



Building bridges for non-violent change: Women as insider mediators within the pro-democracy movement in Venezuela

Isabella Picón Ball

About this paper

This case study report is part of a project conducted by the Berghof Foundation, in consultation with UN Women in an advisory and coordination capacity, and funded by Global Affairs Canada and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Since April 2023, it has supported women insider mediators actively involved in peaceful protest movements around the world. The project helped to increase their conflict resolution skills and capacities, allowing them to leverage their knowledge and expertise more effectively in peace processes. It also allows them to potentially take on more formal roles in conflict transformation processes, in line with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

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Preface

The past decade has seen a global proliferation of mass movements demanding societal, constitutional and institutional change. These pro-democratic, peaceful protest movements (PPMs) have arisen in response to various factors including economic distress, systemic violence, political repression, or restrictions placed on civil society. PPMs can become vectors of societal conflict, and experience direct and often spontaneous confrontations between citizens and their governments that may erupt into violence. As these clashes have grown increasingly prevalent, peacebuilding scholars and practitioners began expanding their understanding of peace mediation, from high-level formal processes aimed at resolving armed conflicts, to encompass informal practices that frequently originate in grassroots movements. Often initiated by individual ‘insider mediators’, these activities bridge gaps in state-society relations, thereby further facilitating socio-political change.

Insider mediation in socio-political conflicts is conducted by locally-rooted individuals who build bridges and facilitate dialogue between belligerent parties, enhancing trust, preventing violence, advancing peaceful change, and contributing to sustaining peace. They derive their legitimacy, credibility and influence from their closeness to the conflict parties, thanks to personal and kinship relations, or socio-cultural proximity.

While the peacebuilding community has grown increasingly aware of the important mediation role played by societal actors such as religious or traditional leaders, no attention has yet been paid to the informal (and often invisible) spaces of mediation occurring during peaceful protests. Nevertheless, social movement activists engage in processes of informal and situated mediation - which occur during or between cycles of protests - either between different factions within a movement, or between activists on one hand and community members, government actors, security forces, or even armed groups on the other. In particular, women often play prominent leadership roles in protest movements, but may also take on less visible insider mediator roles; they build bridges between various sets of actors, either to protect activists and mitigate violence or to advance conflict transformation.

This report is part of a series of case studies uncovering the roles of women insider mediators within peaceful protest movements. They examine their various roles and attributes, and the gender norms which may facilitate or inhibit such roles, among other limiting and supportive factors. They also reflect on strategies to sustain and leverage these mediation roles, especially during formal dialogue and mediation processes. Finally, they list key capacity-building and support needs faced by these women to sustain and deepen their mediation engagements, thereby expanding the potential for achieving peaceful change and conflict transformation.

Each report draws on data collected through qualitative interviews with relevant movement actors, activists, observers, as well as civil society organisations and state authority representatives. The women interviewed and featured in the studies may not necessarily self-identify as mediators, but are depicted as such by other activists and observers due to their positions of trust and access to conflict protagonists, as well as the positive outcomes of their interventions. In the spirit of participatory research, the reports are authored by local scholars who had trusted access to the respective movements, either as activists themselves or as close allies and sympathetic observers.

These studies will hopefully appeal to a broad readership. Readers who are experts or interested in mediation and conflict resolution will find inspiration on ways to engage with protest movements through internal and societal bridge-builders. Similarly, activists and experts in the field of social movements and civil resistance will gain new insights into the relevance of dialogue, negotiation and mediation in advancing peaceful change.

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Women standing in front of a Bolivarian National Police picket line during a protest. Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / NurPhoto | Roman Comacho



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Acronyms and abbreviations

CEPAZ	<i>Centro de Justicia y Paz</i> (Center for Justice and Peace)
CNE	<i>Consejo Nacional Electoral</i> (National Electoral Council)
ICC	International Criminal Court
MUD	<i>Mesa de la Unidad Democrática</i> (Democratic Unity Roundtable)
NIMD	Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy
PSUV	<i>Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela</i> (Venezuelan United Socialist Party)
PUD	<i>Plataforma Unitaria Democrática</i> (Democratic Unitary Platform)
UCAB	<i>Universidad Católica Andrés Bello</i> (Andrés Bello Catholic University)

1 Introduction

Over the past 20 years, Venezuela has gone through a process of democratic backsliding, resulting in political conflict between the governments of Hugo Chávez (1998-2013) and now President Nicolás Maduro, and their political opposition. The intractability of this conflict has had dire consequences: a complex humanitarian emergency, nearly eight million forced migrants,¹ three protest cycles (2014, 2017 and 2019) that were met with heavy repression,² and a process of institutional decay that led to a period between 2019 and 2022 in which parts of the international community recognised the interim government of Juan Guaidó rather than the de facto government of Nicolás Maduro. Most recently, although the July 2024 presidential election was won by a landslide by opposition unitary candidate Edmundo González (Alta Vista PVT Project 2024), the institutions

controlled by Maduro and the military have been able to impose their will to remain in power.

Six negotiation processes – most of them involving international actors – have attempted to find a solution to the various crises and have failed. However, the negotiation processes have acquired an increasingly central role. As the social, humanitarian and political crises become more acute, social actors who were previously marginalised have acquired more prominent roles within the pro-democracy movement – among them, women. Moreover, for the first time in its history, the Venezuelan opposition has a woman – María Corina Machado – as its main leader. This study stems from the need to understand the strengthened roles of civil society and women in these negotiations and explores the roles of women as insider mediators within the Venezuelan pro-democracy movement.

¹ This has been the second largest displacement crisis on the planet, second only to the one in Syria (ILO and UNDP 2021; UNHCR 2023).

² Under Maduro, almost 300 people have died in protests. When comparing the 2017 and 2019 protest cycle with the 2024 post-electoral protests, it is evident that lethal violence has worsened incrementally. There have been 42 deaths over 4 months in 2014, 124 deaths over 4 months in 2017, 27 deaths over 11 months in 2019 and finally 25 deaths in just 3 days of protests in 2024 (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social 2019, PROVEA 2024).

The study seeks to describe and characterise the role of women insider mediators, meaning those women who build bridges within the Venezuelan pro-democracy movement and potentially with state actors. Insider mediation does not take place in a vacuum. Women assume specific social and political roles that allow them to mediate between different actors – within political movements, between different factions of these movements and between state actors and political movements.³ These roles are performed at different levels of society, from government and high-level decision-making spaces, to grass-roots organisations. Moreover, women may be building bridges between actors while fulfilling roles as activists that may overlap with, complement and promote their role as insider mediators. Mediation in a movement context with high divisions and low levels of trust, as in the Venezuelan case, should be seen as a process that involves creating or curating spaces to build trust between the various parties, facilitating communication between them and eventually engaging in mediation to reach specific agreements. For this study, 17 interviews (with 16 women and one man) were conducted between September and October 2023.⁴ Interview participants were selected through a methodology that combined purposive and snowball sampling, with two criteria to ensure diversity: the level at which they do mediation (grass-roots, mid-level organisations, or higher-level decision-making spaces), and their geographical location.⁵

The report is organised as follows: Section 2 provides some background on the Venezuelan socio-political process, the main protest cycles, the actors' evolution and the movement's demands, the main dialogue spaces created within the movement, and the situation of women in politics, which affects their capacity to have a role in the movement. The

subsequent sections address the specific roles and mediation practices by women activists, the gendered dynamics that shape their mediation roles, the factors influencing their mediative practices, and their needs for capacity-building and support to strengthen their mediation practices. The report then concludes with recommendations for future programming to support women insider mediators.

