

# Women Faith-Based Mediators in Colombia

Challenges and Opportunities  
Within Peace Mediation

  
Berghof Foundation

The Network  
for Religious  
& Traditional  
Peacemakers



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Derived by political and social disputes, Colombia has experienced over 50 years of internal armed conflict between left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and government forces. Religion, although not a driving factor of conflict, has played a significant role in driving peace mediation and humanitarian work across Colombia. Women faith-based mediators (WFBMs)<sup>1</sup> have played a crucial role in demobilization efforts and peace processes. Women faith-based mediators (WFBMs) have played a crucial role in demobilization efforts and peace processes. They engage in both formal and informal mediation efforts, focused on transforming relationships that inherently fuel conflict. Despite their progress, continuing conflict and challenges related to discrimination, inequalities and security risks hinder their full engagement within these processes.

This case study draws on observations from interviews conducted in 2023 with WFBMs across Colombia.<sup>2</sup> It contains a variety of voices which reflect the diversity of experiences of WFBMs and the contexts in which they work. In addition to mediating with government officials and the military, experiences of WFBM throughout Colombia range from mediating with left-wing guerrillas, to right-wing paramilitary groups. The WFBMs interviewed come from a variety of religious denominations, belief systems and backgrounds, and identify themselves in very different ways.<sup>3</sup> Despite this mosaic of experiences and differences between local socio-cultural, political and economic contexts, WFBMs encounter remarkably similar situations.



*Photo: Taken from RTVC with Pastora Adaleida (right) as part of the Colombian Government delegation in negotiations with the ELN.*

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**1** Women faith-based mediators and negotiators are working on various tracks to prevent and stop violence through dialogue and negotiation of agreements. They convene stakeholders, liaise, and negotiate with armed groups and relevant decision makers to broker humanitarian access, save lives and release hostages. Faith plays different roles in WFBMs' work. Many of them find motivation and inspiration for this work in their faith, and their tools and methods may be inspired by faith. They may be cooperating with or as part of faith-based structures and/or faith-based actors.

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**2** Between January and March 2023, 13 interviews were conducted with women faith-based mediators, relevant stakeholders – including networks who support the mediation work of women –, and male faith-based mediators. The interviewees came from different regions in the country. A majority are based in Bogotá, while the others work on the Caribbean coast, in the Pacific region, and in the departments of Antioquia, Cauca and Caquetá.

**3** The mediators identified as Christian, Catholic, Protestant, and as holding ancestral beliefs.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING RELIGION, CUSTOMS AND CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

Fueled by the agrarian, political and social disputes that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century, Colombia has experienced over 50 years of internal armed conflict between insurgent groups of left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries, and government forces. Colombian armed conflict has claimed more than 200,000 lives, most of these civilians, as well as huge numbers of victims of forced disappearance, recruitment, and displacement, landmines, sexual violence, and massacres.<sup>4</sup>

Religion does not serve as a driving impact of conflict. Rather, the conflicts throughout the country trace back to a long history of political violence, social and economic inequality, and the lack of strong state capable of providing for its citizens. Since colonization in 1500, Colombia has been a predominantly Catholic country. Historically, the Catholic Church has been an important actor in peace negotiations and humanitarian work.<sup>5</sup> There is also a strong presence of Protestant churches across the country as well as indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian communities with deeply rooted traditional spiritual belief systems based on ancestral practices and knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica. (2013). ¡Basta Ya! Colombia: memorias de guerra y dignidad. Bogotá, Colombia: Imprenta Nacional.

<sup>5</sup> Catholicism in particular has seen a transformation from the early and mid-twentieth century, where the Church was a staunch defender of the status quo and had a political role protecting the interests of the elite. With movements such as Liberation theology, the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations started to become involved with social change, peacebuilding and resistance to violence. It is important to note that within the different denominations, there are distinct currents of thought which can contradict each other. For more information see: Plata Quezada, William Elvis, & Vega Rincón, Jhon Janer. (2015). Religión, conflicto armado colombiano y resistencia: un análisis bibliográfico. Anuario de Historia Regional y de las Fronteras, 20(2), 125-155.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Gloria Luna Rivillas, 2023, March 3, Quibdó; Interview with Adelaida Jiménez, 2023, February 8, Bogotá.

