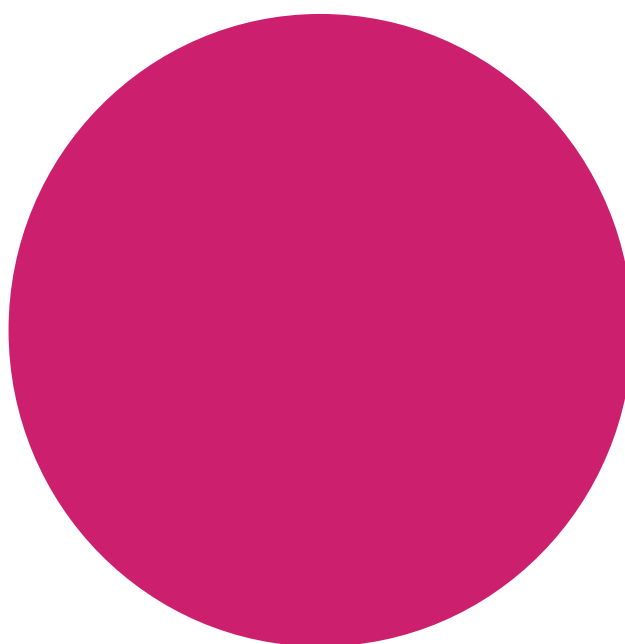


Misean Cara Learning Brief No. 2021/04

WOMEN IN PEACEBUILDING

Voices from Latin America



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Mission Support from Ireland

1. Introduction

In April 2021, Misesa Cara organised the online event “*Women in Peacebuilding: Voices from Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Peru*” to give women in peacebuilding a voice, to listen to and learn from their experiences, and to understand their desires and struggles, which leave a legacy for their children and for society as a whole.

Women in all four countries experienced conflict and human rights violations over many years, but have since become active in the fight for justice and have managed to get the state and society to recognise the wrongs that were done, and to have their rights respected.

Both men and women were victims of the injustices described in this document and are survivors who have campaigned and continue to campaign for justice. While this document concentrates on the particular experiences of women in relation to violence, it is not intended in any way to ignore or diminish the experiences and the role played by men in the areas concerned.

2. Peace: Concept and challenges

Throughout history, peace has mainly been seen as the absence of war; war was regarded inevitable until German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s ‘Perpetual Peace’ (1795).

In 1945, the founding charter of the United Nations stated as its first purpose ‘to maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace’.

In the 1963 encyclical ‘Peace on Earth’, Pope John XXIII pointed out that peace among all peoples is founded on truth, justice, love and freedom. In 1969, Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung described the modern concept of peace, stating that it is not only the opposite of war, but the opposite of all forms of violence:

- *Direct violence*, referring to direct aggression (including war)

- *Structural violence*, associated with injustice in society and between countries
- *Cultural violence*, referring to the ideas that legitimise all forms of violence

Following this description, peace is the absence of direct, structural and cultural violence. Similarly, Galtung’s studies led him to identify two forms of peace:

- *Negative peace*, i.e., the absence of aggression, exploitation, and discriminatory ideas.
- *Positive peace*, i.e., positive relations between people in social structures and in culture.

Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, another peace approach¹ emerged, valuing the relationship between people and the environment, and understanding that nature must be respected and cared for². The relationship of people with nature, so present in indigenous cultures, was introduced into Western thinking about peace.

Agreeing on one concept of peace is challenging, with endless perspectives to consider. Still, for Latin America, peace remains the greatest challenge. It is a fundamental value of people and societies; and, above all, something that has not yet been fulfilled. This Learning Brief presents some of these struggles to achieve peace.

3. Colombia: A long peace process

Armed, political, and social conflict, as well as peace negotiations and agreements, characterised Colombia throughout the twentieth century. Two additional factors have also been notable:

1. Successive governments reneged on agreements, particularly regarding the contentious areas of rural development and access to land.
2. The assassination of civil society leaders and demobilised ex-combatants.

