple levels. They also address the real constraints women face related to access to land and water, limited by poor governance, insecurity, and competition over use for other purposes (for example, growing illicit crops), which hinder their efforts to improve the human security and peace of their communities.

These initiatives illustrate the significance of networking and coalition forming as an effective strategy for women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding. The existence of multiple active networks represents a form of empowerment for different groups of women, an effective means of exercising collective power toward a common goal, a source of both solidarity and capacity building among members, and a strategy that covers a larger area of the region or territory in which they operate. Collective action is particularly important in the face of violence; lack of infrastructure and effectual governance; and the intersecting structural inequalities of gender, race, ethnicity, and class that manifest in daily life in various ways (for example, in lack of access to housing and sanitation, steady employment, education, psychosocial support and health care, and legal services).

Many women members of civil society organizations in Colombia demonstrate a high level of familiarity with national and international frameworks on human and women's rights, as well as development and, to a lesser extent, environmental justice agendas. This allows them to engage in joint activities at local, national, and international levels on the basis of a shared understanding, facilitates a stronger representation in the public sphere, and serves as an advocacy tool to demand better policies and programming at local and national levels. Study participants repeatedly highlighted the role of civil society organizations and their impact in shaping the Colombian peace agreement as an example of good practice.¹⁰⁰ Building on a history of women's activism for peace throughout the fifty-year violent conflict, Colombian women have leveraged their various strengths and networks across diverse constituencies (that is, as Afro-Colombians, Indigenous women, young women, and so on) to mobilize for the recognition of their rights.

Coalition 1325 is particularly strong among Afro-Colombian and Indigenous women. Their participation in peace and environmental activism is often seen as breaking both class and gender social norms. Yet they are at the vanguard of land-rights advocacy in Colombia, demonstrating that vulnerability and resilience can happen simultaneously. Indigenous women often see their struggle as both environmental and spiritual as they fight against the destruction of sacred sites in their territory. By adopting an intersectional approach, Colombian women peacebuilders are leveraging their diversity and acknowledging the need to implement

differentiated measures to address the effects of the conflict. Although their efforts have often cost them their lives, they have formed alliances and applied pressure on government and FARC negotiators, demanding the incorporation of women's rights and the adoption of a gender-inclusive and environmentally sound approach to the peace process.

SOUTH SUDAN

Context

Women and girls have often borne the brunt of the multiple shocks and stresses pummeling South Sudan, the world's newest country. Levels of sexual violence, high even during interwar periods, skyrocketed as the conflict spread into previously peaceful areas of the country.¹⁰¹ When civil war fueled by ethnic divisions engulfed the country in 2013, violence against women and girls grew even more pronounced. From 2013 until the end of 2018, soldiers on both sides of the conflict used sexual violence and torture, especially of women and girls, as part of their military strategies. A complete breakdown of the rule of law permitted armed men to operate with impunity throughout the conflict. Although most political violence abated when the most recent peace agreement was signed in September 2018, conflict-related sexual violence has persisted. Additionally, widespread displacement—about 2.2 million people outside of the country and 1.5 million people within the country¹⁰²—exacerbates other risks to the safety of women and girls, including intimate-partner violence and underage pregnancy.

Displacement has been the result of violent conflict and an array of rapid- and slow-onset climate disasters that have coalesced to create widespread catastrophic circumstances. While torrential rains and pronounced variation in seasonal river flows are common in South Sudan, the latest spate of extreme flooding—for the third year in a row—is signaling a new era of climate-inflicted destruction. Insecurity and a lack of basic infrastructure keeps most farming at the subsistence level. Local farmers have been severely impacted by climatic changes affecting seasonal harvests, and threats such as flooding—mixed with continuing insecurity—may continue to impact food security.¹⁰³ Farmlands and cattle have been abandoned, and overall agricultural production has declined drastically. Locust swarms have resulted in widespread crop and property damage in the affected regions.

In early 2017, the United Nations declared a famine in parts of South Sudan—the first such declaration since Somalia's famine in 2011—leaving 100,000 people on the verge of starvation.¹⁰⁴ The famine declaration was lifted in 2018, but an estimated 7.2 million people remained in need of humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁵ Conditions in 2019 were classified as widespread acute food insecurity and acute malnutrition.¹⁰⁶ As a result, large-scale humanitarian food assistance needs persisted throughout the region in 2020, reaching their peak from June to September. The risk of famine in certain areas of South Sudan has driven people to internally displaced persons settlements, in search of assistance.¹⁰⁷ Fueled by hunger and desperation, assaults on aid convoys and looting of supplies have become increasingly common, making it

both difficult and dangerous for humanitarian efforts to reach in-need families with the support required for their survival.

These factors have adversely affected the ability of the South Sudanese population to earn their livelihood and participate in the economy. Such shocks exacerbate vulnerabilities and weaken the resilience and adaptive capacity of agriculture-dependent communities; they can heighten competition over natural resources, sometimes leading to cattle raiding and communal conflict. Female-headed households are especially vulnerable to the effects of deteriorating environmental conditions, as most depend on agriculture to sustain their families and rely on natural resources such as firewood and water for household management.

Despite these multiple challenges, the current peacebuilding phase in South Sudan offers significant opportunities for advancing gender equality, mainstreaming women's perspectives in peacebuilding, and fostering women's budding efforts in environmental stewardship. Both the South Sudan National Action Plan 2015–2020 for Women, Peace, and Security on UNSCR 1325 and the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan establish numerous provisions promoting women's participation in public life. Gender issues also figure prominently in South Sudan's First State of Environment and Outlook Report, which considers the role of sustainable resource management as a vehicle for peace.¹⁰⁸

The contribution of South Sudanese women has extended beyond policy and institutional reform to include a significant role in conflict transformation, as well as the shaping of their country's political, social, and economic future. Twenty-five percent of the delegates and one mediator in the peace process were women, and several female civil society leaders acted as official observers. Fifty-eight percent of South Sudanese households are female headed, and women are increasingly active in the political arena, including raising their voices against the widespread sexual and gender-based violence that prevails in the country. Female civil society leaders consistently work to broaden the political agenda to include protection, education, health, and attention to environmental issues, especially as they impact livelihood provision.¹⁰⁹

Transitional justice is another prominent issue of concern to women. Primary demands of the women's delegation that met with members of the UN Security Council during its October 2019 visit to Juba included implementation of the Hybrid Court for South Sudan and measures for reparation and compensation, all of which are elements of the 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is worth noting that women's groups have not always operated as a unified front. The extremely high prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence became a highly contentious and divisive issue among women's organizations. The views of Funmi Balogun, head of Humanitarian Normative and Coordination Action at UN Women, who has worked extensively with women organizations and individual women on peacebuilding in South Sudan, clarify this point. As she reports, "Women peacebuilders were accused of bringing infamy to the young nation of South Sudan by speaking about [sexually-related crimes] and women in position[s] of power then made it a campaign to undermine women's organizing and cast women as 'enemies of South Sudan and of South Sudanese men.'" ¹¹¹ South Sudanese

women’s diverse—and at times conflicting—priorities and contributions, including their participation in a growing number of peacebuilding initiatives, are nevertheless increasingly recognized as vital to advancing overall peacebuilding efforts, helping the country overcome its current fragility and better prepare for present and future shocks and stresses.