There have been many attempts to end the violence while simultaneously providing socio-economic support structures to the local community. In 2016, the government signed a peace agreement with the largest remaining guerrilla group, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas (FARC). In 2022, negotiations began between the government and Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). Despite the progress of hosting formal negotiations, there were 21 massacres which claimed the lives of 67 people in the first two months of 2023.<sup>7</sup> Illegal armed groups continue to target human rights defenders and social leaders, especially against Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities defending their ancestral territories. Several of the WFBMs interviewed have been targeted or know others killed in the ongoing violence.<sup>8</sup>



*Photo: The Institute Foundation for the Construction of Peace (FICONPAZ), CONPAZ Cauca Departmental Meeting, 2022.*

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<sup>7</sup> Semana, “Aterrador panorama: el inicio del 2023 ha sido el periodo con más masacres de los últimos cuatro años en Colombia”, Semana.com, March 6 2023. <https://www.semana.com/politica/articulo/el-inicio-de-2023-ha-sido-el-periodo-con-mas-masacres-de-los-ultimos-cuatro-anos-este-es-el-aterrador-panorama/202336/>.

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with Rosa Inés Floriano, 2023, February 15, Bogotá; Juana Alicia Ruiz, 2023, January 26, Mampuján; Ana Deida Secué, 2023, February 25, Carlotó.

### 3. WOMEN, RELIGION AND MEDIATION

Since the mid-1990s, many WFBMs have been involved with numerous demobilization efforts and peace processes. WFBMs cite their faith<sup>9</sup> and belief systems as the catalyst for their work. ‘Faith drives everything I do,’ shares Pastor Adelaida Jiménez. In many cases, it was through their faith that women in Colombia were inspired to engage in mediation. Josefina Perdomo views herself as, ‘a pencil in the hand of God.’ By assisting the community and engaging with actors from all sides of the conflict, she believes she is doing God’s work to support the common welfare of all.

Faith provides WFBMs with the energy, courage, tenacity, and patience to sustain long-term processes in difficult situations. ‘When you look at a seed, you have to be able to see the tree and the fruit that will eventually blossom,’ says Juana Alicia Ruiz.<sup>10</sup> The cultivation of spiritual strength is a key strategy for personal fortitude and wellbeing for WFBMs. Spiritual tools or practices such as prayer, rituals, and meeting with their faith groups provide inspiration and support for WFBMs. Reconnecting with and seeking solace in their spiritual beliefs is key to restoring emotional and physical strength and continuing to engage in this work.

*Faith is the engine that drives me. Faith is not passive, it is active with the proposal to build new relationships and reconciliation. I nourish my faith every time I have the opportunity to work.*

*Pastor Adelaida Jiménez*

Efforts by WFBMs to reduce the humanitarian impact of the conflict on local communities, and ultimately the end of violence, involve different track negotiations. WFBM’s previous work with communities often means that their mediation processes generally focus on the transformation of the relationships fueling conflict.<sup>11</sup> This transformation of relationships is a key part of mediation between social factions to prevent future political violence. Rosa Inés Floriano is a consecrated lay person who describes her work as her, ‘vocation to use mediation to rebuild relationships that are in need of transformation.’<sup>12</sup> Rosa Inés is currently providing support to the Catholic Church’s delegation in its official role to facilitate the negotiations between the Colombian government and the ELN. Rosa has significant experience working with the Catholic Church to promote dialogue and mediate between different groups and factions in civil society. Similarly, Pastor Adelaida Jiménez, a government-appointed negotiator currently engaging in ELN negotiations, is most notably engaged as a mediator in track 1.5 efforts. She was appointed due to her previous success and excellent reputations working at the local level.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Whilst the term mediator is not commonly used in Colombia, the WFBM strongly identify with the phrase “faith-based” to describe themselves. The word “faith” is a uniting term in understanding their mediation work.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Juana Alicia Ruiz, 2023, January 26, Mampuján.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Adelaida Jiménez, 2023, February 8, Bogotá.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Rosa Inés Floriano, 2023, February 15, Bogotá.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Adelaida Jiménez, 2023, February 8, Bogotá; Interview with José Rutilio Rivas, 2023, February 10, Istmina.

Most women in Colombia negotiate either in track 2 or 3 level processes at the community level. In Arauca, where conversations or activities were not allowed by armed groups, Katherine Torres took the initiative to host dialogue sessions between the ELN and FARC on issues related to humanitarian aid for local communities. She received support from the Mennonite church to conduct these efforts. Similarly, Josefina Perdomo, a Catholic lay person, has prominently negotiated with armed groups in the Caquetá region. During a period of intense violence, she convened stakeholders from both sides of the conflict to facilitate a dialogue exchange and ultimately, ensure humanitarian access to the region. She defines her mediation work as, ‘advocacy for communities and especially women.’<sup>14</sup> After years of negotiating with armed groups for the cessation of violence, Josefina currently works to reconcile victims and perpetrators of organized violence.

