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Changing the world
with women and girls



Leading the way:

Civil society movements
reshaping peace in Colombia

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1 Introduction

This policy brief has pulled together evidence, stories and experiences from women, young people, and their organisations involved in activities on peacebuilding, conflict prevention and post-conflict support in Colombia. It has explored their lived experiences to better understand and document their work in conflict-affected regions, including the challenges they faced and solutions they found.

The findings demonstrate the effects of conflict and violence on women and their communities, which has affected Colombia since the internal armed conflict in 1964, leading to complex ongoing conflict dynamics throughout Colombia. A series of civil wars, uprisings and insurgencies have created devastating consequences for many communities. This policy report focuses on the districts (‘departamentos’) of Cauca, Nariño and Valle de Cauca in southwestern Colombia, which have experienced the most prolonged and protracted crisis in the region.

For many in this region, the idea of post-conflict ‘recovery’ and the concept of ‘peace’ is still an illusion. Many are still affected daily by the ongoing violence, with those living in the most affected areas feeling a sense of loss, fear and injustice. Civil society organisations, specifically women’s rights and women-led organisations, have found ways to reshape what peace and security means for them.

In this brief, ActionAid-Alianza has worked with their partner organisations to document the gendered impacts on conflict on women and girls in Colombia, and how these organisations have helped to address them. This report also aims to showcase the unique role these organisations play in the Women Peace and Security (WPS) space, which is often inaccessible to the international community.

1.1. Country context and the WPS agenda

Colombia has endured one of the world’s longest civil conflicts, which began in the mid-1960s.¹ The conflict has led to widespread human rights abuses, with over a million deaths and 8.7 million Colombians internally displaced between 1985 and 2024.²

Although there has been a decrease in violence since the declaration of a peace agreement in 2016, between the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), armed conflict has since increased in some regions.³ Violence is particularly prevalent in the Colombian Pacific, where non-state armed groups are present in most coastal areas, allowing them to maintain social control over the population.⁴

Women and girls were – and are – disproportionately affected by the conflict. Colombia has some of the highest number of cases of gender-based violence (GBV) in the region.⁵ According to data from the National Institute of Health (INS), 66,621 cases of gender violence were registered so far in 2024. Some regions of the country are worse than others, with extreme cases in areas such as the Colombian Pacific, where girls under 14 are reported to have been made pregnant and infected with sexually transmitted diseases as a result of sexual abuse by non-states armed groups (NSAG).⁶ The Office of the Counsellor for Women’s Equality carried out a survey showing that the gendered division of labour, harmful traditional gender roles and unequal power relations between men and women have led to an increase in expressions of violence against women and girls across the country. This violence is widely normalised and tolerated.

Colombia has some of the highest number of cases of gender-based violence (GBV) in the region. According to data from the National Institute of Health (INS), 66,621 cases of gender violence were registered so far in 2024.

The conflict's legacy continues to influence Colombia's social, political, and economic landscape, with ongoing challenges related to peacebuilding, justice for victims, and rural development. It has also affected Colombia's history of ancestral practices, particularly among indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. These practices, which are central to cultural identity, spirituality, and land stewardship have been disrupted by displacement, loss of land and environmental destruction, which have led to a stalled and detached process towards justice and recovery for many.

Despite these challenges, many communities have shown resilience by adapting their ancestral practices to new contexts, including the urban environments where displaced populations often resettle.⁷ Women's rights organisations (WROs) and women-led organisations (WLOs) have also set up programmes to preserve and revitalise their traditions, using these practices as a form of resistance and healing from the trauma of the conflict. Using these practices, women leaders and their organisations have been advocating for justice and accountability for human rights abuses, delivering humanitarian assistance and working towards the reconciliation of different communities in Colombia.

1.2 Methodology

The brief explores how women's rights organisations and youth groups in Colombia perceive and deal with post-conflict issues. It specifically covers the districts ('departamentos') of Cauca, Valle de Cauca and Nariño, which experienced extensive conflict since the 1940s.

ActionAid adopts a feminist approach to research,⁸ seeing it as a tool to bring about shifts in power, through ActionAid's Feminist Research Guidelines. Research findings and evidence are used to dismantle potential bias from decision-makers views and actions, and to challenge how and where power negatively manifests and reproduces oppression. The voices of women and girls from communities and women-led organisations and women's rights organisations are prioritised as evidence, and women-only and girl-only spaces are created for evidence generation. By focusing on 'people-centred evidence', ActionAid's research aims to build solidarity and shift power.