Initiatives

Based, respectively, in Ganyliel and Nyang, the sister groups Beam of Hope and Women for Peace, initiated by the Assistance Mission for Africa, specifically target internally displaced women who are survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. The primary objective is to reduce women’s vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence and to strengthen their economic empowerment through natural resource–based livelihoods.

As previously discussed, from the onset of the conflict, government and opposition forces committed grave acts of sexual violence, targeting victims based on their gender, ethnic, and perceived political identities. Thousands of women and girls, but also civilian men and boys, have been subjected to brutal forms of sexual violence, including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, sexual mutilation and torture, and sexual humiliation.¹¹²

The number of participants in Beam of Hope and Women for Peace fluctuates as cases are identified by the community. Membership tends to be around 125 women and girls as direct beneficiaries, while awareness-raising and advocacy campaigns engage a larger segment of the two communities. Activities include the celebration of monthly community forums with a focus on women empowerment; training and mentoring in peace activism and gender equality; provision of counseling and medical treatment for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, in coordination with the International Rescue Committee; training in natural resource–based livelihood support and income-generating activities, including farming, market gardening, and food processing; and the identification and promotion of leadership and opportunities for women to participate in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, including conflict over resources.

Although the available data do not allow causality to be established, the increased gender equity awareness referenced by peace committees, chiefs, youth, *payam* administrators (all of them gatekeepers), groups of internally displaced persons and women themselves (both direct and indirect beneficiaries), as well as the recent inclusion of three female *payam* chiefs (out of ten) in Ganyliel, have been attributed to the work of these two projects.¹¹³ At a more tangible level, since Beam of Hope and Women for Peace were established, several multipurpose buildings, a kitchen, a restaurant, and kitchen gardens for women practicing subsistence agriculture have been built; produce from the gardens is used to prepare meals in the restaurant and may also be sold in the local market. Relatedly, a more substantive meeting hall, toilets, and a grinding mill in Ganyliel have been built with additional support from the US Agency for International Development. This mill not only provides a reliable income source for the Beam of Hope women but is also a highly valued community asset. The tangible positive outcomes reported by participants in these projects illustrate South Sudanese women’s ability to

work together and meaningfully participate in environmental peacebuilding while contending with the challenges posed by complex realities; intersecting identities; and ethnic, age, generational, and other significant social divides.

Portals to Peace, another notable initiative in South Sudan, started as a small pilot project in 2015. The initiative's aim is to promote peaceful coexistence within and among communities and across ethnicities in the southern Unity and Eastern Lake states. The project supports conflict resolution and reconciliation in these communities to leverage changes that can positively influence the conflict dynamics across the region and may then influence the national political-military and ethnic conflict that has devastated South Sudan since December 2013.

Since 2017, the Portals to Peace project has also had a very specific focus on gender and the role of women in local peacebuilding, which is intended to contribute to the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and South Sudan's National Action Plan 1325 at the community level. More than a dozen peace committees have been established with a focus on increasing the meaningful (they use the term "credible") participation of women. Inclusive (women and men, members of different tribes) monthly community forums are held in five locations in Unity and Eastern Lake states where women and men present their concerns and discuss potential solutions. Responding to some of the issues highlighted during these forums, several female social workers have been recruited to support survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. As an additional effort to reduce impunity for crimes of sexual and gender-based violence, Portals to Peace has also been engaged in training exercises with traditional courts and community police.¹¹⁴ Advocacy campaigns on peacebuilding, the Revitalized Peace Agreement, gender equity, attention to gender-based violence and mental health issues, and the celebration of two large peace conferences in Ganyliel and Yirol in 2018 are other activities in which local women have participated.

Several tangible positive outcomes related to women's participation in these initiatives took place in the first four years after Portals to Peace was established. Most notably, there has been a significant reduction in revenge killings and an expressed commitment to civilian disarmament, a reduction in the prevalence of small arms in the communities, and dialogue and the rule of law over traditional retaliation. This has facilitated the improved freedom of movement across conflict lines—for enhanced trade and movement of goods, for internally displaced persons returning to home communities, and for dialogue and other peacebuilding initiatives and events. Relatedly, incidents of interethnic cattle raiding have decreased in the area, with looted cattle being returned to their owners by border peace committees.

Specifically related to women's circumstances, there has been a marked reduction in cases of gender-based violence, a positive change in community and men's attitudes toward women, and an increase in women's voices in intraethnic and interethnic forums and processes, including visible participation and influence in the local rule-of-law institutions and

traditional courts. Portals to Peace—promoted inclusion of women in the traditional courts at all levels has been credited with the growing number of cases brought by aggrieved women that have been heard, overcoming the past tendency to dismiss women’s cases and even to block their attempts to testify.

Theme: Navigating Intersecting Identities

Among other aspects, this case study illustrates the nuances and complexities of women peacebuilders’ realities on the ground. It highlights the need to avoid essentializing women, to reject the assumption that their needs and priorities are monolithic, and to recognize that women—as much as their male counterparts—often have conflicting goals and divided loyalties.

Sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls in South Sudan is extremely prevalent and, not surprisingly, a key action priority for women peacebuilders and human rights activists, such as those involved in Portals to Peace, Beam of Hope, and Women for Peace—a pattern also found in Colombia and Honduras. According to the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, sexual and gender-based violence, including rape and gang rape, was a central characteristic of the conflict, in some instances amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹¹⁵ As previously noted, the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence has been a highly contentious issue for women peacebuilders in South Sudan. It nevertheless became a rallying call for women’s organizations—as a rationale for calling for ceasefire and a justification for their demands for postconflict reconstruction initiatives to prioritize justice and the inclusion of women in negotiations and at decision-making spaces.