As Ana Deida explains, faith provides a mediator with the necessary tools, spiritual practices, to regroup when there are difficult hurdles or even stalemate in negotiations where, ‘nobody wants to talk.’<sup>15</sup> Ana relies on her faith-based spiritual practice including ‘ley madre’, or ‘law of origin’ to carry out her mediation practice. Prior to any mediation activity, Ana will connect to her surroundings and seek harmony with nature and the protective spirits. ‘Mother Earth is everything, this belief reveals itself through the body, in dreams, the signs that our bodies show us, the messages sent through the singing of birds and other spiritual beings,’ she explains. In her mediation approach, Anna emphasizes the importance of woman-to-woman interaction and acknowledges the value of intertwining her role as a mediator and a member of the community who is impacted by these efforts.

Many WFBMs believe that their faith provides them with protection. Indigenous mediators use ancestral wisdom and a spiritual connection with nature to map risks and provide safeguards prior and during the mediation process.<sup>16</sup> Ana Deida shares compelling examples of how invoking Mother Earth can provide protection for both the land and its inhabitants while restoring the balance that is disturbed by violence. This was echoed through the lens of Christianity by the theological understanding that God protects all mediators from harm.<sup>17</sup> Josefina Perdomo would ask God to protect her work, and that as a result, she and her colleague, ‘were never sick, and were never shot at. We are the ones making it happen,’ she says, ‘but God has to intervene and make change possible.’<sup>18</sup>

*Mother Earth is everything,  
this belief reveals itself in our  
dreams, in the signs that our  
bodies show us, and in the  
messages sent through spiritual  
beings and through nature, such  
as the singing of birds.*

*Ana Deida*

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Josefina Perdomo, 2023, February 6, Cartagena de Chairá.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Ana Deida Secué, 2023, July 14, Carloto.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Ana Deida Secué, 2023, February 25, Carloto.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Ana Deida Secué, 2023, February 25, Carloto.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Josefina Perdomo, 2023, February 6, Cartagena de Chairá.

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### Integrating a faith-based approach in mediation

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WFBMs utilizing the teachings from Catholicism and other Christian denominations stresses the importance of interpreting religious scripture as a basis for their work,<sup>19</sup> particularly in justifying the role of women mediators through biblical examples. The Bible exemplifies stories of women mediators, such as the ‘Wedding at Cana,’ where Jesus performs his first recorded miracle. His mother, referred to as the ‘woman,’ plays a significant role in the events leading up to the miracle.<sup>20</sup> Gloria Laverde is a member of the network GemPaz and advocates for the interpretation and use of contextual theology, meaning that it applies, ‘theology through local practices to motivate and justify the importance of meditation work.’<sup>21</sup> An example of such interpretation is how scripture was used to motivate the demobilization and reinsertion of former combatants into society.

Juana Alicia Ruiz believes that faith-based mediation serves as a powerful tool for addressing violence.<sup>22</sup> When she begins working with communities and earning their trust, she uses a range of activities to engage the individuals, such as prayer, bible readings, religious songs, spiritual rituals and cleansing, and somatic work. This approach has earned her a level of legitimacy within her community, and ultimately supporting her recognition to mediate with the Colombian government and paramilitary groups. Through convening these actors, she prevented an increase in violence, ensured humanitarian access and facilitated the safe return of communities. Juana Alicia Ruiz shares this sentiment and takes it a step

further, emphasizing the unique power of faith to ‘touch hearts.’ Juana sees how faith-based mediation operates on the principals of love and forgiveness, making a profound impact on people’s souls as well as their minds, awakening their emotions and focusing on empathy as a way to open dialogue.

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### Reconciliation in Colombia

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In Colombia, the signing of peace accords between the largest left-wing guerrilla and paramilitary groups, along with the implementation of transitional justice processes, have shifted the country’s focus towards reconciliation efforts. Juana Alicia Ruiz’s community in Mampuján, Northern Colombia suffered human rights violations and forced displacement as the result of a paramilitary-led massacre in 2000. Together with other victims, she started the ‘Las Tejedoras de Mampujá’<sup>23</sup> reconciliation campaigns. Through her dedicated advocacy efforts, Juana was selected to negotiate reparations with the Colombian government and paramilitary groups. Her efforts sought the recognition of the crimes committed, reparations for the victims and the right to return to their lands. Throughout this process, Juana has combined advocacy with initiatives aimed at reconciliation and forgiveness, while also investing significant effort into negotiations with different armed actors. Much like Rosa Inés, she used faith-based mediation ‘to transform relationships.’<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interviews Jenny Neme Neiva, 2023, January 21, Bogotá; Monsignor Héctor Fabio Henao, 2023, January 31, Bogotá.