The current conflict began in the 1960s, with the emergence of guerrilla groups like the *FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army)*. Negotiations and agreements in the 1980s and 1990s led to the demobilisation of several

¹ <https://www.mimp.gob.pe/webs/mimp/sispod/pdf/78.pdf>

² Introducción a la cultura de paz, Ministerio de la Mujer y Desarrollo Social, Peru 2009.

organisations, but assassinations and non-compliance with peace treaties continued.

Other actors in the conflict included right-wing paramilitary groups and the armed forces. Drug trafficking and other illicit activities, such as illegal mining, contributed to escalating the conflict and internationalising it, particularly to Venezuela and Ecuador.

Despite this, for civil society organisations, especially women's organisations, the search for peace has been persistent.

*"Peace walks if violence against women ends".
Soraida Fuelantala and Southwestern Colombia Women*

The most recent peace agreement between the FARC-EP and the government, signed in late 2016, took four years of preparation and another four years of negotiations, during which women demanded the inclusion of a gender focus. The agreement led to advances in disarmament, a reduction of violence, the reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life, and a valuable institutional system of truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition. Unfortunately, it also saw the polarisation of the country, non-compliance (mainly in the area of rural development), the occupation of former FARC-EP areas by other illegal armed groups, the repositioning of paramilitaries, and the assassination of 260 signatories to the agreement.

"Since the agreement was signed in November 2016, until March this year [2021], more than 1,150 leaders and human rights defenders have been assassinated. Of these, almost 30% are indigenous and around 15% are women."

Fabio Mesa – Colombian Social Development Service (SERCOLDES)

The Colombian organisation SERCOLDES, which (with support from Misesa Cara member the Little Sisters of the Assumption) has been promoting women's organisations in different communities, provides support to networks seeking to achieve the full realisation of women's rights in their territories, strengthening the social structures and carrying out actions to prevent gender violence.

These networks include the *Red Departamental de Mujeres del Cauca*, the *Red de Mujeres del Norte del Cauca*, the *Mesa Departamental de Mujeres de*

Nariño and the *Confluencias Municipales de mujeres del Valle del Cauca*.

The networks strengthen women's organisations and their political participation, build strategic alliances, and contribute to women's economic autonomy. They also advance female leadership and social transformation from an ethnic and cultural perspective, proposing public policies that promote women's rights.



Women's human rights activists of Departmental Women's Roundtable of Nariño

Women were not included in the early negotiations between the government and FARC-EP in 2012, until women's and feminist movements demanded to be included in the process. Going forward, women's visibility was ensured through the creation of the Gender Subcommittee, composed of ten members: five from the Government and five from FARC-EP. It was the first sub-commission of its kind, and the first time that the need to include a gender focus in the peace agreements reached was explicit.³

The networks mentioned above support the peace agreement from a gender perspective and have been working with Afro-descendant, indigenous and mestizo women, providing different analyses based on rights, land and the environment.

One of the important results of this work is the involvement of these networks in the monitoring and evaluation of departmental and municipal development plans, generating analyses and recommendations on gender equity, human rights and the implementation of the peace agreements.

³ *La paz sin las mujeres ¡No va!*. El proceso de paz colombiano desde la perspectiva de género. Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals, n.121, p. 7-18. April 2019

They also provide ongoing training for soldiers on women's rights to prevent the abuse of girls and women by armed forces; and support women's political participation, e.g., as mayors and council members, to contribute to the preparation of public gender policies and regional development plans.

The tireless, and sometimes dangerous, work of women to overcome gender-based violence and contribute to peacebuilding is both valuable and challenging, but also always full of motivation and hope.

The stronger the pain, the stronger we become...we will not give up...we have to be united, progress for us is not giving up, it is always moving forward!

Agueda Sumi, Tumaco, Colombia

4. El Salvador: Seeking Justice

The El Mozote Massacre

In December 1981, the Salvadoran Army executed at least 986 people, including 558 children under 12, in El Mozote and surrounding communities in El Salvador. These events were directly linked to the internal conflict that took thousands of lives during the 1980s. The army claimed these operations and the systematic violation of human rights were necessary in fighting guerrilla forces.