The age/generational divide was another challenge in women’s participation in the peace process. In patriarchal and gerontocratic societies such as South Sudan—and, in fact, most of Africa—older women are granted privileges, including access to the few positions of power available to females. These traditional older matriarchs may see their higher status as threatened by younger women, including the often more progressive leaders of women’s organizations involved in the peace process, whom they might perceive as interlopers usurping political positions they have not earned. As Balogun comments, the gatekeeping role played by these older matriarchs has been “limited [not only] to who could speak on behalf of South Sudanese women, but also what could be said.” Her experience has led her to reject perceptions of South Sudanese women as a homogeneous group and also the assumption that the highest priority for women in war-torn countries such as South Sudan is to resolve the conflict at any cost. “Women were as divided as men, on the basis of political party, [and] on the basis of tribe.”¹¹⁶

HONDURAS

Context

Although Honduras has not been involved in an active conflict since 1969, levels of structural and physical violence in the country are extremely high and often markedly gendered.¹¹⁷ So is the level of environmental vulnerability, which manifests as shifting extreme weather patterns and a range of life-threatening shocks and stressors such as hurricanes and tropical storms, severe droughts, increased flooding, and related landslides.¹¹⁸

Honduras has one of the highest per capita homicide rates worldwide, with women constituting frequent targets.¹¹⁹ Much of the urban violence is attributed to *maras* (gangs) directed against members of rival *maras*, or is a means of furthering the groups' economic activities (for example, extortion, kidnapping, and drug trafficking). Women and girls tend to play a larger role in the Central American *maras* than is typical for urban gangs elsewhere. In Honduras, female members are often exposed to high levels of physical abuse and sexual violence.¹²⁰ Other forms of violence against women in urban areas include domestic violence and feminicides. Especially common are the targeted killings of young women employed in the *maquilas* (manufacturing plants that import and assemble duty-free components for export) of the textile industry, one of the leading sectors in the Honduran economy.¹²¹

In rural areas, violence is highly gendered and often related either to the control of shipment routes of drugs or to land issues.¹²² Landownership in Honduras has long been characterized by significant inequality, which has recently been further exacerbated by a considerable increase in extractive projects engaged in the mining of silver, zinc, iron, lead, and other minerals.¹²³ This issue is compounded by expansion on large landholdings of monoculture—bananas, coffee, tobacco, and sugarcane—and livestock-breeding operations that put pressure on land use, forcing smallholders to move to less productive lands. This form of internal displacement encourages deforestation and results in greater land concentration in a system that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has characterized as benefiting an elite minority linked to high levels of political and private power.¹²⁴

The effects of Honduras's high rate of deforestation are evident during tropical storms and hurricanes that batter the country with increasing frequency. Honduras is highly vulnerable to climate change, owing to its high exposure to climate-related hazards (hurricanes, tropical storms, floods, droughts, and landslides) that devastate crops and critical infrastructure.¹²⁵ In 1998, Hurricane Mitch killed thousands and caused widespread damage to infrastructure. Aerial surveys following the storm revealed that mudslides were significantly worse in deforested areas.¹²⁶

A similar but perhaps even more pronounced impact was noted in November 2020, when Hurricanes Eta and Iota ripped through Central America. The arrival of two such powerful storms just two weeks apart had a severe impact on Hondurans already reeling from the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Dry Corridor regions and other areas affected by prolonged drought, the dry, hardened earth could not absorb the torrential rains.

Devastating floods swept away homes and drowned livestock. In recent years, the increasingly severe impacts of climate change have further exacerbated vulnerabilities in rural regions. Weather across the Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador) is predicted to become increasingly volatile because of El Niño–Southern Oscillation—a climate phenomenon that causes extreme weather—which is expected to occur more frequently because of climate change. As precipitation patterns change and droughts and heat waves become more frequent, growing numbers of people are unable to rely on subsistence farming, driving internal displacement into struggling and violent urban areas, as well as cross-border migration, using gendered migratory networks.¹²⁷

Evidence suggests that resources controlled by women tend to be allocated at greater rates toward family nutrition.¹²⁸ At the same time, women are also highly affected by food insecurity and malnutrition despite their important contribution to household survival.¹²⁹ Women contribute significantly to food security and household survival in rural areas, working up to twelve hours a day engaging in agricultural activities; kitchen gardening; tending animals; selling produce in local markets; collecting, processing, and cooking food; and providing childcare, education, and eldercare.¹³⁰ Yet 86 out of every 100 women lack access to land, which has led to a high percentage of women being involved in land recovery processes.¹³¹

Women defenders of the land and environment in Honduras face a situation of heightened vulnerability.¹³² They confront specific forms of violence that frequently include references to sexual stereotypes and women’s perceived failure to submit to traditional gender roles, with frequent reports of sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of sexual violence while in police custody. Women defenders also face persistent discrimination, stigmatization, and the normalization and social acceptance of this violence, which often undermines their role in the struggle for human and environmental rights.¹³³ In an extreme manifestation of this targeted violence, 1,232 attacks against women defenders, their families, and their organizations were recorded between 2016 and 2017, 52 percent of which were perpetrated by state actors; and according to Global Watch, at least thirty-one human rights defenders were killed between 2016 and 2018.¹³⁴

Women rights defenders who face multiple levels of discrimination—as women, small-scale farmers, Indigenous people, or members of other marginalized identities—are often revictimized or blamed for the violence perpetrated against them. Despite these compounded challenges, or perhaps because of them, several networks of human rights and environmental defenders remain active in Honduras, often integrated into larger regional coalitions. While women members have often paid a high price for their activism, the success of their campaigns keeps them motivated and committed to their causes.

Initiatives

The Honduran Defenders Network is part of the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defenders).¹³⁵ The initiative was launched in 2010 with the goal of

developing a comprehensive and regionally relevant response to the increased violence against women human rights defenders. Placing gender power dynamics at the heart of protection, it is dedicated to supporting and mobilizing women defenders from distinct social movements and organizations for recognition, enhanced impact, and protection in a volatile context. It has collaborated with hundreds of women human rights defenders, movements, and organizations in shaping and advancing a women-led, cross-movement human rights agenda. The various member associations, including the Defenders Network, convene and organize a wide range of women defenders, including those most vulnerable to violence, such as rural and Indigenous women defending land rights and environmental justice, lesbian and transgender activists, and feminists advocating for an end to violence.