<sup>20</sup> Interview Monseñor Héctor Fabio Henao, 2023, January 31, Bogotá.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Gloria Laverde, 2023, February 1, Bogotá.

<sup>22</sup> “[...] actuamos tocando la alma, no la arma”. Mediation is the antithesis of the weapons used in the conflict. Interview with Juana Alicia Ruiz, 2023, January 26, Mampuján.

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<sup>23</sup> Tejedoras de Mampuján, Premio Nacional de Paz 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owAj-XxbXhk>.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Josefina Perdomo, 2023, February 6, Cartagena de Chairá.



## 4. NAVIGATING RISKS AND CHALLENGES

### Discrimination and gender inequality

The main challenge impeding the successful engagement of WFBM in the mediation space is connected to elements of discrimination and gender inequality. This encompasses discrimination by key actors or parties with whom they are trying to mediate with as well as prejudice within religious institutions or faith-based communities. These areas of discrimination stem from persistent gender inequality throughout Colombia and the patriarchal stereotypes in which circulates in the country's collective consciousness. In some settings, WFBM are invited to participate only if they operate under male leadership.<sup>25</sup> That means a woman's intervention is seen to be more acceptable if they act as part of a team led by a man, thus limiting their independence and ability for equal participation.



*Photo: The Institute Foundation for the Construction of Peace (FICONPAZ), CONPAZ Cauca Departmental Meeting, 2022.*

In the Chocó department, illegal armed groups have specifically requested male negotiators. This presents a challenge to the legitimacy of women in the field, especially as the mediator must hold legitimacy and trust with the parties in order for a successful outcome. The limited participation of WFBM in track 1 and 1.5 mediation processes is partly due to the challenge that faith-based women have little access to leadership roles. This is particularly serious for Catholic women as many women support the community under the guise of the Catholic church, but do not actually hold any leadership or decision-making roles. As a result of the church's institutional structure, they are subjected to secondary and assistant roles, unable to become priests and rise through the hierarchy.<sup>26</sup> This is also true for other Christian denominations as well as ancestral faith-based contexts where male spiritual or religious leadership has impeded women's inclusion in senior positions. In turn, this exacerbates the lack of women's participation in high-level mediation processes.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Cotez, 2023, February 2, Medellín.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Monsignor Héctor Fabio Henao, 2023, January 31, Bogotá; Interview with Rosa Inés Floriano, 2023, February 15, Bogotá.

Traditional conservative cultures adhere to strict gender roles that restrict women's engagement in public-facing roles outside of the home. Women who work outside the home are often judged for, 'not attending to the needs of their families because they were participating in mediation activities.'<sup>27</sup> Others dissuade the participation of women in mediation spaces because they do not view women as authority figures capable of making decisions and ensuring their implementation. '[Armed] groups think that women do not have the weight to implement what is agreed upon at the table,' shares Pastor José Rutillio Rivas, who has substantial experience working with armed groups in dialogue processes in the department of Chocó in Western Colombia.<sup>28</sup>

Colombia is a country where many people, especially in rural settings, are familiar with faith and religious practices. However, not everyone and not every armed group feels equally comfortable with these aspects. One of the challenges lies in the balance that WFBM must make to incorporate spiritual or faith-based practices while also ensuring they do not inadvertently create divisions. This is specifically true when mediating with parties that adhere to different belief systems or may not subscribe to a belief. WFBM need to act with prudence and sensitivity, making sure to take time to understand the nuances of each party.

*Women have been criticized for not attending to the needs of their families because they were participating in mediation activities, work which is considered as risky or an environment for men.*

Stigmatization is a frequent fear and a risk in which WFBM must navigate. For example, a WFBM could be incorrectly labeled as a member of one conflicting party, or as sympathetic to their cause. In Colombia's case, this is of particular risk when WFBM are perceived as 'left-wing sympathizers' when engaging in a mediation process with left-wing guerrillas, as experienced by Josefina Perdomo in Caquetá. This perception can also extend to the national level, as seen with members of GemPaz.<sup>29</sup> Faith groups themselves can also be the source of stigmatization if they disapprove of women in mediation roles. Previously, these groups have accused WFBM of abandoning their families and/or disregarding their traditionally assigned role as women needing to manage a household.<sup>30</sup> These stigmatizations have greatly impacted WFBM professional and personal relationships, as well as within their own faith communities.