3 Women-led dialogue spaces which are more closely aligned with the government are not included in this study due to its focus on mediation within peaceful protest movements.

4 The names and personal details of all interviewees have been pseudonymised for security reasons. Although not all respondents expressed the need for their participation to be anonymous at the time of the interviews, we decided to anonymise all interviews due to the increasing repression after the 2024 election.

5 With regard to the levels of intervention, five interviewees operate at the grass-roots level, seven in mid-level organisations and five in high-level decision-making spaces. With regard to regional diversity, 10 interviewees are based in Caracas, four in local communities within the capital, and three in other regions of the country.

2 Background

For Della Porta and Diani (2006), social movements are a distinct social process in which the actors that take part in them are engaged in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents, linked by dense informal networks, and share a distinct collective identity. Therefore, we can conceptualise the Venezuelan pro-democracy movement as a network of diverse social and political actors who have opposed the process of democratic backsliding and autocratisation that began in the early days of Hugo Chávez’s presidency. This section will briefly explain the composition of the movement, the evolution of its demands, tactics and strategy, and the role of women within it.

The figure below seeks to explain the anatomy of the Venezuelan pro-democracy movement. The political opposition which leads this movement consists of political parties spanning ideologies from right to left, each employing various theories of change and strategies to achieve democratisation. To strengthen itself, the political opposition draws on its ability to mobilise millions of people through the ballots or through street protests. This involves the emergence of new movement dynamics, characterised by the appearance of new grass-roots organisations and civil society actors. This growth of the movement requires dialogue, mediation and negotiation between different entities within the political opposition (formed by political parties), between the political opposition and grass-roots movements, and between political and social actors within and outside Venezuela.

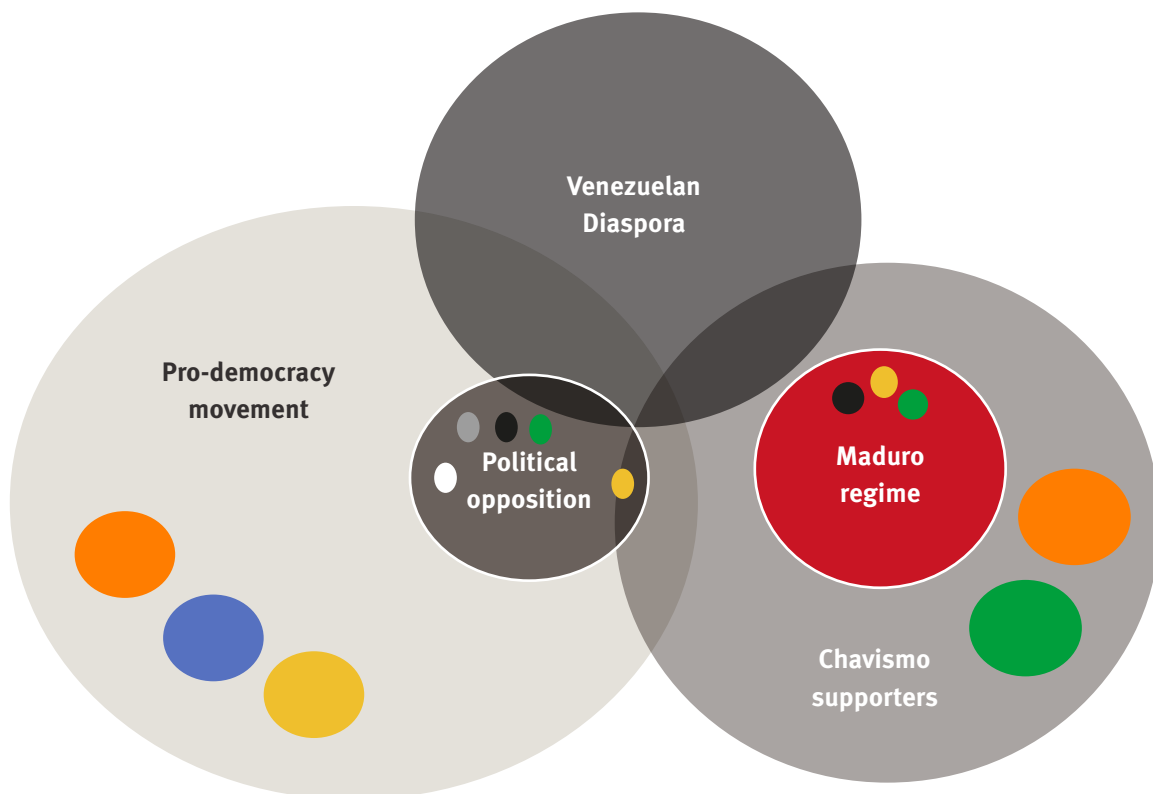


Figure 1: Anatomy of the Venezuelan pro-democracy movement and its counterparts

Over the years, the movement has been led by different entities, such as *Coordinadora Democrática*⁶ from 2002 to 2004, *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (Democratic Unity Roundtable – MUD)⁷ from 2008 to 2015, and the National Assembly deputies elected in the 2015 legislative elections. Between 2016 and 2022, the political leadership of the pro-democracy movement gravitated towards the National Assembly, and specifically the four major opposition parties.⁸ After several attempts to achieve a democratic transition (e.g. through a 2016 recall referendum which was sabotaged by the Maduro-controlled courts, and increasing pressure through two protest cycles combined with international sanctions), this leadership ended its cycle. In 2023, an important part of the opposition agreed to hold primary elections as a method to choose a unitary presidential candidate. María Corina Machado, from the liberal political party *Vente Venezuela*, won the election with 92 per cent of the vote, with 2.3 million Venezuelans – 12 per cent of the electoral register – voting in a self-organised election.

Although María Corina Machado has been the movement's undisputed leader since the 2023 election, there are at least five factions ranging from radical to moderate forces within the pro-democracy movement. On the hardliner side of the spectrum, there is María Corina Machado and her coalition *Soy Venezuela*. Next, there is the *Plataforma Unitaria Democrática* (Democratic Unitary Platform – PUD) which is a successor to the MUD, composed of the main opposition political parties. Additionally, there is a group of relatively new political parties such as *Fuerza Vecinal*, *Cambiamos*, *Alianza Del Lápiz*, *Futuro* and *Avanzada Progresista* which have representation in the National Assembly elected in 2020 (in elections that were not recognised by the mainstream opposition). It is important to note that these political factions have different negotiation

mechanisms with the Maduro government: the PUD negotiates through the mediation of Norway, while the rest use national, ad hoc dialogue channels.

The 2014, 2017 and 2019 protest cycles are crucial to understand the pro-democracy movement beyond the political opposition, because they brought along changes in the profile, actors and dynamics of the movement. These protest cycles were the consequence of movement actors adopting a theory of change that sought to apply internal pressure through mass protests and external pressure to force international reactions to the Maduro government's repressive response towards protests. The following table (see p. 14) portrays the length, magnitude and main outcomes of these protests.