After many years of campaigning by survivors, in 2010, the Inter-American Court on Human Rights (IACHR) concluded that the massacres of El Mozote and surrounding areas violated the most elementary principles underlying the American Convention.⁴ The IACHR made a series of recommendations for the State to settle the historical debt to the victims, their surviving families and society who, after 30 years, still did not know the truth (and no sanctions against those responsible had been imposed). In October 2012, the IACHR recognised the State's responsibility for the crimes and human rights violations committed by the Salvadoran Army in El Mozote. The events were eventually recognised as a crime against humanity, nationally and internationally.

The Role of Missionary Sisters

Miseen Cara member, the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary began work with the

community of El Mozote in 2006, promoting the creation of an organisation to lobby for justice⁵; many women became involved in its work. After years of effort, the organisation galvanised community involvement and worked tirelessly until the ruling of the IACHR was secured.

The role of women was key in this process. They dedicated their lives to achieving justice and now, after campaigning for many years, they are older adults – many have already passed away – waiting for this ruling to be fulfilled, and to gain justice at a national level. It has been a fight as women, but also as mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters, who have been seeking to vindicate their loved ones.



Juana Anteportan Sánchez and Antonia López Sánchez, carrying the remains of their relatives after the exhumations.

In their efforts to obtain justice, many women have been able to give their testimonies (as have men), to share their fears, overcome barriers and accompany others in asserting their rights. They gained prominence through:

- **Dialogue with the government**, which, according to the women, is sometimes difficult. Still, they became representatives of their communities at the dialogues established to evaluate progress in fulfilling reparation measures for the victims.
- **Giving testimonies** in the judicial processes, where women, even those who were sexually abused, have very active participation.

⁴ The American Convention on Human Rights, is an international human rights instrument applicable to the signatory American States, that establishes international regulations outlining the roles of states in protecting human rights. It entered into force on July 18, 1978.

⁵ Now: *Asociación Promotora de Derechos Humanos de El Mozote (APDHEM)*.

"The witnesses at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights were women: Rufina Amaya⁶, Dorila Márquez, Margarita Chicas, Rosario Lopez... women who have been following these processes of denunciation for many years, until today, coming to be seen as representatives of this effort.

Krisia Moya – Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary

This example of the El Mozote survivors, and particularly the women, has inspired other similarly affected communities to seek truth and justice, and shed a light of hope, so that the truth about other massacres may be revealed. Many survivors were afraid to speak up due to the rape and violations suffered, but they found the courage to share their experiences despite the challenges to talk about themselves, their families, and what they faced during those events.

Women have carried out significant work – and continue to do so – to the benefit of all women who suffered abuse and violence. They continue to fight for their voices to be heard. And far from forgetting what they have lived through, they are determined to remember the victims, *their* people. For them, the search for justice is also a search for the truth about what happened to their relatives, a truth that in many cases still remains unknown.

"I am still looking for my nieces. The battalion took my two nieces, my sister's daughters, and other cousins of my nieces and to date nothing is known of them. We are many women who have been fighting; my sister who is 80 years old is still looking for her daughters with great hope of seeing them again, as there have been other reunions, but only of my two nieces nothing is known, that is why we continue in the fighting".

Reina Dionila Portillo De Silva, Association for the Promotion of Human Rights of El Mozote.

The women continue to work as members of APDHEM, mobilising people and advocating at the national and international level. They work to finally bring to justice those responsible, and to achieve full reparation for survivors and their families. While there has been important progress, they still have a long way to go to achieve full justice.

⁶ Rufina Amaya was the first woman to testify regarding the events of El Mozote, but she died before the case came to court. Nevertheless, her testimony was read into the record.