Aligned with this, the policy brief adopted a feminist approach, centring the experiences and rights of those who are most at risk of being marginalised within conflict affected regions, and interrogating the causes of inequalities. To do so, this research took a participatory, reflexive and feminist approach throughout, co-developing and validating the methodology and findings with all participants. To do so, the research questions were co-designed with the women leaders and partner organisations ActionAid works with in Colombia. Qualitative data was collected through 12 key informant interviews (KIs) and 9 focus group discussions (FGDs), with a total of 190 participants. KIs allowed individuals to share personal experiences, while FGDs gathered group perspectives on issues, to cross-check findings and allow a variety of voices to be heard.

The policy brief is a cross-sectional design with a mixed-method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data for

comprehensive analysis. Secondary data was reviewed through literature, and a structured questionnaire was used for quantitative data collection from project participants. The quality of the assessment was maintained by monitoring measures at all stages, including planning, data collection, and data management (data cleaning and analysis), interpretation and write-up. All data was validated with the research participants, and the final recommendations were co-developed by the research participants.

Data collection took place in the following districts of Colombia:

Cauca: Located in southwestern Colombia, Cauca is one of the districts most affected by the humanitarian emergency, climatic disasters and threats related to the armed conflict.⁹ Cauca has been badly affected by armed conflict, with violence and human rights violations that have devastated vulnerable social groups including indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians and peasant communities. Interviews took place in the north of Cauca, in **Santander de Quilichao**.

Valle del Cauca: Located in western Colombia, according to the Ombudsman's Office in 2022, Valle de Cauca has experienced the highest incidence of human rights violations in the country, including kidnapping, prison overcrowding, gender-based violence, and health-related complaints.¹⁰ This reflects the complexity and severity of the challenges facing the district due to ongoing armed conflict.¹¹ Interviews took place in the region of **Buenaventura**.

Nariño: The district of Nariño is located in southwestern Colombia. Post-Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) groups continue to operate in the area, which has the most cases of forced displacement and activities associated with the illicit economy, such as illegal mining and drug trafficking routes.¹² There is minimal state support offered to the people who live in Nariño, meaning that many needs go unmet. Interviews took place in the municipality of **Tumaco**.



Focus group with the Women Leaders Association (ASMUL).
Tumaco, January 25, 2024

Findings: Gendered impact of conflict in Colombia



The domination of the territory by armed groups brings with it the uprooting experienced by women who have had to leave the territory and begin to assume new customs, have to interact with new cultures and leave behind their ancestral traditions.”

Woman leader from Santander de Quilichao

The conflicts affecting Cauca, Valle de Cauca and Nariño are profoundly impacting women and girls. Restrictions to freedom of movement, gender-based violence, a lack of health care for women, displacement and a lack of livelihood opportunities are among the exacerbated issues.

2.1 Safety and restrictions of freedom of movement

The findings of this research show that, while there are restrictions to freedom of movement and worsening feelings of safety for everyone in a conflict setting, women and girls experience them differently because of gender inequalities.

The conflicts that are affecting Cauca, Valle de Cauca and Nariño are restricting women and girls' freedom of movement. There is reportedly a curfew in place, but women's movements cannot be limited to this time window even if they wanted to due to the increased violence and insecurity.

As a woman from the Canasteando organisation said, *“there are some women who can't go out to sell in the early hours of the morning for the simple fact that [most of the] armed actors now live within the territory, within the communities”*.

Many women work far from their homes, and they only manage to get back home after the curfew has started. This means they are at risk of getting in trouble for breaching the curfew; they also feel unsafe because they are out during curfew hours

when the streets are mostly deserted. Women reported being unable to go to their lands because of these restrictions, making them feel disconnected from ancestral practices¹³ that are linked with the land and farming.

The Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities of the Colombian Pacific have a deep relationship with the territory that transcends the merely economic or physical. For these communities, the territory is a vital space where cultural, spiritual and productive practices are developed, such as sustainable agriculture and natural reserves with ancestral or ritual connotations. This integral connection between territory, culture and wellbeing is part of their identity, and any interruption in their ability to interact with these spaces directly affects their psychological and community wellbeing. In fact, communities consider the territory to be a “corridor of life”, where daily practices and the ecosystem are deeply interconnected.¹⁴

Respondents also expressed concerns that the movement restrictions prevent them from visiting family and friends in different neighbourhoods, areas and towns, and from doing recreational activities.

A member of Asmul organisation said: *“The armed conflict has also allowed one to lose the habit of going to visit one's family [...] Not only in the mangroves, but also in the neighbourhoods affected by these armed conflicts, there's a sense of caution and necessity to avoid going out [...] They call the children to come home early because of this conflict, because it's an issue that also greatly affects the population of children”*.