The 2014 protests were initiated by university students and supported by only a part of the MUD. They demanded Maduro's resignation and were relatively short-lived. The 2017 protest cycle was a spontaneous, four-month national mobilisation initiated by the opposition National Assembly deputies and the MUD as a reaction to the regime's constant violation of the National Assembly's jurisdiction (Corrales 2023). Although initially the aim was to restore the powers of the legislature, it expanded later towards demanding complete institutional and regime change. Finally, the 2019 mobilisations were initiated by the National Assembly in support of the establishment of an 'interim government' led by its President Juan Guaidó. The 2014 and 2019 protest cycles both happened after presidential elections that were either contested (as in 2013) or deemed fraudulent by the opposition and by international standards (in 2018). In the 2017 mobilisation cycle, the protests started as a reaction to the worsening economic situation characterised by scarcity and hyperinflation, and to the regime's decision to delay

6 During the first years of the Chávez government, *Coordinadora Democrática* was the alliance of the main opposition actors, which were business groups such as *Fedecámaras*, trade unions such as the Venezuela Workers Confederation, the media, and the Church, with the political parties taking a secondary role because the two-party system had just collapsed (Cannon 2016).

7 Emerging as the electoral coordination body of the main opposition parties, the MUD won the majority of seats in the National Assembly in the 2015 legislative elections.

8 The "G4" consists of *Acción Democrática*, *Un Nuevo Tiempo* (centre-left), *Voluntad Popular* (centre-left) and *Primero Justicia* (centre-right).

	2014	2017	2019
Dates	4 Feb – 31 Mar	1 Apr – 31 Jul	10 Jan – 16 Nov
Approximate number of protesters	800,000	2,000,000	1,500,000
States affected by protests	16	22	23
Number of protest events	3,671	6,769	6,211
Arbitrary detentions	3,127	5,051	956
Deaths of protesters	42	124	67

Table 2: Protest cycles of the Venezuelan pro-democracy movement during the Maduro era⁹

and ultimately halt the recall referendum initiative on Maduro’s presidency (PROVEA 2018b).¹⁰

Although this study was conducted in 2023, it should be noted that 2024 has seen a new wave of mass protests following the presidential election on 28 July. These protests were self-organised and spontaneous, erupting the following day, between the announcement of fraudulent electoral results by the National Electoral Council (CNE) during the night of the election and the announcement of María Corina Machado’s actual election victory the following night (AP News 2024). One week after the election, between 130 and 210 protests had occurred in 20 out of 23 states, resulting in 25 deaths and hundreds of people detained (PROVEA 2024).

Throughout these junctures, dialogue spaces within the opposition coalition have emerged to address different kinds of tensions relating to negotiations with the government, the pertinence of participating in elections, and the complex

humanitarian emergency and its effects on Venezuelan society, among other divisive and strategic issues. However, these spaces are informal in nature. Relevant groups in this regard are *Foro Cívico* – a platform of 690 social organisations and 194 civil society leaders founded in 2021 that defines itself as a “diverse, plural and inclusive space that seeks the re-institutionalisation of the country” (Efecto Cocuyo 2023). Having participated in direct public talks with Maduro in April 2022, the group advocates for a negotiated solution to the political conflict in Venezuela. Another important group is the Venezuelan human rights movement, an informal network of more than 100 organisations represented in every state of the country and which has held a yearly meeting since 2015 (Codhez 2022). Another relevant nationwide civil society organisation (CSO) is *Creemos Alianza Ciudadana*, a “platform for civic articulation that was born as an initiative of ... Andrés Bello Catholic University,¹¹ with the purpose of inviting leaders and organisations from civil society to recognise, articulate, unite efforts

9 Sources: Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social (2019); La Gran Aldea (2020); PROVEA (2018a); Issuu (2014).

10 It is worth noting that in December 2020, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) stated that based on acts of violence committed since April 2017, the ICC had reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity had been committed by state authorities in Venezuela (Dib and Woo 2023).

11 Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB) is one of Venezuela’s leading private universities and has always been a hub for independent political thought and activism. José Virtuoso, who was its President from 2010 until his death in 2022, was one of the founders in 2018 of the *Frente Amplio Venezuela Libre*, an opposition coalition of political parties and civil society organisations.

and plan activities to strengthen democracy” (Sobre Creemos 2023). It currently comprises more than 350 CSOs, more than 17,000 people and 10 regional entities (POLITIKAUCAB 2023). The diversity and complexity of these civic networks require different kinds of actors to create trust, articulate and mediate between them so that they coordinate their strategies and objectives effectively.

With regard to women’s roles, it should be noted that women have not been visibly significant in driving the various protest cycles, especially those spearheaded by political parties. For instance, the 2017 and 2019 protests were led mostly by opposition National Assembly deputies who were elected in the 2015 elections. Out of 167 deputies, only 32 were women and 24 of these were part of the opposition (Brandler 2021). In the 2023 municipal and regional elections, the proportion of women candidates never surpassed 15 per cent. Although the CNE has passed resolutions to promote gender parity in elections, these measures have been sparsely implemented. There are no laws to promote gender parity; instead, this is addressed on an ad hoc basis during specific electoral moments (Red Electoral Ciudadana 2023). Consequently, there is no incentive for political parties to change their hierarchical structures. Women are often relegated to traditional roles at the base of their organisations, handling organisational and logistical matters, which makes it very difficult for them to reach positions of true decision-making authority. Similarly, women hold subordinate positions in formal negotiation processes. For instance, out of nine members of the government’s delegation for the Barbados Agreement signed in October 2023, four were women, while in the Unitary Platform (PUD) there were two women out of eight members.

However, the 2024 presidential cycle has seen the rise to prominence of many women political leaders, such as María Corina Machado, but also Delsa Solorzano (who was a candidate in the opposition primaries and is the leader of the political party *Encuentro Ciudadano*), Maria Beatriz Martinez (president of *Primero Justicia*), Paola Bautista de Alemán (from the same party), and Adriana Pichardo (from *Voluntad Popular*). It remains to be seen whether this will be translated into a more prominent role for women in the formal negotiation process.

3 Women's mediation practices

Four distinct but overlapping categories of mediation practices emerged through the analysis of the interviews, namely: community mediation, violence de-escalation, capacity-building and invisible facilitation. It is important to acknowledge that most of the interviewed women did not identify themselves as formal or even informal mediators, as they were unfamiliar with the term. We did not specifically seek out women who already identified as (insider) mediators because many were unaware of mediation as a distinct practice. Instead, interviewees were selected based on their roles as activists and peacebuilders. Moreover, the four categories identified here primarily pertain to informal mediation roles, as this is the most common type of mediation women engage in, even for those who participate in high-level negotiations.

3.1 Community mediation

Of the 16 women interviewed, four fit into the category of community mediators. These women mediate between various actors in their communities, such as between CSOs and political parties, between Chavismo¹² and people with other political affiliations, or between community members and gangs. Two of the women used to be members of the government party, the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (Venezuelan United Socialist Party – PSUV) and engaged in mediation from those positions. The other two are civil society leaders primarily engaged in local-level work.