⁷ Data from the Commission for Historical Clarification of Guatemala (CEH, by its Spanish acronym): <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/guatemala-memoria-silencio/guatemala-memoria-del-silencio.pdf>

5. Guatemala: armed conflict from a female perspective

The context of civil war

In 1996, a Peace Agreement was signed between the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (UNRG) and the State of Guatemala, which after 36 years put an end to the civil war in the country. During the conflict, the armed forces followed *Plan Sofia*, a strategy of extermination of the indigenous and peasant population. According to the commanders, by killing and dismantling structures in rural indigenous communities, the guerrillas would lose access to infrastructure and people to recruit. Another strategy, *Plan Victoria 82*, saw a massive deployment of the army, and the indiscriminate killing of children, women, men and the elderly. The *Scorched-Earth Plan* consisted of burning all that could help the guerrillas: houses, animals and equipment. By taking women and forcing them to serve the army, this plan left communities plundered and destroyed.

Sepur Zarco: Seeking justice for women

Sepur Zarco is a case of extreme violence against women. The origin of their ordeal is in their communities' struggles to assert their right to land in El Estor/Izabal, a Maya Q'eqchí area where land dispossession was common. Men in and around the area applied to the National Land Institute for legal clarity on the rights to the land they lived on. These men were abducted and killed by the Guatemalan Army, while the women were taken as slaves and held by force in the Sepur Zarco military base from 1982 to 1988.

During the civil war, it is estimated that 30,000 women, 89% of whom were indigenous Mayans, were victims of sexual violence. In 98% of the cases, State agents were responsible for these crimes⁷. This level of violence is explained by the existence of ethnic and gender inequalities, exacerbated by profound racism at all social levels of the country.

After many years, the Mayan women decided to seek justice and to have their aggressors brought to court. They wanted to make the crimes of the

armed forces known, because they themselves were looked upon as 'prostitutes' by their own communities. In their own words, seeking justice meant "returning" the blame to their aggressors.

"Because you got involved with the soldiers, they killed your husband... because you fought for the land, they killed your children".

Alejandrina Cano, UNAMG, describing how the women of Sepur Zarco were viewed by their communities

According to an analysis on armed conflict⁸, the violation of women's rights does not end with rape. The stigmatisation by society and the lack of institutional mechanisms that recognise this crime as seriously as it deserves, ends up making the victim partly responsible; subjected to continuous confrontations in which their private lifestyles are questioned, and they end up being judged.

In 2011, 15 women, who for years had been searching for their husbands and seeking reparation for physical and material damage, filed a lawsuit. When the Sepur Zarco trial took place in 2016, 12 women testified about their experiences. In addition, 14 expert studies confirmed the women's testimonies and found that they should receive compensation. One study presented forensic architectural evidence of the military base to show how the women of Sepur Zarco had been systematically raped.

"The High-Risk Court concludes that the accused, Lieutenant Esteelmer Reyes and Civilian Heriberto Valdéz, perpetrated sexual abuse, sexual and domestic slavery against women and must remain in prison for 120 and 240 years, respectively, which are not commutable...".

Verdict & sentencing in the Sepur Zarco trial

The Court also chose 26 February as a day to commemorate the victims of sexual violence, and sexual and domestic slavery in Guatemala. This day is important to the survivors, as the community now approaches them and no longer sees them as guilty parties. Now, their community accompanies and believes them; and recognise that this happened not only to the women of Sepur Zarco but to many women in the country.

"It was 20 long days in court and the women, when they heard the sentence, only raised their hands as a sign of joy, but also as a sign of gratitude to the community that was with them, in this struggle, in their struggle, as brave women who continue to fight, fighting for access to land".

Alejandrina Cano, UNAMG

The Court also committed to reopening the land claim files, building a health centre, improving the infrastructure of the elementary school, opening a new secondary school, and offering scholarships for women and children. The sentence also included economic reparations for each of the survivors, to be paid by the convicted parties. The State of Guatemala is still required to continue its search for the missing husbands of the 15 women.

The ruling in favour of the female survivors established a precedent in Guatemalan justice, as it was the first time a war-related sexual crime was brought to court. The grandmothers of Sepur Zarco, as they are known today, hope to see these commitments become a reality, thus putting an end to the extreme poverty faced by their community. But, despite their insistence, the promises have not yet been fulfilled, so their struggle continues.