Participants reported hearing of people who breached the curfew being killed or kidnapped for their transgression, and the constant presence of military groups and the police is exacerbating people's feelings of insecurity. All this has a huge impact on the community's sense of wellbeing and mental health because *“sometimes it is too painful to get these things out”*.

2.2 Gender-based violence (GBV)

Colombia is among the countries in the region with the highest number of cases of gender-based violence against women.¹⁵ According to a report submitted by The Advocates for Human Rights,¹⁶ “prevalence rates of intimate partner violence are some of the highest in the world”. In 2022, Colombia's National Institute of Legal and Forensic Medicine reported 47,771 cases of domestic violence and/or intimate partner violence. And things do not seem to be getting better. Indeed, despite the efforts of legislation, femicides and episodes of GBV continue to increase: according to the Observatorio de Femicidios de Colombia, as of August 2024, approximately 250 femicides have been registered, representing a 10% increase compared to the same period in the previous year. Moreover, gender inequality is also still pervasive in many areas of everyday life, influencing the increase in violence. The Office of the Counsellor for Women's Equality carried out a survey showing that the gendered division of labour, harmful traditional gender roles and unequal power relations between men and women have led to an increase in expressions of violence against women and girls. This violence is widely normalised and tolerated.

Among the biggest problems facing women and girls are sexual violence, a lack of reliable referrals for complaints of gender-based violence and inadequate care for survivors of gender-based violence.

Our findings reflect this, as women's rights and women-led organisations report that GBV has increased significantly in their communities. They report that the perpetrators include members of the police, military groups, gangs and other criminal groups, as well as family members. Many women interviewed highlighted the persistent issue of sexual exploitation and abuse, with women being forced into this because they lack the money to bribe groups to leave them alone. Some survivors are also forced to marry their perpetrators because they fear the perpetrator will turn on their family if they don't. As a member of Canasteando explained: *“there are also women, girls, adolescents, who have been forcibly seized by the armed groups themselves in order to be their women. They have forced the children to get involved, to take different paths. And it's not because they wanted to, but because they've forced it, [...] so that nothing happens to their family”*.

Displacement increases the risk to women and girls because it often means additional income issues, breakdown of safety nets and having little support in a new, unfamiliar place.

As if this were not enough, the lack of appropriate referral mechanisms and gender-sensitive care exacerbates the mistrust women and girls already have in the judicial system, leaving survivors to face the consequences of gender-based violence on their own. A woman from Vida Digna organisation told us,



there is a great lack of trust in the institutions and in the police. Women don't have confidence in the reporting process. This is why the work of women's organisations is important in the territory.”

A different, but no less significant, form of gender-based violence in Cauca, Valle de Cauca and Nariño is the mistreatment of pregnant women by medical staff. Reports indicate a troubling

trend where pregnant women are scheduled for caesarean sections with no medical necessity. This practice highlights the failure of medical professionals to provide unbiased information and constitutes an abuse of power. By exploiting the vulnerability of pregnant women, medical staff are performing unnecessary surgeries for financial gain.

2.3 Mental wellbeing

The ongoing conflict has profoundly impacted the mental health of communities, with women expressing major concerns about safety for themselves and their children. A member of Redpaser organisation told us that *“women’s emotional situation is severely affected by the presence of the permanent actors of the conflict”*. This strain is compounded by the lingering effects of the armed conflict, and the broader impact it has had on their daily lives. Some women confessed they live in constant fear of interacting with others *“because there’s a fear that this person you interacted with might be part of a violent environment or a gang. There is no trust anymore”*.

Several respondents flagged that a *“main concern is that their children may be linked to the conflict”*. Children’s perceptions of normalcy are being shaped by the conflict around them, and women fear that exposure to widespread violence will not only traumatise them but also lead to the normalisation of violent behaviour and crime. The recruitment of children into armed groups, and the lure of criminal activities, is exacerbated by a lack of alternative income opportunities. Participants also expressed concerns about their dire living conditions, and how they affect both themselves and their children.

Other repercussions of the conflict, such as economic hardship, movement restrictions, the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, the breakdown of social cohesion, and the



Focus group with Canasteando Association. Tumaco, December 23, 2023.

deterioration of family relationships, have been identified as significant stressors that exacerbate women’s mental health issues. As a result, many women leaders experience both mental and physical exhaustion, without adequate care or support systems in place to alleviate these pressures.