One of these four is Teresa, a community leader from a *barrio* in Caracas, one of the largest and most violent *barrios* in Venezuela and Latin America.

She identifies as a nonviolent activist, a role she performed and learned about in the 2017 and 2019 protest cycles and through her participation in nonviolent action training programmes. She began her community work in 2010 while visiting her mother, when she saw a giant garbage dump that had been there for more than 40 years. Then and there, Teresa initiated interventions in her own community in which she grabbed a broom and started to clean up public spaces, gradually encouraging men, women and children from the community to join her. After getting rid of the trash, she built alliances with local, national and international artists who produced graffiti and other artistic interventions that increased the value of public space in her community. This has since become one of the key tactics of her organisation, a collective that promotes civic values and social cohesion through artistic interventions:

We love to invite people from the community councils that are part of a political party structure but they are from the barrio ... Sometimes they forget that the barrio is also theirs, that the street that we clean is where they walk, that the school that we painted is where their children study ... When someone attacks us verbally, I tell them to sweep; I tell everyone, come along and sweep here; no one is going to fight.¹³

When describing her role in the movement today, Teresa states that she engages at the local level, but “the civic movements that were born during the protests transformed into local community action ... We stopped focusing on the protest itself or on the space of power, in the ‘going to Miraflores’ format¹⁴ and instead we began to focus on our own spaces.” In this sense, although she is a mediator

12 Chavismo is a left-populist political ideology and movement held together by the supporters of its leader, Hugo Chávez, a Venezuelan politician and military leader who held the presidency of Venezuela from 1998 until his death in 2013. Chavismo is characterised by a populist, nationalistic, anti-imperialistic and socialist rhetoric and symbolism (Smilde 2021).

13 Interview with Teresa (pseudonym) on 23 September 2023 in Caracas.

14 Miraflores is the headquarters of Venezuela's executive branch of government.



Murals and urban art in Caracas, the Venezuelan capital. Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / AA | Pedro Rances Matthey

in her community, Teresa also acts as a bridge between local and national dynamics. An example of this is Teresa's mediation between the National Commission that organised the 2023 presidential primaries and her community: when the National Commission changed her community's voting centre to an inaccessible location, she used her contacts to ensure that the voting centre was switched back to the original place.

3.2 Violence de-escalation

Four of the 16 women interviewed for this study have been engaged in violence de-escalation; in two cases, this overlapped with the roles of community mediator and invisible facilitator. Their experience is marked by intervening in situations involving physical violence among various actors. In two instances, interviewees recounted how an important part of their activism during the 2017 protests was engaging in dialogue with young, violent protesters. The other two women successfully negotiated agreements between violent gangs in their communities.

One such woman is Diana,¹⁵ a social worker at *Fe y Alegría* – an international organisation promoting educational opportunities for society's most disadvantaged communities, based in the barrio of Caricuao. There, a long-standing territorial dispute between gangs had led to years of gun violence

15 Interview with Diana (pseudonym) on 12 October 2023 in Caracas.

affecting many residents. Despite her non-partisan stance and criticism of political figures on both sides, Diana aligns with the pro-democracy movement due to her affiliation with UCAB and because she identifies herself with specific opposition leaders with political aspirations, who often seek her advice precisely because of her community and peacebuilding work. With the guidance of a Jesuit, Diana helped broker deals between the rival gangs. She recounted a pivotal moment in her engagement when she realised that the mothers of the gang members were as important to achieving peace as the gang members themselves. She convened meetings of the mothers and initiated the development of the Caricuao Agreements. One reason for her ability to develop a rapport with gang members was their recognition of her long-standing community engagement. Over the years, this included finding a plot of land, cleaning up a landfill and building a community centre with a kindergarten, a chapel and after-school tutoring.

3.3 Capacity-building

The third practice identified pertains to the creation of capacity-building spaces in which diverse movement actors can develop trust towards each other and enhance their dialogue skills. All five women engaged in this work are also active in other categories, as invisible facilitators or community mediators.

The case of Patricia shows how capacity-building spaces can become spaces in which conflict is mediated. She is the founder and director of an organisation created in 2020 with the objective of promoting gender equality and empowerment for Venezuelan women in their spaces for action. As a feminist and a member of an opposition political party, Patricia felt the need to create a safe space for women to learn about their rights while also strengthening their skills as leaders. In the following quote, Patricia explains her role as a mediator and how the capacity-building space that

she curates has become a safe space for women from diverse backgrounds:

*I mediate ... among feminist organisations. For example, they tell me, 'The people of Tinta Violeta are Chavistas.' And I say: but they defend the same thing that you defend. 'But feminist organisations only talk to each other.' And I tell them: 'And how can they listen to you if you don't come closer?' 'Politics doesn't help.' And I tell them: how will your proposals have an impact if you don't have alliances in the political parties and with female politicians?'*¹⁶

For Patricia, there is always a need for conflict resolution and agenda-setting spaces for feminist and women's rights leaders. But gathering people together for the purpose of agreeing on a specific agenda or solving a conflict puts too much pressure on participants. However, education, capacity-building and training can be a good 'excuse' for them to develop a rapport and get to know each other on a basic level. Before joining the workshops, participants sign a letter of commitment that establishes that there must be respect for all people, there must be recognition of diversity and a language that considers and respects the other person.

The interview with Xenaida,¹⁷ an indigenous community leader in the Autana municipality of Amazonas State, also sheds light on how capacity-building spaces become spaces for conflict resolution. Xenaida describes herself as a community leader in training, who aims to replicate what she learned in the negotiation, mediation and dialogue training sessions she took with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and a Caracas-based organisation that works on training women in dialogue and peacebuilding. After working with the opposition governor of her state, she distanced herself from political party activism in the last few years and transitioned into community-based work. For example, in 2023 Xenaida helped organise a workshop with indigenous women. One of the trainees was a

16 Interview with Patricia (pseudonym) on 20 September 2023 in Caracas.

17 Online interview with Xenaida (pseudonym) on 16 October 2023.

teacher and community leader who used to lead protests that often became violent. The protests sought to keep soldiers from unlawfully seizing the product that the indigenous communities wanted to commercialise, alleging that they were hiding drugs. Thanks to her participation in Xenaida's workshop, this activist and other members of her community started using nonviolent tactics. Such engagement combines community mediation with capacity-building because – like Teresa – her local organising work allows her to change the behaviour of actors in her community.

3.4 Invisible facilitation

A majority of the women interviewed, 12 out of 17, also qualify as invisible facilitators due to their ability to foster encounters between diverse actors in a discreet, behind-the-scenes manner, enabling them to navigate various opposition arenas easily. Six of these women also engage in elite-level, formal negotiation processes.

For example, Carla works as a local coordinator for an international think tank dedicated to researching policy solutions for conflict-affected states to negotiate effective transitions out of war, crisis or authoritarianism. Carla's responsibilities include building rapport and convening experts and politicians to formulate proposals on complex and contentious issues such as sanctions and the management of frozen assets. This process requires extensive listening to identify shared ideas that work for all parties.