IM-Defenders' approach is informed by a series of premises that loosely guide the work of its members. For instance, it recognizes that community-level organizing will inevitably engage power dynamics in families and intimate relationships as a necessary step to dismantling gender inequality. The meaningful participation of women, the initiative underscores, requires a diversity of activist leadership functions—including the capacity to facilitate, mediate, mobilize, and inspire that potential in others—which women defenders embody as they take on different roles throughout the movement. Furthermore, as stated by Just Associates Mesoamerica (one of the members of the IM-Defenders coalition), challenging inequality generates conflict at multiple levels—within ourselves and in the way we relate to others in our families, workplaces, and beyond. Efforts to manage conflict can be a source of knowledge and power but can also bring social isolation, stigma, and even violence.

The perception that the state security forces are the main perpetrators of violence against women defenders, reflected in the low number of reported attacks and violations, is often warranted. According to a recent report by the Honduran Defenders Network, less than 19 percent of the women defenders who suffer an assault file a complaint with the authorities.¹³⁶ By claiming the title “women human rights defender,” women who have previously worked individually and faced isolation and social stigma for speaking out have been able to acknowledge the risks they face because of their work in promoting human rights and to take proactive measures to protect themselves. Specific activities combine training, self-care, research, social media activism, urgent action campaigns, and human rights advocacy to raise awareness about the important but often invisible leadership role played by women defenders in the advancement of human rights. Through the training and information that the Defenders Network provides, women defenders have learned how to access national, regional, and international human rights tools and mechanisms that explicitly support human rights defenders and that can provide emergency protection and funds to women activists.

The Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations in Honduras (Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras, or COPINH) promotes the recognition of the political, social, cultural, and economic rights of Indigenous communities in Honduras and works to protect their territory. It was cofounded by Indigenous Lenca activist Berta

Cáceres in March 1993 to defend Indigenous Lenca culture, territorial rights, and natural resources. The council is made up of 200 Lenca communities, primarily in the department of Intibucá, in southwest Honduras.

Described by anthropologist Mark Anderson as “a pivotal force within the ethnic movement” in Honduras, COPINH has played a key role in building a broader movement in Honduras and beyond, alongside other partner organizations such as the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña, or OFRANEH). The latter is a grassroots organization working with Garifuna (Afro-descendant and Indigenous) communities in Honduras seeking to protect their communities’ economic, social, and cultural rights, particularly with regard to natural resources, farming, fishing, and the protection of the environment.¹³⁷

Led by Berta Cáceres, COPINH members have campaigned for their right to free prior-and-informed consent in relation to megaprojects that would threaten their territory and force them out of their ancestral lands. A report presented by Peace Brigades International to the UN’s Universal Periodic Review offers a rather grim assessment. It is estimated that over 30 percent of the Honduran territory is currently under one of the numerous concessions granted to private transnational mining and hydroelectric companies.¹³⁸ Activities in these territories are often implemented without the “free, prior and informed consent of the communities”—a requirement established by Article 6 of the International Labor Organization’s Convention 169 on Indigenous Peoples, which Honduras ratified in 1995.¹³⁹ Furthermore, some companies have reportedly forged signatures on consent documents.”¹⁴⁰

Through their work with COPINH, Lenca communities have stopped logging corporations’ destruction of their homes. They have also purposefully organized to build women’s leadership and challenge patriarchy. Leading by example, Berta Cáceres was a lifelong supporter of feminism, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender and Indigenous environmental rights. Her last campaign before her assassination in 2016 centered on a yearlong struggle to stop the construction of the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque River, which is part of the sacred ancestral territory of the Lenca Indigenous community. The Agua Zarca dam was among hundreds of environmentally destructive projects sanctioned without legally required community consultations. Cáceres took the case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. In 2013 she led COPINH and the local Lenca communities in a yearlong protest at the construction site to prevent the companies from accessing the land.¹⁴¹

Members of COPINH, whose work opposed the interests of the government and of large corporations, were routinely targeted with threats and harassment. On July 15, 2013, the Honduran military opened fire on the protesters, killing one COPINH member and injuring three others. Several other incidents took place the following year, resulting in the death of two members and serious injuries to three others. In April 2015, Cáceres was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize—the world’s leading environmental award—for her campaigning against the construction of the Agua Zarca dams.¹⁴² She nevertheless continued receiving rape and death threats. She was shot dead in her home by armed intruders on the night of March 2,

2016. Mexican environmental activist Gustavo Castro Soto, who was staying with Berta, was also wounded in the assault, receiving gunshots to his face and hand.

Despite the assassination of its cofounder and best-known leader, COPINH has continued to lead the fight to transform Honduras through its demands for human, women's, environmental, and Indigenous rights. Berta's daughter, Bertha Zúniga Cáceres, has carried on her mother's work leading COPINH, despite an assassination attempt against her own life in 2017 and ongoing threats. In 2018, partly in response to the death of Berta Cáceres, twenty-four Latin American and Caribbean countries signed a legally binding pact to protect the rights of environmental defenders.

Theme: Responding to State Fragility and Structural Violence

Like those in Colombia and South Sudan, the Honduran initiatives discussed here illustrate the importance of collective action and capacity building, as well as navigating intersecting identities. The case of Honduras also provides insight into how women peacebuilders are forced to contend with pervasive insecurity, targeted violence, and governance failures that compound disparities in access to resources to meet basic needs. Women's participation in environmental justice and peace advocacy efforts in Honduras is taking place in a context of significant political and environmental fragility, where state legitimacy has often been questioned by the local population, including the members of the two initiatives discussed here. Fragile and conflict-affected states alike must be able to provide security and public services, among other things, to maintain stability and security.¹⁴³ A state's legitimacy is also a function of its ability to deliver those services equitably and fairly, which can be especially important in rural areas and those inhabited by Indigenous groups that have historically been disconnected from the central government.¹⁴⁴ The members of Defenders Network and COPINH are denouncing what they perceive as their national government's exploitative, unsustainable, and inequitable approach to service provision and environmental governance, among other violations, while actively seeking to further arrangements that allow for equitable access to basic services and provisions.