2.4 Livelihoods

Women highlighted that economic independence is a huge challenge, citing various barriers to earning a livelihood. These barriers include severe limitations on women’s economic activities, as gangs and criminal groups impose exorbitant illegal taxes on their incomes. Displacement and restricted freedom of movement have compounded these challenges, further impeding women’s ability to access viable livelihood opportunities. According to a member of Vida Digna,

“the conflict in Buenaventura has generated hunger and displacement for women. When food prices rise, women are forced to move to support their families. It is a displacement both internally and abroad”.

These restrictions not only limit women’s ability to secure financial stability but also heighten their vulnerability to criminal exploitation. Children are particularly affected, with many turning to using and distributing drugs. In 2023, the United Nations reported alarming increases in kidnappings, sexual violence, attacks on schools, and school dropouts, all of which were linked to the risk of child recruitment. Armed groups use subtle strategies to attract youth, such as offering school supplies, groceries, or money, and using social media to make contact.¹⁷

Consequently, children frequently take part in activities such as drug trafficking in order to compensate for their parents’ financial instability caused by a lack of job prospects. A woman from Canasteando organisation shared that *“as a parent, it also generates anguish when the children also fall there, fall into that abyss [...] and get into that life, not because they want it but they need to survive”*.

Participants also flagged that projects promoting women’s economic autonomy are disproportionately underfunded, with women

entrepreneurs in the Colombian Pacific facing challenges in linking their products to manufacture and marketing chains. Many are forced to limit the visibility of their businesses to avoid extortion and intimidation from criminal groups, who target them not only for their business efforts but also for promoting women’s independence.

...the lack of appropriate referral mechanisms and gender-sensitive care exacerbates the mistrust women and girls already have in the judicial system, leaving survivors to face the consequences of gender-based violence on their own

Findings: Challenges in responding to the conflict

WROs and WLOs have faced significant challenges in peacebuilding and conflict resolution due to harmful cultural norms and traditional gender roles. Despite Colombia's engagement with a WPS National Action Plan (adopting its first National Action Plan in 2018), the participation of women peacebuilders and decision-makers is often tokenistic, with challenges in the implementation of the plan and limited response capacities provided to WROs and WLOs.¹⁸

Women may be included in decision-making spaces to meet quotas but lack real power and influence. According to figures from the National Registry of the 2019 elections, only two women (6.3%) hold the position of governor out of 32 available seats. Out of 1,100 mayoralities, only 132 (12%) are held by women. Out of 418 deputies, only 73 are women (17.5%) and of 12,043 seats in the councils, only 2,157 (17.9%) are taken by female councillors. These figures have not changed significantly since the 2007 elections, meaning that, if this rate of growth continues, reaching parity would require about 150 years for mayors, 164 years for governorships, 130 years for assemblies and 142 years for councils.¹⁹

The women leaders we spoke to said the main challenges were: lack of awareness and political will; inadequate resources and funding provided to women's movements; persistent gender inequality and social norms; and security concerns for women leaders.

3.1 Gender inequality, safety and security

Deep-rooted gender inequality and patriarchal social norms continue to impede women's participation in peace and security processes. In many parts of Colombia, especially in rural areas, women still face significant cultural and social barriers that limit their access to decision-making spaces and undermine their capacity to influence national conversations on conflict resolution.

A leader from Santander the Quilichao reported that racism and distrust of indigenous people is a major barrier:



the stigmatisation of the ancestral practices of the communities is one of our biggest challenges to respond. We are accused of engaging in satanic practices and things like that. But they don't understand them".

Women's rights organisations and women-led organisations also have little access to decision-making spaces, both within their communities and in broader peacebuilding initiatives. As a result, these organisations struggle to gain recognition and support for their efforts, despite often being the first responders. Women leaders and activists also face constant threats, intimidation, and violence from armed groups. One member of a WRO stated: *"We would like to extend our efforts to other villages, but we are often unable to do so. Even moving within the same neighbourhood is difficult due to distance and danger. There was a time when you could simply walk there."*

Some of these threats are aimed at WROs specifically, with sexual violence and gang

violence targeted to the WROs trying to engage communities with peacebuilding activities. As one respondent put it: *"The women of this community are the ones who are in all the spaces, they are the builders of peace, the ones who make the invitation to the assemblies, the ones who contribute to the preservation of customs, the creation of care routes, the support in the face of displacement. And because of this, at the same time, they are the ones who are disappearing and being murdered the most"*. The targeting of women leaders further diminishes the ability of WROs to operate safely.

3.2 Lack of context-specific support from international actors

From our survey findings, only 24% of our survey respondents felt that the international community is responding effectively and sufficiently to the consequences their community is experiencing post-conflict.