In order to understand, the listening process is very long, especially on the issue of sanctions. So you start to test ideas ... to plant an idea in people's heads and add some water to the plant. After a few conversations I keep adding elements and at some point, I gather them in workshops and launch a series of events where I socialise the ideas that have come together.¹⁸

Although Carla conducts these conversations from a formal position within her organisation, the process itself is informal and the proposals developed from these conversations are kept confidential. In 2019, the think tank presented a set of recommendations to formal negotiators and mediators. Thus, while Carla's mediation has been informal, it operated at the elite level of negotiations. Carla also explained her approach with more 'radical' opposition actors, who were resistant to negotiation: instead of trying to convince them of a particular approach, she provided opportunities for them to learn about experiences of transitions and negotiation processes in other contexts.

Another case of invisible facilitation is that of Andrea,¹⁹ a civil society leader from Barinas State, who got involved in political activism due to her son's participation in the 2017 protests. Through various initiatives such as *Creemos Alianza Ciudadana*, Andrea has become a trainer in nonviolent action and peacebuilding. She recounts how she mediated a conflict between two individuals appointed as electoral advisers by her Regional Primary Commission. Although she was not a formal member of the Commission, she was approached to solve the conflict by providing technical advice on appropriate appointment procedures. This is an example of mediation between political parties using the 'go-between' method because she had already established a working relationship with the commission members and was trusted by the parties who sought their advice during the meeting.

18 Online interview with Carla (pseudonym) on 8 October 2023.

19 Online interview with Andrea (pseudonym) on 7 October 2023.

4 Gendered dynamics

The interviews brought to light recurrent gender dynamics that shape the mediation roles described above. This section presents the three main trends identified: social and thematic stratification; cultivation of relationships; and maternal role.

4.1 Social and thematic stratification

The interviews revealed a consistent pattern: women often take on mediation and negotiation roles that are less visible or more informal than those of men, reflecting their lower status in the social hierarchy. Additionally, the topics on which they intervene tend to be those traditionally reserved for women, such as less contentious or less political issues. The more political and contentious the issue, the less likely women are to participate. This gender dynamic significantly shapes the practices of community mediation and invisible facilitation. Carla, who, as mentioned earlier, has been involved through discreet channels in high-level negotiations in Venezuela since 2018, talked about her experience as a woman:

Some actors and stakeholders don't really like a woman being involved; they feel it is a conversation for men and it is hard to penetrate that culture. My approach is to put my associate (a male colleague) ... to work on areas where I feel I am not going to be heard.²⁰

Carla's mediation role is more invisible because the gender dynamic requires her to put her male colleague (rather than herself) at the forefront of certain conversations. In the case of community mediation, Teresa feels that the gender dynamics favour her:

I feel that ... the doors open everywhere, first because I am a woman and I am a woman leader of a neighbourhood who is not doing just any kind of leadership thing, but rather we are creating a social fabric for many people, not only in Venezuela, not only in the neighbourhood, but with people outside the country.²¹

Teresa's leadership extends beyond the barrio, unlike most community leaders who remain within their community sphere. This distinctive quality grants her access to valuable opportunities, which is why she does not feel discriminated against as a woman.

Andrea, on the other hand, reflected on the difficulties of involving young women in political leadership:

We have been trying to find young women in these roles and it is difficult. They do not like it; it doesn't attract their attention. In social and charitable activities, women are the most involved. But when we tried to facilitate the workshops on electoral participation, for example, there were only three girls who dared to apply.²²

4.2 Cultivation of relationships

Several women spoke about their capacity to maintain healthy relationships with their networks over time and to build a strong network of allies and connections as a way to compensate for gender inequality and sustain their mediation work. This gender dynamic is especially linked to the invisible facilitation role.

20 Interview with Carla (see above).

21 Interview with Teresa (see above).

22 Interview with Carla (see above).

Berenice is a philologist and entrepreneur who has been involved in several negotiation processes in Venezuela at the elite level. In the early days of the Chávez government, she participated as a formal negotiator, while lately she became involved in backchannel talks between the Church, the Maduro government and the opposition. Recognising the rare presence of women at this level, she mentioned that the basis of her reputation is her capacity to create trust, her wide international network and her interpersonal skills:

This is a machista country. But once you have an image and a reputation, you can impose your ideas. ... The true mediator identifies the need of the moment and the circumstances of the country and the person. Then you identify the person who can help you ensure that the need is fulfilled. You identify the messenger ... But you also really need to look at the way you treat people: people will never forget how you treated them in a specific moment, and that pays off.²³

Gabriela²⁴ plays a crucial role within the informal network of the Venezuelan human rights movement. Having previously worked with an international NGO, she has utilised her established relationships effectively in her current role as an NGO director dedicated to promoting civic participation, monitoring electoral processes and promoting independent journalism. When asked about her skills, she responded as follows: “I would highlight my ability to coordinate. I am gregarious by nature. I break with the traditional. I can be hard too but I am also able to use that more feminine side to be able to enter [a space].” The balance of femininity, formality and affect suggests a disciplined approach in which these elements are combined in order to cultivate informal dialogue spaces and sustain relationships as part of Gabriela’s invisible facilitation work.

4.3 Maternal role

An important gender dynamic that helps explain the roles of community mediators and violence de-escalators is the stereotypical role of women as mothers and caregivers. Many interviewees, particularly those working within communities, cited their roles as mothers as both motivating and facilitating their community roles. Geraldine, an opposition party member and community leader from La Vega, described it as follows:

I think that because we have kids, we are motivated for everything. The mother is the one who wants a better community, no drugs, who is distressed if a child goes hungry and who wants their child to go to school ... And this gives you the strength to carry on.²⁵

For Diana from Caricuao, previously mentioned for facilitating a peacebuilding process between violent gangs, being a mother is a source of respect in the barrio: “Although some people say that values have been lost, I think that there is respect for women. It makes things easier when men have the education they need to respect [us as] women and mothers ... I think in Venezuela there is more prejudice against women from barrios than just for being women.”²⁶ She also mentioned that being a woman gave her a more neutral role. A man would not have been accepted as mediator between the gangs. So Diana leveraged on her role as a mother to establish herself as a mediator.

Finally, Andrea, the civil society leader from Barinas who practises invisible facilitation, got involved in political activism because of her desire to protect her son when he decided to participate in the 2017 protests.

So I said: ‘I’ll let you do it, but you must allow me to take care of you and guide you.’ And that’s when we found a group of stray boys who were protesting.

23 Interview with Berenice (pseudonym) on 19 October 2023 in Caracas.

24 Interview with Gabriela (pseudonym) on 12 October 2023 in Caracas.

25 Interview with Geraldine (pseudonym) on 6 October 2023 in Caracas.

26 Interview with Diana (see above).

They liked to take a lot of risks, they were disorderly, no one protected them, they did not have a plan. I started to talk to the boys. I felt that I started having some credibility and impact on them, and they began to change their way of doing things and allowed themselves to be guided. That's when I connected with a professor who had been studying nonviolent action for 15 years. She ran a workshop for us ... and we managed to carry out planned and orderly nonviolent actions. We did not allow the protest to be infiltrated by armed groups from the neighbourhoods.²⁷

The story speaks for itself. Mediating within her community, Andrea de-escalated many tense or violent situations during the protests in Barinas.