Violence and human rights violations perpetrated against members of these two and other groups aim at silencing them, and crimes against them are rarely met with justice.¹⁴⁵ Perpetrators tend to be backed by strong economic and political interests, while defenders often belong to marginalized ethnic minorities and Indigenous communities with limited recourse to official justice, as authorities are believed to be complicit.¹⁴⁶ The resulting culture of impunity and even criminalization and violence against women defenders and their male allies is intended to impede their efforts to defend the environment by empowering those who wish to silence them.¹⁴⁷ While threats and violence against all human rights defenders, including women environmental human rights defenders, have continued to take place at alarming rates,¹⁴⁸ the courageous examples of members from the Defenders Network and COPINH

indicate that perseverance, innovation, and long-term vision and commitment, together with capacity building, collective action, and network building with other organizations within and across national borders, can bring noteworthy victories.

These women are seeking to create meaningful alternatives in the absence of a functioning social contract. As Nora Dudwick and Kathleen Kuehnast note, “The need to reimagine and rebuild ruptured institutions can create openings for renegotiating roles and establishing the basis of an inclusive and more stable society.”¹⁴⁹ In the face of structural violence and state fragility, their agency is directed toward constructing alternative institutional arrangements, relations of power, leadership, and approaches to change that advance justice while building social cohesion. This vision and sense of purpose, bringing hope amid urgent need, draws many women to participate in peacebuilding.

Discussion: Actors and Factors

The themes that influence women’s participation in peacebuilding have been examined individually, in relation to one of the cases studied. But they cut across all three countries, as do the related factors and actors that facilitate or impede women’s meaningful participation.

Cross-cultural comparisons of women’s participation in peacebuilding in three different countries must contend with the challenge presented by different understandings of the meaning of the construct of “peacebuilding” across the various data sources. Many of the women—both leaders and local-level participants in civil society organizations—involved in the various women’s rights organizations and projects consulted for this report do not necessarily view their work as a peacebuilding project. Rather, they often see themselves as fighting against sexual and gender-based violence—sometimes against the opposition of their older counterparts, who see them as undermining the peace cause—advocating for women’s civil, political, and Indigenous rights, or demanding better access to land and other natural resources, with conflict, fragility, and insecurity serving as the context in which their work takes place.

Relatedly, recognition of the concept of “environmental peacebuilding” and the role of natural resources in violence and conflict varies from country to country—more openly recognized in Colombia and Honduras, especially in the rural areas and among Indigenous groups, less so, if at all, in South Sudan, where women’s involvement in environmental peacebuilding is currently in its infancy, although steadily gaining momentum. Furthermore, available reports and summaries of the activities engaged in by the various women’s organizations consulted for this project tend to be descriptive rather than analytical, which makes drawing out causal relationships difficult. Nevertheless, it is possible to make informed inferences on what facilitates or impedes this participation, triangulating conclusions through multiple data sources.

LEVERAGING COLLECTIVE POWER AND BUILDING CAPACITY

Networking and coalition forming improve empowerment among women. Colombian women have a long history of grassroots activism and participation in civil society. The existence of multiple active networks represents a form of empowerment for different groups of women, an effective means of exercising collective power toward a common goal, a source of both solidarity and capacity building among members, and a strategy to cover a larger part of the region or territory in which they operate. A similar pattern is found in Honduras, where the IM-Defenders coalition has highlighted the need for stronger alliances and connections across geography and issues for change to be effected. Similarly, women activists report that most of them would not have called themselves “human rights defenders” before engaging with the coalition. In South Sudan, participants often referred to the 1999 Wunlit Peace Conference—the most prominent and comprehensively documented case of a people-to-people peace process in South Sudan—as a model to be followed.¹⁵⁰ The resolutions passed at the Wunlit conference were ceremonially signed by the participants, including female delegates, representing an important gain for women’s participation in local government.¹⁵¹ A number of informants (both female and male) noted that Wunlit was primarily about violent competition over grazing lands and water and between the chiefs, whereas current peacebuilding efforts focus more on human rights, protection, compensation, rule of law, gender equity, and women’s rights, especially when efforts are led by international agencies. Not all local male leaders, or even older women, celebrate these more recent priorities.

Champions and gatekeepers influence women’s participation and are more successfully engaged as a collective. The important role that champions and gatekeepers play in either facilitating or impeding women’s peacebuilding efforts is frequently highlighted by project leaders and women participants themselves in all three countries. In both cases, women are better positioned to navigate unequal relationships through their collective voice and action.

At the local level, where kinship and community relations are a significant force in people’s lives, being part of a collective or coalition lends confidence and a measure of protection. This was particularly the case in South Sudan where the term *gatekeeper* was often applied to formal and informal authorities, male family members (fathers, brothers, husbands), and often also to older female relatives and colleagues who opposed women peacebuilders’ involvement. Formal authorities, local chiefs, and other traditional, tribal, and religious leaders have been the target of advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns mounted by the South Sudanese initiatives explored in this report to persuade them to champion women’s efforts or at least not hinder them. Where individual women have connections with men or women in positions of power who can act as champions, they can leverage those relationships to serve the coalition as a whole and advance the prominence of a movement. In the case of the death of the Honduran environmental activist Berta Cáceres, the expressions of support sent by a number of well-known institutions and influential individual “champions” is believed to have

contributed to COPINH's successful demands for an immediate investigation. The council is a women-led organization, but male champions, including male members, relatives, and other sympathizers, have also been supporting the work of the female environmental peacebuilders—and often have also been targeted, assaulted, and even killed by their detractors.

Familiarity with national and international configurations on women's rights frames peacebuilding initiatives and increases effectiveness. In Colombia, leaders of women's civil society organizations—as well as many members—demonstrate a high level of familiarity with national and international frameworks on human and women's rights. This allows them to organize and engage in joint activities at local, national, and international levels on the basis of a shared understanding, facilitates a stronger representation in the public sphere, and serves as an advocacy tool for demanding better policies and programming at both local and national levels. Women in Honduras and South Sudan appear to have initially had a more limited knowledge of national and international frameworks. The focus on capacity building on these issues in all three countries nevertheless suggests that their importance is widely acknowledged. In effect, many of these women leaders and members of civil society organizations credit this knowledge with their increased capacity to accomplish their goals. Unsurprisingly, familiarity with Indigenous rights frameworks is more common among members of Indigenous initiatives in Colombia and Honduras. In all three countries, knowledge of institutional frameworks and legal provisions related to natural resources and the environment appears to be a more recent and still emergent development.