6. Peru: The struggle of indigenous women

In the 1980s and 1990s, a peace concept emerged that highly values the relationship between people and the environment, seeing the human species as an element within a larger unit – Nature – which must be respected and cared for. This vision was subsequently incorporated into the Earth Charter⁹, a document drawn up by world leaders and scientists in an intercultural dialogue. Associated with this vision are the ideas of ecodevelopment and sustainable development. Thus, the relationship between people and Nature, so common in indigenous cultures, was introduced into Western thinking about peace.

Women and Mother Nature in Peru

Of Peru's total population, 20% identify as indigenous, Andean or Amazonian; 52% are women. Indigenous women's close ties to their

⁸ Género y Poder en el Conflicto Armado. Verdades develadas, verdades que rebelan. Narda Henríquez. In Fronteras Interiores, identidad, diferencia y protagonismo de las mujeres. Maruja Barrig, ed. Lima, IEP 2007

⁹ <https://earthcharter.org/>

land, territory and natural resources, which underpin their cultural identity, knowledge and spirituality, affect them differently than men, because effective access to their lands is directly related to the preservation of their livelihoods and way of life. Yet indigenous women face greater insecurity over the tenure and governance of their land.

“...and in this struggle for our rights is also our struggle for Mother Earth, Mother Nature; a struggle to defend the land, as for us indigenous women, without Mother Nature there is no continuity of life. ...We indigenous women have also been promoting, in the case of Peru, the recognition of the rights of Mother Nature, because Mother Nature also has rights”.

Melania Canales, ONAMIAP – Peru

Despite being actors in the promotion of food security, community governance and the management of natural resources such as water, forests, soils, seeds, plants and animals, they have access only to smaller and lower quality landholdings. The norms that regulate the recognition and titling of peasant and native communities have been in force for over 30 years, and their complexity has hindered and even prevented the legal physical regulation of communal property in Peru. These norms do not include affirmative gender measures that would make visible the rights of indigenous women with respect to property management.

“We indigenous women always see Mother Earth as part of us, as if she were our brothers and sisters, because our ancestors are resting on those lands... That is what motivates us to take care of her, but there is also our medicine, our food or what she gives us. The continuity of life has to do precisely with Mother Nature. But in this defence, we also suffer violence, macho violence that is in our communities, that sees indigenous women as inferior, that’s why we are controlled, controlled by the men”.

Melania Canales, ONAMIAP - Peru

In recent years, community statutes have been modified to recognise Quechua and Aymara women as qualified community members, enabling a group of women to assume leadership positions in their communities. The 2017 National Census in Peru

captured the type of activities carried out by people without receiving economic remuneration for their work. Of the almost 262,000 indigenous people who reported working on farms, only 35% were women.

For indigenous people the world is a living, integrated and sacred totality. This natural totality is the “Pacha”, which comprises all living things, including water, mountains, stars, etc. Peace is seen as a state when the world is calm, when the Pacha is undisturbed. In the Andean concept, there is a solidarity between people, animals and nature. Hence, the introduction of a social disorder is not only perceived as a danger to that solidarity but to nature itself, bringing diseases or intolerable suffering such as hailstorms, frost or earthquakes¹⁰.

In 2020, the National Organisation of Indigenous Women (ONAMIAP) drafted a bill on the rights of Mother Earth and has since conducted advocacy work in the Peruvian Congress for the bill to be passed. The bill recognises the rights of ecosystems and species, seeking to increase protection measures for all living beings, as they have the right to exist, develop naturally, regenerate and evolve. While the bill is still under review, the advocacy work of indigenous women, through ONAMIAP, continues. The approval of this bill would be an opportunity to generate a dialogue with indigenous peoples about their relationship with the territory and their vision of Good Living, a vision that is relevant throughout the world, considering the precarious state of the environment.

“Our territories are being handed over for extractive activities, which bring problems such as human trafficking promote diseases, pollute our rivers, and kill all living beings and make our lands unproductive. This is happening in Peru and Latin America. We resist, that is why we are “indigenous women in resistance”; resistance to an extractivist development model that destroys life. ...It destroys our Mother Nature, it is important to seek unity, to weave our struggles to defend ourselves... Let us begin to weave to resist, to weave to defend”.