Nonviolent action by the families of victims of extrajudicial killings. Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / NurPhoto | Roman Comacho

27 Online interview with Andrea (see above).

5 Factors influencing women's mediation roles

This section delves into the factors that have helped or hindered insider mediation work for the women featured in this study. Throughout their life histories, some factors helped them become peacebuilders, while others obstructed the roles they assumed.

*primary process²⁸ was over, there was already a foundation of trust among people who would need to work together ... It has been a bit of a bumpy ride because ... when you start to convene women of different tendencies, the male leaders who make decisions and manage the money do not like the idea ... So some of the women have been reprimanded for meeting outside of party lines with other women.*²⁹

5.1 Hindering factors

≡ Political culture: Polarisation and structural hierarchy

While it may appear self-evident, political polarisation does indeed pose specific challenges to the sustainability of mediation and collaboration spaces. Antonio, national coordinator for a European NGO with offices in Venezuela, points out that polarisation during the 2024-2025 electoral cycle could jeopardise the sustainability of a space the organisation has been fostering to unite men and women around a shared agenda for women's rights and gender equality. Moreover, women politicians mentioned instances when male leaders attempted to prevent them from meeting women from other political parties. Josefina referred to an initiative she organises in her state of Barinas to bring together women from different political parties and build trust between them:

In the opposition, we face a very bad problem of fragmentation. The groups did not speak to each other and failed to collaborate. So I tried to build spaces for the most hardliners to the more moderate opposition groups to meet. I did it so that once the

≡ Economic and financial dependency

All the women who mentioned their lack of economic and financial autonomy belong to political parties and hold relatively high and established positions within their parties. For example, Josefina – former congresswoman and political prisoner, and member of an opposition party – cited the funding of political parties as a barrier to gender equality and the advancement of women with peacebuilding agendas: “Many resources for strengthening political parties come from international cooperation. There is a contradiction because the international community wants women to be in positions of power but gives money to men.”³⁰

Maria, an opposition politician and civil servant, also highlighted the lack of financial autonomy as a hindrance to women's effectiveness in negotiation processes:

If you depend economically on your boss, telling your boss that he is wrong, that he is not considering something is very hard, because it could cost you your salary. And if you are not paid, how do you finance your politics? Who pays for the posters,

28 This refers to the opposition primary elections that took place on 23 October 2023. They were organised without the assistance of the CNE, so a high level of grass-roots coordination was required to hold the elections.

29 Interview with Antonio (pseudonym) on 24 October 2023 in Caracas.

30 Online interview with Josefina (pseudonym) on 8 October 2023.

etc.? If your boss is the one who goes to the big negotiating table where it gets decided if you are the candidate or if you go to the negotiating table with the government, how do you tell him, 'hey, the negotiation scheme is wrong, you are not taking this into account' ... That economic dependence kills the participation of any woman at any table.³¹

≡ **Unsustainable mediation and collaboration spaces**

While capacity-building training can create spaces for respectful dialogue, Liliana³² – founder of an organisation that promotes dialogue and peacebuilding skills for women – mentioned that maintaining these spaces after the trainings, e.g. through WhatsApp groups, is very time- and resource-intensive after the training ends. In the case of initiatives led by INGOs, Antonio noted the unpredictability of resources needed to sustain the spaces of collaboration promoted by his organisation:

I am very open to the idea of things happening beyond what we do. I wish it would happen but, in the end, [the participants] are the ones who need to determine this. The resources can be cut at any moment. So at least they met, sat and reached some kind of clear agreement. I really wish we could keep generating that space.³³

Another element that hinders the sustainability of mediation spaces is the difficulty of dealing with growth crises in which these networks of organisations start becoming more complex and in need of decision-making processes as well as accountability mechanisms. Gabriela talks about a group in which very diverse people collaborate on pro-democracy efforts:

They lost their path; a moment came in which they had a growth crisis that was not approached in the proper way. And the effort we made was lost. So now

I think it is more of a lobby group with political elites. The interesting thing about ... these experiences is that they start with great force and momentum, they bring together many people, but they are diluted over time or they do not know how to face growth crises.³⁴

5.2 Supporting factors

≡ **Strong sense of empowerment and agency**

All the interviewed women share a deep confidence and conviction in their democratic values and beliefs. The meaning they derive from their work is the main element that keeps them resilient. In the following excerpt, Blanca – one of the leaders of Foro Cívico – responds to criticism for engaging with the Maduro government:

My reason for being an activist is precisely that I do not share the practices of those in power. I do not share them because they are abusive and violate human rights. So I am willing to understand that a conflict transformation process requires entering grey areas without forgetting one's principles and values. I join these processes to improve practices, never to support those practices.³⁵

≡ **Bridge-building**

Seven of the interviewed women shared the experience of having to mediate, negotiate or coexist with Chavismo in its early years as part of their professional and political trajectories as insider mediators. For these women, brokering deals and finding common ground with Chavistas was not a new concept. They had already practised these skills earlier in their careers, before peacebuilding and negotiation became more mainstream practices in Venezuela.

31 Interview with Maria (pseudonym) on 27 September 2023 in Caracas.

32 Interview with Liliana (pseudonym) on 26 September 2023 in Caracas.

33 Interview with Liliana (pseudonym) on 26 September 2023 in Caracas.

34 Interview with Gabriela (see above).

35 Interview with Blanca (pseudonym) on 11 October 2023 in Caracas.



Woman standing in front of a Bolivarian National Guard picket line during a protest in Caracas. Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / NurPhoto | Roman Comacho

Maria is an example of this. As part of an opposition political party, she had to take part in high-level negotiations between the opposition and the Maduro government to attain this position. Maria recounts her experience working as a civil servant:

There were political levels that decided things, but what the average officials wanted was to do their job. I met incredible people from the other sector, extremely efficient, brilliant, although with a different ideology than mine. And we had very respectful relationships. I remember one single person who tried to tell me some propaganda. And I told him, 'Look, I have been to Havana twice and I know very well what it is like to live there.' ... That experience brought me closer to understanding their historical project, its goals and objectives. They are ideologically different from me, but conceptually, at least, I understand them.³⁶

Nelly's experience dealing with a Chavista communal council in the early days of her political career taught her some lessons that are useful in her current role as part of the PUD delegation to the high-level negotiations. In 2006, she opposed a government plan to rezone and build new homes in her middle-class neighbourhood. By uniting neighbours and negotiating across political divides, she stopped the project and maintained the area's quality of life, despite failing to win control of the local council. Other women shared similar experiences, such as Patricia, who recounted her time as student leader at the Central University of Venezuela, and Berenice, who recalled her participation in the 2002 and 2004 national dialogues between the opposition and the government.

≡ Nonviolent activism

According to several profiled women, their experience as nonviolent activists during the protest cycles is a strong identity marker that

36 Interview with Maria (see above).



Woman participating in a nonviolent action protest to pay homage to victims of state violence. August 30, 2017. Caracas.

Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / AP Photo | Ricardo Mazalan

leverages their work as insider mediators. For Teresa, Andrea and Blanca, their nonviolent activism has an important ethical element that allows them to have a critical, yet constructive perspective that they are continually trying to convey in their dialogues with others in the movement, especially with regard to the maintenance of nonviolent discipline and the use of a language that sheers away from polarisation. In this excerpt, Blanca conveys how her identity as a nonviolent activist is what keeps her grounded with the bases of the movement even though she has assumed roles in more formal negotiation spaces:

Maintaining a presence in the streets through social engagement: this comes first because that's where I come from. That is my primary identity, having been an activist involved in nonviolent protest and it is essential to me to maintain it. Then the practice and responsibilities that the movement gave me took

me to more formal spaces, and as I say, there is no academic training in this; [rather, it is] empirical and organic training that has been developed through practice.³⁷

≡ Utilising platforms

One of the commonalities among all the women interviewed was that they do not act as individuals, but operate from organisational platforms that they have built, which leverage their bridge-building and mediation. These platforms serve as a source of resilience and sustainability for the work of women peacebuilders.

For Teresa, founding her own grass-roots organisation allowed her to advance local peacebuilding efforts at a moment in which she felt that the national dynamics and narratives did not allow for this kind of discourse and action. In Berenice's view, if women work from their

37 Interview with Blanca (see above).

own platforms, they develop more autonomy and are better able to show their own results and trajectory than if they depend on men to be recognised or allocated specific roles.

The women who create spaces of collaboration through capacity-building operate from initiatives they themselves have built. Teresa does her community mediation work through her organisation, which has become a brand that she has progressively positioned as a movement to rescue and transform public spaces.

When it comes to high-level processes, Blanca has also coordinated her work through the platform of her organisation, an activist collective she created during the 2017 protests. *Foro Cívico* emerged as a result of her organisation's effort to gather support for partial and sequential agreements in search of a political solution. *Foro Cívico's* main achievement was the renewal of the CNE in 2020, which constituted a "relative opening of the CNE to change bad practices implemented after the 2015 legislative elections" (Trak 2022). This change in the CNE created trust and was pivotal for the return of virtually all opposition political parties to the electoral arena in the 2021 regional and municipal elections.

≡ Support and mentoring

Another important supportive factor for two women was the role of Church members at various levels. Diana, for example, was empowered by Jesuit Father José Virtuoso ('Joseito') to assume leadership roles as a *Fe y Alegría* social worker, which in turn positioned her to mediate between the gangs in La Quinta and Portillo several years later.

One day, we held an assembly in La Quinta and Joseito suddenly announced that I was going to coordinate the Guanábano health centre. I thought I was going to die. 'I don't know how to do that,' I said. He always did this without asking, he just put his hand on your forehead and said 'I'm thinking'... And then you knew that he had already thought about everything ... That was the first time this happened. The second time, in 2007, they sent me to an assembly in La Quinta. The people were complaining; they said the community centre was not open to the community. Joseito felt that I had to go there. I was terrified of La Quinta because it was very violent. 'Diana, I know that you are going to do a good job' ... So I went to La Quinta as coordinator in the area of education, sport and health.³⁸

Other women cited being mentored by men or making sure they had the support of key male figures in their communities to do their job. Teresa, for example, mentions her mentor as someone who encouraged her to stand up against social discrimination:

I think it also has to do with a personality issue of self-esteem. My brothers taught me to defend myself. I have never felt that because I am a woman I have less opportunity, quite the contrary, I have been discriminated against not because I am a woman, but because I am from a barrio ... However, after I become a mother and changed my attitude, my mentor, Mr D., taught me that you can live anywhere, but you have to be respected and not feel inferior to anyone simply because they have a Rolex and I have no possessions of my own.³⁹

38 Interview with Diana (see above).

39 Interview with Teresa (see above).

6 Strengthening women’s insider mediator roles

The final part of this report focuses on identifying the women insider mediators’ needs for capacity-building and support, which the interviewees say would help them to sustain their work.

6.1 Capacity-building needs

Several participants mentioned continuous learning as a source of empowerment to sustain their mediation practices. Geraldine, for example, noted that in the early 2000s, she received training that allowed her to grow in her role. She highlighted that technical training, provided on a continuous basis, is crucial to enable women to remain effective in their work.

▮ Practical experience, peer learning and formal qualifications

The need for practical experience, peer learning and formal qualifications in dialogue, negotiation and mediation was frequently mentioned. Participants felt more confident in their theoretical knowledge than in their practical skills. Patricia expressed it this way:

My capacity-building need is not just about how to conduct dialogue or negotiate. I already have [theoretical] knowledge on multi-level track negotiations, soft and hard power, the difference between dialogue, negotiation and mediation [and so forth]. What I want is field experience. I believe, for example, that the United Nations could promote an ... exercise between potential women peacebuilders

and the actors who were at the negotiating table in Mexico ... so that these women can see, can sense the opportunity in the current state of the negotiation process. Everyone wants to get involved [in the negotiations] but there is no representation because [they are] led by the political parties. And the role of social movements is reduced to that of a social dialogue commission.⁴⁰

Teresa also mentioned her interest in achieving certification as a mediator or justice of the peace⁴¹ – something that would formalise her position when dealing with the authorities. As she explains: “We live in a country where you need that kind of status for things to move forward.”⁴²

Furthermore, two interviewees highlighted the need for peer exchange with other insider mediators. Liliana mentioned her interest in mentoring and peer learning to observe dialogue processes in other countries or for experts to provide in-depth training in Venezuela. Josefina recounts how an exchange programme she was involved in through the NGO *Centro de Justicia y Paz* (CEPAZ)⁴³ helped her change her perspective on the conflict in Venezuela, while acknowledging that perspectives in such contexts are continually evolving, underscoring the need for consistent support:

In 2016 I travelled to a leadership programme on the Women, Peace and Security agenda and there I met other women victims. Among them was a woman whose son was murdered by the Taliban, and yet she made that effort to build bridges. These women had

40 Interview with Patricia (see above).

41 Justices of the Peace (or Jueces de Paz) are mandated, according to Venezuelan legislation, to mediate in community conflicts. They are considered part of the judicial system (Pogrebinschi 2017).

42 Interview with Teresa (see above).

43 Center for Justice and Peace is a Venezuelan NGO based in Caracas.

been victims of much more difficult situations than mine, right? So [it made me realise that] we cannot live in an eternal conflict or continue in this spiral of conflicts. As time went by, my position changed and I thought, 'Well, I have certain skills'. Even though I travelled and acquired knowledge, it was something gradual and sometimes challenging in my own mind because sometimes I felt that it should build bridges, but at other times the same thing made me withdraw and retreat to my original state.⁴⁴

≡ Women's empowerment

Although women's empowerment may seem like a very broad topic, many interviewees referred to the need to implement training and education initiatives that improve women's confidence in their own abilities, especially in poor and rural communities. Josefina recounts her experience in Barinas, where women have specific training needs because they come from a rural community and do not have as many connections as women in urban areas, where peacebuilding training sessions usually take place. Training programmes should therefore be adapted to cater for the needs of these women.