Training and skill building enhances women's self-confidence. Training and skill building activities—for example, in leadership; communication; social media activism; urgent action campaigns; knowledge of related policies and frameworks; and women, human, and environmental rights advocacy—are consistently brought up as essential factors facilitating the participation of women in peace activism. Capacity building, either through the formal training many peacebuilding networks offer or simply learned experientially through interacting with other peacebuilders, increases their effectiveness and enhances their self-confidence. The importance of training and skill building was highlighted by study participants in all three case studies and is illustrated by the fact that most of the projects analyzed included capacity building among their main activities. In some cases, this was irrespective of the actual quality of the training received or the relevance of the specific skills that participants may or may not have acquired; it is largely the process of participating in the training programs and interacting and collaborating with the trainers and fellow participants that enhances women's self-confidence and determination to engage in peacebuilding efforts. Participants in all three case studies also report an appreciation for training in natural resource management. Whether they see it as a tool of economic empowerment through livelihood provision or as an integral component of environmental peacebuilding tends to reflect their perception of the role that natural resources play in the conflict.

NAVIGATING INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

Access to meaningful engagement is affected by age, marital status, and the gender division of labor. The work of women peacebuilders takes place in a context dominated not just by conflict and fragility but also by gender stereotypes that affect their experiences in both public and private spheres. A woman's ability to engage in peace activism or participate in politics or any other public sphere activity appears to be strongly influenced by her age/generation and marital status in all three case studies. Study participants report a commonly held view—among men but also among many women—that women's lives should be spent at home and that women should engage only in family matters. Even if women's work outside the home is increasingly accepted out of necessity, their engagement in politics is still frowned upon.

Furthermore, traditional expectations that women (and girls) do most or all of the household chores affords limited free time to engage in politics or any other kind of activism. Female-headed households with young children in all three countries included in this report tend to experience significantly higher poverty levels than national averages. In Colombia and Honduras—less so in South Sudan, where child-rearing is more communal—the absence of reliable or affordable childcare may prevent women in these households from engaging in the formal labor sector or participating in peace or environmental activism. Women with supportive partners often invoke their social status as guardians of their families' well-being to justify their involvement in peace and environmental activism. Unmarried women, widows, and older women with fewer family constraints are often more easily able to participate.

Most notably in South Sudan, women in their late forties and beyond—that is, those past their reproductive years, often widows—are typically less constrained by domestic responsibilities and cultural expectations of female abstention from public and political roles. They are also largely unsusceptible to the strictures associated with the preservation of family honor and have the perception that they have earned their positions of relative power (compared with younger women). The navigation of intersecting identities and gender norms related to household and community dynamics is central to the exercise of women's agency at the local level and merits more nuanced analysis to inform program and policy design. Furthermore, expanding avenues for all women to engage in peacebuilding activities and access decision making at the local level may prove critical to supporting meaningful participation at other levels, as well as to furthering local ownership of peace processes.

Ethnic membership may serve as a limiting factor of engagement. Afro-Colombian and Indigenous women are often described as particularly vulnerable because their communities have been severely affected by the conflict and displacement from their ancestral territories. Their participation in peace and environmental activism is often seen as breaking both class and gender social norms. Yet they are at the vanguard of land rights advocacy in Colombia, demonstrating that vulnerability and resilience can exist simultaneously. In Honduras, Indigenous women, such as those involved in COPINH, often see their struggle as both environmental

and spiritual. Their shared ethnic membership constitutes a source of strength as they fight against the destruction of sacred sites in their territory. In South Sudan, ethnic (tribal) rivalries have been a primary driver of conflict. While ethnically diverse women have been able to successfully work together in initiatives such as Portals to Peace, Beam of Hope, and Women for Peace, tribal membership has often created tension and rivalries in other contexts and initiatives.

Rural contexts are more directly linked with political participation in land-related issues. Experiences of conflict, as well as their involvement in natural resource management, tends to be markedly different for women in urban and rural environments. These differences are less pronounced in South Sudan, where most people live in rural areas. In Colombia, the high level of internal displacement (including rural-to-urban migration) and the presence of large peri-urban informal neighborhoods (such as Altos de la Florida) somewhat blurs the urban-rural distinction for some Colombian women, but by no means all. In both Colombia and Honduras, Indigenous and ethnic-minority communities tend to live in rural areas, where land and water-related issues are of paramount importance on cultural and religious grounds, beyond their role in livelihood support. Membership in women's groups and coalitions allow these rural women to overcome their relative isolation and benefit from the easier access to official structures available to their urban counterparts. Natural resource management and conflict mitigation often constitutes an effective entry point for women's participation, a pattern also identified elsewhere.¹⁵² In all three countries, rural and Indigenous women appeared to be more easily able to derive legitimacy from their traditional resource-related roles than is typically conferred to them in other (political) issues. It is, nevertheless, worth bearing in mind that engagement in informal, community-level initiatives does not necessarily translate to access to higher-level formal peace processes. Furthermore, mere access at any level is not in itself sufficient to ensure women's meaningful participation.

RESPONDING TO STATE FRAGILITY AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Proliferation of arms correlates with increased risks of violence for women. In all three countries, the proliferation of arms has a significant gendered impact on women, as they are often used to commit sexual and gender-based violence, including femicides and assaults against environmental and women's rights defenders. In Colombia, following the FARC-EP's laying down of weapons, women experienced a significant reduction of violence and a general increase in security that facilitated their participation in peace and environmental activism. However, the presence of other armed actors—criminal gangs and FARC-EP dissidents—and associated uncontrolled proliferations of arms greatly contribute to women's continued experience of violence in both urban and rural areas. Many women are confronting insecurity and fear generated by the presence of weapons that remain in the hands of both armed groups and civilians in postconflict South Sudan.

Insecurity is aggravated by impunity for perpetrators of violence against women. The Global Impunity Index situates Honduras among the twelve countries with the highest levels of impunity.¹⁵³ More than 90 percent of the murders and other human rights violations go unpunished.¹⁵⁴ In all three countries, women frequently report selective administration of justice, with delays in acting on human rights violations and actions that favor the interests of actors linked to political powers. Women civil society leaders find themselves the target of smear campaigns in the local media and of unwarranted police investigations; they report sexual harassment while in detention. An additional difficulty comes from within their own communities and from their families, who sometimes disapprove of their leadership role and the increased risks it involves.