Some WROs reported that INGO activities within Colombia sometimes lack context-specific and conflict-sensitive approaches, which limits their effectiveness in addressing the needs of the communities. A women leader spoke to an international donor who *"operated only in a one-size-fits-all approach, but how can this work in our context? The conflict can be so different from department to department, and how violence expands differs from one actor to another"*. This approach has meant programmes often fail to consider how to support resilience and long-term peace, due to the INGO's limited understanding of the conflict and cultural dynamics. This gap in understanding is particularly problematic as the conflict within Colombia is multi-faceted, involving a wide range of actors including government forces, paramilitaries, guerrilla groups, and criminal organisations, all with varying degrees of influence in different regions.

By not conducting thorough conflict analyses, international actors may struggle to identify and

respond to the local power dynamics and cultural practices, such as ancestral traditions that are essential to the identity and resilience of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. A women leader emphasised that some INGOs *"follow their set programme, and this can have slow procedures, and slow distributions, despite the context changing. They do not sit to better understand the needs or how this may have changed from their initial risk assessment at the beginning of the crisis, and therefore cannot meaningfully address the needs."* This oversight not only undermines the relevance of their interventions, but also ties up funding that could be used for initiatives that could address the root causes of the conflict.

These frameworks often prioritise immediate relief, focusing on food, shelter, and healthcare without fully integrating the cultural dimensions of wellbeing that are critical to these communities. This can lead to a focus on Western healthcare over traditional medicine, or an emphasis on economic aid that does not account for the spiritual and communal aspects of land use that are vital to ancestral practices. Such gaps in understanding can marginalise traditional cultural systems and contribute to the erosion of ancestral knowledge. Another unintended consequence of international aid is the creation of dependency on external resources. With international organisations often prioritising short-term relief over long-term sustainability, some communities have become reliant on external assistance, diverting attention from traditional forms of self-sufficiency that are tied to ancestral practices, such as sustainable farming and natural resource management.

3.3 Limited funding opportunities

The scarcity of long-term, flexible funding was consistently raised as a significant issue for WROs. Most funding opportunities available to these organisations are short-term, project-

based grants, which makes it difficult for them to plan sustainable programs that address deep-rooted issues like gender-based violence, economic inequality, and women's participation in peacebuilding. This limited funding model often requires organisations to focus on immediate outputs, rather than investing in institutional capacity building, staff retention, or long-term strategic goals, with a participant stating: "Access to resources is so important and we have no knowledge on how to easily access the resources. We don't want intermediaries. We want to take care of bringing the resources directly to the women or to the beneficiaries".

Smaller organisations in Colombia frequently find themselves competing with larger, more established organisations for limited funds. International donors tend to favour larger NGOs that have the capacity to manage extensive budgets and deliver measurable outcomes on a larger scale. Instead, a woman leader claimed: "due to the limited funding, we aren't able to continue working or continue a project we started. Funding mobilisation is one of the biggest challenges". As a result, smaller WROs that are deeply embedded in local communities and understand the grassroots challenges are often overlooked, despite their critical role in advocating for women's rights and responding to the specific needs of women and girls.

This includes lack of budget and capacity to address their core needs, and inability to engage in more meaningful long-term work.

3.4 Lack of gender-responsive programmes



The issues that concern women and girls, must be discussed among women themselves, not by others for those women and girls".

WRO member, Colombia.

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Even though women's protection has received further recognition in Colombia, especially in the context of peacebuilding after the 2016 peace agreement with FARC-EP, programmes responding to the conflict and providing humanitarian assistance still do not focus on women's needs. Many donors and international humanitarian actors prioritise broader humanitarian and development issues without dedicating sufficient resources to women's rights and gender equality initiatives. This has left women's protection overlooked in projects, leading to a lack of trust in actors to implement women's rights. To fill the gap, women leaders have set up referral pathways and information sharing on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

As one participant framed it: "There is a great lack of trust in the institutions and in the police. Women don't have confidence in the reporting process that is set up. Where international actors have referral systems, most people here don't understand the process, and so they come to us. This is why the work of women's organisations is important in the territory".

Too often, international organisations implement top-down approaches, where decisions are made on behalf of women and girls rather than including them in discussions about the issues that directly impact their lives. This exclusion perpetuates the misalignment of priorities, particularly around issues such as gender-based violence, economic insecurity, and access to healthcare, with a woman participant stressing: "No one comes and asks us what we need. Right now, there are no access to services, no security, no guarantees for

girls and women to have their rights protected. But this is not considered".

To improve their effectiveness, INGOs need to engage in more robust conflict analysis, prioritise the inclusion of women in peacebuilding conversations and ensure that their interventions respect and integrate local cultural practices. This shift would lead to more sustainable, context-sensitive solutions that could truly address the needs of Colombia's diverse communities.