≡ Fundraising and economic autonomy

A crucial way to support women peacebuilders is to build their connections and capacities to do their own fundraising, thus supporting their efforts to achieve economic autonomy. Patricia recounts that even as a National Assembly deputy, she lacked the knowledge and connections necessary to raise the funds required to launch her own initiatives:

[When I became] a deputy I did not know that one of the ways to finance yourself was to design a project and present it. Nobody tells you this. As a woman you feel a little afraid of knowing that you have to turn to a sponsor to support you to do a programme in a community or help people in a community, because you fear being sexualised, and you fear what they will ask of you in return. Nobody tells you

who to ask for funds. I asked myself, why me? I had a lot of insecurity. I do not want this to happen to anyone else. So my organisation became [a space to transmit] the lessons I learned as a representative, for the women in the neighbourhoods of Caracas.⁴⁵

Two of the interviewees also mentioned that they would like to learn skills to improve their economic autonomy. Xenaida explained the link between providing the means for women to achieve economic autonomy, and providing an alternative to activities that sustain the violence in her community:

I would like to learn about methods for implementing a sustainable economy in indigenous communities. It is important to learn not only about peace and conflict resolution but also about tools for working ... to make a living. There need to be other options beyond artisanal or illegal mining or joining armed groups.⁴⁶

Sustainable incomes and economic autonomy would also allow women activists to free up more time, resources and mental space for their mediation work.

≡ Strategies for mitigating polarisation

Given its pervasive nature, some interviewees mentioned the need for capacity-building to deal effectively with political polarisation. This becomes especially crucial in the context of advocacy efforts to promote women's equal participation and other policies for gender equality. Women in Venezuela have not been able to overcome the traditional political barriers to advance these policies, underscoring the need for them to develop specific skills and capacities for progress.

44 Online interview with Josefina (see above).

45 Interview with Patricia (see above).

46 Online interview with Xenaida (see above).

☰ Communication skills

Several women expressed the need to continuously improve their communication skills to convey their messages effectively to a broader audience and to better navigate the nuances of communication in high-level negotiation processes. For example, Geraldine noted that she has already improved her communication skills, but plans to continue working on their development.

at what's going on in your head. The thing about peacebuilding is the loneliness ... I believe that to build peace you have to be aware that you are going to be permanently part of a minority and you cannot feel uncomfortable with that loneliness.⁴⁷

A similar message was also conveyed by Diana:

I believe that support in this environment is essential because in this job, when you work close to people who are full of hatred, you have to listen to them and you absorb all of that. You need someone to listen to you and who can advise you ... You have to work on grief from both dimensions, from the spiritual side and with psychologists. Because no one can give what they do not have inside ... I cannot tell you that I forgive you if I do not forgive myself.⁴⁸

6.2 Support needs

Beyond capacity-building and training needs, the insider mediators interviewed for this study also identified a need for broader support that would help foster a conducive environment for their peacebuilding engagement.

☰ Neutral meeting spaces

Two women emphasised the importance of having a neutral meeting space to facilitate mediation and collaboration with different actors. For instance, Diana has been using the La Quinta community centre as a safe space for meetings between gangs, which proved crucial. Similarly, Gladys, a director of a women's centre, highlighted how her centre has, over the years, become a hub for women from both government and opposition to meet and organise their own activities and agendas. Andrea also stressed the need for a neutral space in San Cristóbal, where meetings could be held without depending on private homes of individuals with potential biases.

Moreover, two of the women highlighted that when they faced prison and persecution, the guidance, aid and education they received from specific organisations helped them process their trauma. For instance, Josefina, a member of *Primero Justicia* from Barinas State, referred to the support she received from CEPAZ after she was released from jail.

☰ Psychological and spiritual guidance

Some interviewees also expressed the need for psychological and spiritual guidance. Maria explains it strikingly well:

I think women need a lot of training in communication, confidence-building, a spiritual coach and a psychologist. First of all, they encourage you to look

47 Interview with Maria (see above).

48 Interview with Diana (see above).

7 Conclusion and recommendations

Women in Venezuela are acquiring a historically unprecedented political role. Despite pervasive structural limitations in Venezuela's economy, political culture and social system, women are active at every level to facilitate sustainable political and democratic change. The concepts of peacebuilding, negotiation, mediation and dialogue are relatively new in Venezuela. However, at the community level, women have been performing the role of insider mediators and peacebuilders for decades. At the same time, there is a growing recognition of the need for negotiation and dialogue in mainstream political discourse.

This study aimed to explore the practices and spaces in which women engage in mediation as part of the pro-democracy movement. As highlighted in the Introduction, effective mediation usually starts with attempts to establish trust among actors, as a precondition for enabling collaboration and mediation between these actors. The study identified four main types of insider mediation practices: capacity-building initiatives, whereby women can learn skills in conflict resolution and collaboration and establish trust between different movement actors; invisible facilitation, by forging connections among various actors or contributing to sustaining networks through dedicated platforms; violence de-escalation, by intervening at protest sites or gang-affected neighbourhoods to promote nonviolent behaviour; and community mediation, which enables dialogue and conflict mitigation in specific territories.

In terms of the factors influencing these mediation practices, it is notable that the women interviewed for this study rarely identified specific gender dynamics as obstacles, despite acknowledging Venezuela's culture of machismo. Few felt discriminated against, possibly reflecting their empowerment and resilience levels. Nonviolent activism was seen as a factor that supports the roles of women in mediation roles, with many of

them starting this journey as ethically-oriented nonviolent activists before assuming prominent roles in mediation between movement actors. Establishing their own organisational platforms for capacity-building, coordination and advocacy was crucial for enabling their peacebuilding efforts. Additionally, their maternal role proved supportive, as it motivated some of the women to participate in protests and is a source of status at the community level, which provides them with respect even from violent actors.

The main factor hindering women's mediation practices is the lack of sustainability of mediation spaces. This includes challenges such as network growth crises that leaders are not prepared to confront, unpredictable funding from international actors to maintain those spaces, and capacity-building initiatives that do not ensure sustainability beyond workshop implementation. A second significant barrier is women's lack of economic and financial autonomy, which forces them into dependence on political leaders. This dependence perpetuates traditional polarising dynamics and divisions among opposition political parties, hindering their agency to transcend these dynamics.

The most encouraging aspect of this research process has been to discover the significant ways in which women consistently foster peaceful solutions to Venezuela's protracted crisis, and to better understand how peacebuilding organisations and other external actors can support their work. Accordingly, we conclude this report with these key recommendations:

1. **Maintaining an intersectional lens:** Women engage in peacebuilding in all kinds of different contexts and have different levels of knowledge. They might face additional layers of discrimination based on intersecting identities such as race, class or political ideology.

Training and education programmes need to be adapted to remain relevant and effective for women in rural and poor communities.

2. **Providing mentoring and psychological support:** Offering mentoring and psychological and spiritual guidance is essential to sustain women's resilience and foster an open perspective in challenging circumstances.
3. **Enhancing communication skills:** Supporting women in enhancing their communication skills and abilities to navigate polarisation equips them to advocate effectively for dialogue and peace.
4. **Supporting financial autonomy:** Promoting financial autonomy and the ability to engage in fundraising enables women to sustain their initiatives independently.
5. **Enhancing practical knowledge on mediation:** Providing comprehensive and regular training, coaching and peer learning on the practical dimensions of mediation, negotiation and dialogue processes enhances women's confidence in their ability to address current and future challenges.

These measures collectively empower women peacebuilders in Venezuela, ensuring that they continue to play pivotal roles in fostering peaceful change within their communities.

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