Unsustainable and inequitable economic models put women, communities, and the environment at heightened risk. To varying degrees in these case studies, economic growth is being promoted by the government and, in some cases, extralegally pursued by extractive industries. The adoption of production and consumption models that undermine subsistence have fueled land grabbing and water scarcity—for example, in the growing of African palm trees instead of subsistence crops of rice and beans in Honduras, narco-cattle ranching in Colombia and Honduras, and illegal logging in South Sudan. As evidenced by initiatives such as COPINH, Indigenous and rural women are risking their lives to defend their community's access to key natural resources. While various actors pursue economic gain outside the rule of law, deepening the problem of governance, environmental and peace defenders, predominantly women, are criminalized. In such places as the coastal regions of Honduras, where storms and environmental degradation from climate change have also wreaked havoc, forced displacement and conflict is on the rise. Ultimately, vulnerability—be it to climate change or other societal disruptions—is influenced by social circumstances, and existing political economies oriented toward exploitation and domination stand in the way of women's efforts to create equitable, sustainable institutions and development models.

Structural inequalities compound human and environmental insecurity. As demonstrated in all three case studies, the preexisting conditions or societal baseline to current crises and rising violence against women is one of multiple intersecting inequalities, with gender inequality featuring prominently. The legacy of generational dispossession and discrimination has resulted in deep structural inequalities. Contending with lack of access to health services, food security, housing, employment opportunities, and education, among the many manifestations of structural inequality, is often an all-consuming task for women. To additionally take on the risks associated with peacebuilding and leadership, without trust that authorities will provide any protection, is an act of courage and sacrifice. Extraordinarily, many women do not shy away from this challenge, but it should not be left to local women peacebuilders to fill the void of proper governance or to seek protection outside of formal channels.

Long-term vision and commitment to meaningful alternatives are not optional. Even in the face of daily uncertainty, the women-led initiatives studied here indicate that the kind of

change being sought cannot be realized with a funding commitment of a year or two or through protest and dissent alone. What animates women’s participation in the face of pervasive human and environmental insecurity is a commitment to creating meaningful alternatives. It is indicative of an active and purposeful exercise of agency in response to oppression and centered for many women on a concern for future generations. Women participating in peacebuilding are bringing their resources, skills, abilities, and very lives to create alternative modes of leadership, relations of power, and institutional arrangements that center on equity and cooperation. Arguably, supporting such efforts so that they can be fully realized and scaled will only further women’s participation and commitment.

Recommendations

The women, peace, and security framework and related research literature on women’s participation in peacebuilding, introduced at the beginning of this review, highlights key limitations in the discourse and policies. These include an overly narrow lens on the protection agenda depicting women primarily as victims and a vulnerable population; assumptions about the category “women” that tend to essentialize and ignore diversity and intersectionality; overemphasis on women’s representation in formal peace processes and hard security instead of meaningful participation in peacebuilding that includes prevention and mitigation of conflict, reconciliation and restorative justice, and sustaining peace through inclusive development and social transformation; and, relatedly, privileging peace processes at the national and international levels with less weight given to local and grassroots initiatives, which remain disconnected from other levels. It has also been noted that the women, peace, and security agenda and research on environmental peacebuilding and conflict have remained largely separate, despite their inseparability in the lived experience of women and their communities.

Attentiveness to these gaps informs the case studies of women-led initiatives in Colombia, South Sudan, and Honduras that are at the heart of this evidence review. The case studies serve to identify key factors and actors that facilitate or impede women’s meaningful participation in peacebuilding amid pervasive insecurity and natural resource competition, emphasizing the role of women as decisionmakers at the local level. These findings can inform future programs and policies related to these countries and, by qualified extension, in other contexts affected by insecurity, conflict, and environmental fragility.

As the preceding discussion illustrates, women peacebuilders and environmental defenders are already engaging in multiple successful initiatives to advance their interests and the well-being of their communities, despite confronting compounding gender, intersectional, structural, environmental, and conflict-related challenges. The recommendations that follow are directed to policymakers, international organizations, funders, and peacebuilding practitioners

who recognize how critical women’s participation is to peace and who seek to support their efforts on the front lines of conflict and environmental insecurity.

SUPPORT INCLUSIVE WOMEN-LED CIVIL SOCIETY COALITIONS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

This evidence review and its case studies confirm that civil society coalitions remain a vital way to give voice to women, strengthen a unified vision and framework for action, deepen inclusivity across intersecting inequality, leverage networks and resources, navigate relationships with gatekeepers and obstructive actors, connect grassroots movements to national and international levels, and seek accountability and recognition, among other functions. Of note is how such coalitions can help bridge representation by a few, often elite, women in formal peace processes and the voice and knowledge of grassroots peacebuilders and movements. These case studies also highlight how coalitions are critical to socializing and developing a sense of ownership of global frameworks at the local, as well as national, level. In particular, two aspects require additional research, programming, and flexible funding support: assisting coalitions to link knowledge and ideas from the local level to peacebuilding at higher levels and vice versa, and creating shared understanding through the spaces created by coalitions to bridge currently disparate frameworks and global policy agendas, such as those pertaining to women, peace, and security and environmental conflict, as well as just and sustainable economic development.

EXPAND CAPACITY BUILDING FOR ALL WOMEN

Women in the case studies presented here have repeatedly voiced the need to acquire substantive knowledge and skills that would be useful in promoting their meaningful participation in political processes and local peacebuilding efforts, including negotiations over access to resources. Research, social media activism; urgent action campaigns; and women, human, and environmental rights and policy advocacy are frequently highlighted. This is especially important in the case of environmental peacebuilding because women use natural resources differently from men, which sets the stage for gender-specific structural barriers. Gender-differentiated resource use in the presence of patterns of inequality and marginalization makes women vulnerable to economic, social, and environmental influences, especially in rural areas, and impedes their full and meaningful participation.¹⁵⁵ Conversely, access to spaces of natural resource governance—for example, decision-making over access to land, water, and other resources—provides women with opportunities to develop and demonstrate leadership skills in conflict prevention and resolution. These skills are useful in conflict contexts of natural resource competition and can be potentially helpful in other contexts as well.¹⁵⁶

The evidence gathered for this review highlights the effectiveness of capacity-building programs in developing women’s environmental peacebuilding skills. In all three cases, there

is also some indication that different civil society organizations have benefited from unequal levels of donor investment in their capacities, resulting in asymmetrical access for women to necessary knowledge and skills. While no tensions among members from the various initiatives were observed, these inequalities have the potential to create divisions, fuel grievances, and make it more challenging to communicate across political and ethnic lines. Promoting women's meaningful participation in peace processes would be more effective if necessary technical toolboxes, training, and knowledge were made available to women from both rural and urban vicinities and from all walks of life.