Focus group with the Cauca River Basin Community Council and the Teta and Mazamorreros Rivers Microbasin. Santander de Quilichao, March 4, 2024



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Findings: Alternative solutions for peace and security

In response to the ongoing conflict, WROs, with the support of ActionAid, have pioneered peacebuilding initiatives in several key thematic areas. They have contributed to peacebuilding through alternative livelihood programmes for women leaders, peacebuilding activities in the communities they serve, and initiatives to promote women's safety.

4.1 Re-defining 'peace' and 'security'



Peace is not the reality here. When we talk about peace, we see it as a utopia. So the question we women ask is, what can we do instead to develop our own peace?"

Woman leader, Colombia.

In Colombia, women-led and women's rights organisations have had to redefine what they mean by 'peace' and 'security'. WROs have

started initiatives to support communities, becoming well-known and trusted in the neighbourhoods where they work, which helps build protective relationships and fosters a sense of mutual respect. By integrating themselves in their communities, women leaders have established a network of allies and like-minded organisations that offer support and alerts in times of danger, supporting their personal and collective safety.

An important aspect of this safety includes staying abreast of local conflict dynamics and peacebuilding efforts. A member of a WRO explained this as: *"working in alliances, alongside our sisters and friends, means we are one louder voice. This is how we are working for our own safety"*. Women leaders continuously observe and analyse conflict dynamics to determine where it is safe to work or travel. This allows them to adjust their strategies accordingly, such as moving an in-person workshop online or choosing a different

Stories of Change: Innovative peace-building activities

ActionAid's partner, a women's rights organisation called the Asmul Organisation, was recognised with an award for being the "best conciliators in equity at both the national and international levels." A representative from Asmul explained, "We received this award because we strive to resolve community issues the traditional way—by sitting down, talking things

through, reuniting family members in conflict, and avoiding violence."

The award recognised the effort made by the conciliators to re-establish peace after a dispute broke out between two groups of young people. Through nonviolent communication practices, the active participation of all members of the families affected by the dispute, and by including important local figures in the reconciliation process, the conciliators were able to resolve the dispute without violence.

location to avoid a volatile area. These safety precautions are necessary for continuing their advocacy work, and the solidarity has created much-needed connection for many women groups, who see it *"almost as if we have formed our own form of psychosocial support. For us, but for our communities as well"*.

The concept of collective healing was also highlighted by other WROs, who spoke of nurturing activities in their communities to bring back a sense of community and reconciliation in the aftermath of conflict. These activities included joint cooking classes, community dances and parades, involving all members of the community without discrimination. These activities aim to enhance peace within communities and create new relationships for a more inclusive future: *"We as women have a memory of what has happened, but we use it to help us grow together, and we continue to build peace together, we continue to build resilience together"*.

4.2 Re-building livelihoods

Women and their organisations in Colombia have had to find alternative ways to rebuild their livelihoods, particularly in the aftermath of displacement and the loss of access to land. Respondents shared that their organisations have established courses in entrepreneurship, where women receive training in skills such as cocoa farming and chocolate making. These programs are designed to promote new income opportunities that help women gain economic independence, despite their limited access to land due to displacement and disputes. Women have expanded this initiative by incorporating hospitality services, such as hosting visitors who come to sample their chocolate. As a woman from Canasteando notes: *"the issue of cocoa processing is something very fundamental for all peace, because it is replacing what they called 'illicit*

Stories of Change: Ancestral practices as a source of resilience

Amidst Colombia's armed conflict, ancestral practices have provided a source of resilience and resistance for women. These practices, which often centre on community solidarity, healing, and spiritual strength, have helped women and their communities cope with violence, displacement, and trauma. For many, reclaiming ancestral rituals and customs is an act of defiance against the forces that threaten their lands and ways of life.

The women's groups we spoke to mentioned the importance of the figure of the "comadre" of the Community Council, who is in charge of the initial reception and psychosocial first aid for those affected. This role is fundamental in the process of care and holistic healing for the Afro-Colombian women of northern Cauca. In addition, healing circles for body, soul and spirit, known as "quilombos", have been established by women's groups. These circles also promote collective healing based on ancestral practices.

crops'. Our product, the product of peace, brings out everything better, all the good things we have, of course, yes, because the product that we present when someone takes it, knows that it is a product made by women. It comes from a territory that has been hit but it's [still] there and my people have good things, not just bad things". By focusing on sustainable business ventures,

these efforts don't only enable women to support themselves, but also to contribute to their communities' economic recovery.