Melania Canales, ONIAMAP – Peru

¹⁰ <https://www.mimp.gob.pe/webs/mimp/sispod/pdf/78.pdf>

7. Reflections

Armed conflicts have a particular and different impact on women and girls. Due to gender roles and stereotypes, they face specific risks and are exposed to more vulnerabilities. The most extreme expression is sexual violence, which reflects the general inequality and inequity, but worsens during armed conflict, when the aggressor is no longer just any male, but assumes the role of an armed actor, including the state itself. Sexual violence and rape are often used as a strategy in war. Additionally, we have seen that ethnicity also plays an additional role, with most victims of sexual violence in the cases mentioned in this Brief being indigenous women.

"War is told and has always been told from the perspective of men, but women experience war and its consequences in a different way."

Alejandrina Cano
Unión Nacional de Mujeres Guatemaltecas – UNAMG

The women whose voices are shared here have come a long way fighting for the recognition of their rights and of the violations suffered. Their first challenge was to understand that they were victims and that their rights had been violated, within a wider context of vulnerabilities of women and especially indigenous women. But as heard from these women, their work over many years has shown results: in the women themselves, in society, and at State level.

The next step was to bring the perpetrators to trial. The cases of El Mozote and Serpur Zarco are key examples, showing that progress is not smooth. The work was often marked by delays and Government strategies of amnesty and pardoning of the perpetrators. But the insistent efforts of women yielded important results, challenging the perception of women as only being victims, but now regarding them as actors and builders of change.

Women's organisations have been key to these efforts, creating strong networks for peace building, and seeing themselves as 'women in resistance'. Their stories reveal their suffering, but also the strategies they follow to achieve their final objective: the recognition of their rights.

The participation of women in the peace process also shows us that, in their struggle for peace, they are in search of justice and the recognition of the rights they were denied for many years. They do not only fight for themselves, but also for their families and society. In this process, *Peace* clearly is not only the signing of agreements, but also the encounters and daily challenges women face. Women across Latin America use participation and advocacy to contribute to a more dignified life, free of violence.

Finally, the basis of their struggle is the land, which for indigenous women represents Mother Earth. In Peru, the participation and advocacy for the right to '*the big house*', as they call Nature, is striking. They have been working from the point of view of Mother Earth herself, recognising its rights and, with them, their rights to live a better life.

Participants in the Conference

Misean Cara partners

- Fundación Servicio Colombiano de Desarrollo Social (SERCOLDES), supported by Little Sisters of the Assumption
- Asociación Promotora de Derechos Humanos de El Mozote, supported by Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (Chigwell)

External organisations

- Unión Nacional de Mujeres de Guatemala (UNAMG) <https://unamg.org/>
- Organización Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas Andinas y Amazónicas del Perú (ONAMIAP) <http://onamiap.org/>
- Red Departamental de Mujeres del Cauca – Colombia
- Vallecaucanas en Confluencia – Colombia
- Mesa Departamental, Mujeres de Nariño – Colombia
- Red de Mujeres del Norte del Cauca – Colombia

About Misean Cara

Established in 2004, Misean Cara is an international and Irish faith-based missionary development organisation made up of 88 member organisations working with some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in over 50 countries in the Global South. Adopting a human rights focus, we support communities addressing basic needs in the areas of education, health, and livelihoods, as well as advocating for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. At times of humanitarian crisis, the trusted and long-term presence of missionaries in affected communities allows for rapid, efficient and targeted responses.

Our Strategy 2017-2021 identifies five goals:

- Uphold the right to quality education
- Uphold the right to better health, clean water and sanitation
- Uphold the right to sustainable livelihoods
- Uphold and advocate for human rights
- Enhance and promote the missionary approach to development.

Further expressing our desire to reach the most vulnerable and marginalised, the Strategy sees Misean Cara bringing a particular focus to bear on targeting five groups: women, children, refugees, displaced people and people with disabilities.

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