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT ASSUMING “WOMEN” AS A HOMOGENOUS GROUP

Context-specific and intersectional analysis is critical to research, programming, and policy aimed at increasing women's meaningful participation. While women have effectively built coalitions and collective action across difference, it cannot be assumed that a cohesive “women's agenda” exists among women, especially in conflict settings. International peacebuilding actors have often demonstrated an expectation that women across opposing sides of conflicts would naturally gravitate toward a common goal expressed in a unified women's voice. Viewing women as a homogenous group by virtue of their gender is likely to lead to unrealistic and reductionist assumptions of how women will approach a peace process or engage in natural resource governance.

These assumptions may in turn result in a set of abstract and generic objectives instead of a detailed agenda and a long-term strategy. As the cases of Colombia, South Sudan, and Honduras demonstrate, although women from different groups can effectively work together, trust one another, and develop common understandings on divisive issues, ethnic affiliation, age divides, rural/urban contexts, differing experiences of sexual and gender-based violence and displacement, and other axes of social differentiation cannot be disregarded. As advanced by the GIFT, both environmental peacebuilding and the women, peace, and security agenda need to adopt an intersectional perspective in scholarship, policy, and practice, thereby moving away from binary assumptions and stereotypes.¹⁵⁷ Instead, women must be recognized as autonomous actors who can, and have, separately or jointly with male champions, played multiple roles in conflict and peacebuilding, including as combatants, humanitarian responders, local peace mediators, and environmental peacebuilders.

FOSTER SYNERGISTIC ACTION ACROSS SILOED POLICY AGENDAS BY FOLLOWING THE LEAD OF WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

As these case studies illustrate, for women engaged at the local level, peace, environmental security, and the future of their family and communities are not separate. This clarity around

interconnections needs to inform policymaking and peacebuilding at all levels. There is growing recognition, in line with the research of political scientist Valerie Hudson, that the security of women is firmly tied to the security of the state.¹⁵⁸ This relates to their personal security, status, and access to basic needs and human rights and is also a reflection of how, when able to meaningfully participate, women bring to the table a broad and holistic understanding of security that recognizes the critical role of women in peacebuilding and in addressing the risks posed by climate change and environmental conflict.

CREATE SAFE AND INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION CHANNELS

The unabated rise in violence against women human rights defenders and peacebuilders was highlighted in the January 2022 statement by Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, to the UN Security Council: “At the heart of Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions by this Council is the need for strategies that create inclusive and safe participation channels for women from all backgrounds, movements, and communities. Protection of their work, lives, and rights is central to this effort.”¹⁵⁹ The cases of Colombia, Honduras, and South Sudan provide evidence that the protection pillar of the women, peace, and security agenda is critical to ensuring women’s meaningful participation. A narrow focus on protection alone reinforces assumptions about women’s victimhood and vulnerability, while failure to address protection issues precludes women’s meaningful participation and requires women to carry the risks and sacrifices of change alone. Women are already on the front lines, and in the face of pervasive insecurity and natural resource competition, protection and participation are two sides of the same coin.

PROMOTE PEACEFUL MASCULINITIES PROGRAMMING FOR MEN

As Chantal de Jonge Oudrat and Michael Brown note, “Gender is not just about the vulnerabilities of women, but also about the proclivities of men. Much more attention needs to be paid to how ideas about masculinity and male behavior shape gender relations, the environment, and security problems.”¹⁶⁰ Protecting women’s participation requires action to end the violence that so frequently targets women and girls, especially those seeking to lead movements for change. It also requires profound changes in gender norms and divisions of labor, in how women are perceived, and in what spaces they are thought to belong, so that their participation in every arena is valued by all members of society. In the three case studies presented here, dominant constructions of masculinity are tied to violence. Unlearning violent responses to conflict and recognizing sources of strength and power that are not about domination and exploitation requires socializing alternative, peaceful models of masculinity.¹⁶¹ Whether through psychosocial support to displaced men, reintegration programs for former combatants, educational programs for young men and boys, drawing on social media and the arts, or

other creative interventions, more research and investment is needed to build the evidence base and to scale what is proving successful.

INVEST IN WOMEN'S LONG-TERM VISION AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Local women peacebuilders in Colombia, South Sudan, and Honduras do not see long-term commitment as optional; in the face of historical legacies of exclusion and present-day social disruptions, they are seeking to build alternatives. Ultimately, different institutional arrangements are needed, ones that go past zero-sum relations of power, are based on cooperation and mutual assistance across difference, and can adapt to changing circumstances. Women's meaningful participation and leadership is often a key indicator of where these strategies are being built, and they need support. This requires strategic, flexible, sustained, and targeted financing. As an indication of the general lack of investment, however, currently hardly 1 percent of funding in conflict-affected or fragile countries goes to women's rights organizations.¹⁶²

PRIORITIZE MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Initiatives such as those considered here and across the globe need to be researched and their contributions included in our still-limited evidence base.¹⁶³ A significant impediment in this regard is the scarcity of well-documented information on project outcomes and thoughtful reflection on the challenges encountered. In general terms, grassroots organizations—whether engaged in environmental peacebuilding or other endeavors—are seldom “equipped to document and write up their work in a way that is recognized and understood as legitimate by the wider international community.”¹⁶⁴ As a result, there is a limited repository of analytical data on the successes or failures of the initiatives implemented. When data are collected, the focus tends to be on outputs (for example, the number of workshops held or of women trained) rather than outcomes (for example, measurable resulting achievements). Furthermore, when no monitoring or evaluation is undertaken, it cannot be empirically established whether any observable impact is attributable to participation in the initiatives implemented.

Training and guidance on the implementation of participatory action research and other variants of participatory community-based research focused on the cogeneration of evidence would go a long way in alleviating this shortcoming. So would requiring external donors and program managers to collect gender and age-disaggregated data for baseline development and monitoring and evaluation of peacebuilding and recovery programs that address or have an impact on natural resource management. The global community is already increasingly recognizing the existence and complexity of the environment-security nexus. The challenge that lies ahead is the further development and meaningful implementation of its intersectional gender-based dimension.

Notes

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