In addition to promoting women's economic independence, women's movements are supporting young people to find new passions. By engaging youth in meaningful activities such as crafts and entrepreneurship, these programs provide livelihood alternatives to joining armed groups, by offering skills for a more stable future. Some WLOs have done this in conjunction with cultural activities that draw on ancestral knowledge. These efforts aim to create sustainable economic opportunities while promoting women's independence and fostering a culture of peace. For instance, the women of Canasteando engaged young people in food sovereignty initiatives and cultural activities, such as ancestral songs and dances, to guide them away from negative influences. This project provided children and young people with a sense of belonging and community, helping them stay on a positive path. Inspired by the project, other women and children in the community were drawn to join in. The impact on the community was profound: *"One earns their daily bread by doing good, not harm,"* said a local leader.

This focus on youth rehabilitation also serves as a preventive measure, ensuring that future generations are empowered to pursue livelihoods that are unconnected to criminal activity and help preserve their cultural heritage.

4.3 Women's rights and the root causes of conflict

Women's rights organisations have attempted to fill the gap between the reality of the conflict in affected areas and the short-term response from the international community, by focusing on the root causes of conflict, and aiming to support women who are not being reached by the INGO response.



The outside world, they do not see ongoing violence in Colombia as a 'humanitarian conflict' and therefore responses do not cross through the Nexus. This means a lot of root causes of the conflict are never addressed, and we have to address these."

WRO member, Colombia

WROs have held conversations around regional racism and the stigmatisation of certain communities, to tackle these issues and work to dismantle the prejudices that fuel conflict and hinder reconciliation. Through a combination of education, advocacy, and community engagement activities, these initiatives aim to create a more inclusive and resilient society where all members, regardless of their background, can participate in and benefit from the peacebuilding process, with an emphasis on empowering the next generation of leaders.



Stories of change: Grassroots action against gender-based violence

ActionAid-Alianza worked with WRO partner organisations, Asmul, Vida Digna and Redpaser, to address gender-based violence in Nariño and Valle del Cauca.

Their actions included awareness-raising activities, programmes to prevent the normalisation of violence among children and adolescents, and the enhancement of referral mechanisms and care for survivors of gender-based violence. These efforts aimed to combat gender-based violence and support survivors in rebuilding their lives.

In Nariño, Asmul was able to address the problem of GBV not only by involving survivors in the processes of care and

support, but also by working to sensitise men to the attitudes that lead to GBV. Through its events, workshops and trainings and with the support of local and international NGOs, Asmul was able to involve a significant part of the population, becoming a point of reference within the neighbourhoods where they implement their actions.

Vida Digna also provided structured psychosocial support and helped strengthen the referral pathways to enhance care for survivors of gender-based violence. In addition to this, Redpaser was founded in 2012 as a direct outcome of the awareness raised by these programmes to tackle gender-based violence.

4.4 Diversification of funding sources


With traditional international donors struggling to provide flexible, accessible funding, WROs have sought to diversify their funding sources by looking elsewhere. Many have tapped into community-based fundraising, local government partnerships, and even private sector collaborations. By reducing reliance on a single source of funding, they are better able to secure financial stability and ensure the continuity of their projects. This approach has enabled WROs to keep operating even when external funding becomes scarce or unstable.

WROs told us they have strengthened their efforts by forming collaborative networks like coalitions, to pool resources, share knowledge, and amplify their impact. By collaborating they are better positioned to access larger funding opportunities, support each other in advocacy, and share the administrative burden of grant applications. This collective action helps smaller organisations survive in a competitive funding environment

and provides them with a stronger voice when advocating for women's rights.

Many WROs have shifted toward local, flexible solutions that are tailored to their communities' immediate needs. For example, some organisations have focused on providing microfinance or local entrepreneurship training to empower women economically, while others offer legal support and psychosocial services to survivors of gender-based violence. By keeping their projects community-focused and adaptable, they ensure that even limited funding has a meaningful impact.

In addition, some of the WROs we spoke to have chosen to work with INGOs for external advocacy. Due to limited funds and capacity, these organisations struggle to engage externally outside of 'immediate' emergencies. Using larger INGOs for advocacy helps WROs amplify the voices of the women and communities they work with, without committing to a full partnership or funding arrangement.



Chocolates made by women's movements, to rebuild their livelihood and generate income in line with ActionAid-Alianza WPS projects

Conclusion and recommendations

Our findings reveal that the long-lasting armed conflict and its aftermath in Colombia disproportionately affected women and girls, posing risks to their safety and security such as an increase in GBV and displacement. This research highlighted that ongoing hostilities and the multi-faced character of the conflict created significant obstacles for some international agencies to deliver context-specific activities. This one-size fits all approach, which often prioritises immediate relief, focusing on food, shelter, and healthcare, failed to consider and support resilience and long-term peace. The limited understanding of the context-specific needs of women, and cultural dynamics, which are critical for those communities, resulted in failing to effectively address their long-term needs.

Despite the challenges and obstacles such as lack of funding, harmful cultural norms, and violence, local and national women's rights organisations, with the support of ActionAid-Alianza, have found alternative ways to fill the gaps left by international actors. This was done by pioneering peacebuilding initiatives such as alternative livelihoods programmes for women leaders, peacebuilding activities with communities they serve, and initiatives to promote women's safety. The WROs and WLOs also work closely with the Indigenous communities by supporting the preservation and revitalisation of the ancestral practices via programmatic work and using those traditional practices as a form of resistance and healing from the trauma of the conflict. Any exclusion of WROs and WLOs perpetuates a misalignment of priorities within the WPS agenda, particularly around issues such as gender-based

violence, economic insecurity, and access to healthcare.

This analysis, and the corresponding recommendations, aim to address the complex challenges faced by women in conflict-affected areas of Colombia and suggest pathways for empowering women through improved policies, funding, and community-driven initiatives and training. This is done through developing technical expertise on agricultural and livestock management, financial support, technical assistance, and inclusive approaches that recognise the unique contributions of women and youth-led organisations in peacebuilding and development.

The organisations we spoke to collaborated to write the recommendations outlined below, which aim to enhance the participation of Colombian women and youth in peacebuilding and humanitarian responses, both locally and internationally.

Recommendations for international organisations:

1. Participation:

The international community should actively engage with local women and youth-led organisations. This involves not only acknowledging their efforts but providing substantial support to help them undertake peacebuilding work effectively within their localities, including by:

- Sharing information in an accurate and timely manner during humanitarian response and peacebuilding activities.
- Strengthening the capacity of local women and youth by providing them with the necessary resources, training and skills to engage more effectively with conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities.
- Facilitating more opportunities for Colombian women to participate in global spaces, to raise awareness of the conflict.

2. Protection:

Ensure women's protection is meaningfully included in programme design. This includes making considerations for gender-based violence and women's protection, including partner violence, and early or forced marriage. These efforts must be accompanied by frequent gender-transformative conflict sensitivity training.

3. Conflict analysis: INGOs should undertake thorough conflict analysis and risk assessments for every programme, which must be updated regularly to account for the volatile situation.

Recommendations for local and national government:

1. Partnership and Involvement:

- Local and national governments should provide sufficient opportunities for local peacebuilding initiatives to utilise their skills and influence in peacebuilding and conflict resolution activities. This involves recognising and integrating their efforts into formal, national peacebuilding strategies.
- It is vital for the Government to map out and collaborate with a broader range of actors in the community around peacebuilding and conflict mitigation. This includes women, youth, older people and religious leaders– their detailed knowledge of the issues facing women in the area can help make informed and gender-sensitive programmes. This can be achieved by increase in meaningful participation and involvement of these groups in the peacebuilding spaces through the engagement with the government. With adequate funding and capacity-building mechanisms those groups can lead on generational change and build new leadership of young people.

2. Programming:

Conflict prevention must be given significant attention by actors at all levels. This proactive approach aims to mitigate conflicts before they escalate, reducing the need for extensive post-conflict recovery measures. This can be achieved by increase in involvement of local women's rights and women-led organisations, and youth groups in conflict prevention that enable them to identify and report potential conflict triggers and risks earlier and support with conflict mediations.

3. National Policies:

- Long-term investment must be dedicated to repairing the legal and judicial system, to challenge the entrenched culture of impunity in Colombia.
- Update Colombia's WPS National Action Plan and ensure accountability to women's rights. Promote more spaces for participation, with the aim of facilitating communication between community-based organisations and larger, supporting institutions.

Recommendations for donors:

1. Funding Mechanisms:

Donors should provide long-term, multi-year and flexible funding which can be adapted to the needs of the most affected communities, and allow for different mechanisms for funding streams, e.g. providing cash rather than bank transfers. This type of funding supports the development of comprehensive peacebuilding programs that can have a lasting impact on the community.

2. Donors should support the creation of accessible peacebuilding resources to be used by women and youth. This can be done via translated material, infographics, and pamphlets which are crucial in removing the barriers such as language or literacy and enable participation of the most vulnerable groups in peace processes. Without adequate financial support and inclusion in decision making spaces, local women's rights, women-led and youth organisations are unable to participate and support conflict resolutions and mitigate risks in its early stages.

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Cover image:

Maria, a women leader leading on chocolate making as part of livelihood re-building

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