Photo: The Institute Foundation for the Construction of Peace (FICONPAZ), CONPAZ Cauca Departmental Meeting, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Jenny Neme Neiva, 2023, January 21, Bogotá.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with José Rutillio Rivas, 2023, February 10, Istmina.

<sup>29</sup> Jenny Neme Neiva, 2023, January 21, Bogotá.

<sup>30</sup> Interview Jenny Neme Neiva, 2023, January 21, Bogotá; Interview with Elizabeth Cotez, 2023, February 2, Medellín.

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## Psychological and physical implications

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WFBM face a significant risk of physical and emotional burnout due to the nature of the work as it relates to the expectations held of them by all parties in the conflict. Simultaneously, women also work to be accountable to their own communities and faith groups. This notion is especially heightened in times of economic instability or security risks impacting their families. These scenarios were heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading many WFBM to reduce their time spent in mediation processes.

Physical security is also a significant risk for WFBM and their families. ‘Life becomes vulnerable when putting yourself in the center of mediation processes,’ explains Pastor Adelaida Jiménez.<sup>31</sup> Violence directed towards women range from killings, assaults, and sexual violence. Ana Deida’s involvement in mediation efforts related to land rights, especially when economic interests are at stake, has heightened the level of threats she faces.<sup>32</sup> Being fully aware of the gravity of these threats, she has known leaders in her community who have been killed by armed actors.<sup>33</sup>

*Life becomes vulnerable when putting yourself in the center of mediation processes.*

*Pastor Adelaida Jiménez*

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<sup>31</sup> Interview Adelaida Jiménez, 2023, February 8, Bogotá.

<sup>32</sup> Interview Ana Deida Secué, 2023, February 25, Carloto.

<sup>33</sup> UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, “Colombia: UN expert says killings of Nasa indigenous human rights defenders, including children, must stop immediately”, Geneva, 24 March 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/colombia-un-expert-says-killings-nasa-indigenous-human-rights-defenders>.

## 5. OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

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### Addressing psychological, physical and economic wellbeing

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Addressing the psychological and physical wellbeing of WFBMs is key to supporting their endeavours and success. The ability to access ‘safe spaces’ to network with other WFBMs and exchange experiences is imperative.<sup>34</sup> This is especially critical due to the confidential nature and emotional toll of the work. Safe spaces can also include access to mental and ‘physical rest and recuperation.’<sup>35</sup> ‘First, I should be well in myself in order to look after other people,’<sup>36</sup> emphasized Jenny Montoya, a mediator in prisons and communities in Barranquilla. Given the emotionally challenging and demanding situations WFBMs encounter on a daily basis, it is crucial to provide them spiritual and mental health support opportunities. Such support is essential to enhance their effectiveness.

Many WFBMs are also in precarious economic situations, especially as they became mediators in the midst of violence and conflict. Often, WFBMs are underpaid or work in a volunteer capacity. Those living in rural settings with families to support, or with additional unpaid care responsibilities, need to be remunerated or else they will be unable to continue engaging in mediation work. External funding or remuneration opportunities is key for future sustainability.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Cotez, 2023, February 2, Medellín; Interview with Adelaida Jiménez, 2023, February 8, Bogotá.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Gloria Laverde, 2023 February 1, Bogotá.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Jenny Montoya, 2023, February 1, Barranquilla.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Juana Alicia Ruiz, 2023, January 26, Mampuján.

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Carefully using religion to increase the legitimacy and credibility of WFBMs

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The legitimacy and credibility of WFBMs increases when they mediate on behalf of a faith or spiritual-based institution or organization. Due to her proven capabilities and previous work with communities, as well as being a representative of the Protestant Church in the country, Pastor Adelaida Jiménez was appointed to be part of the government delegation for the ELN negotiations and therefore, was accepted by the parties. This success can be observed through the notion of belonging to a faith-based organization, which serves as a significant entry point.

The use of symbols also creates legitimacy for the women, as they are affiliated with spiritual and religious authority and institutions. Commenting on the significance of the bastón (staff) as a symbol of spiritual and political representation in indigenous communities, Ana Deida describes, 'having staff commands recognition and creates opportunities [for legitimacy]'.<sup>38</sup> Echoing this sentiment, laywoman Jenny Neme observes that, 'the clerical collar speaks for itself.'<sup>39</sup>

Colombians view cultural symbolism and respect for religious authority as elements in which shape collective identity. When mediation efforts, and mediators themselves embrace religious or spiritual symbolism through a religious or spiritual lens, it is well received by mediating parties. Often, this connotation 'garners respect' and women of faith are viewed as 'deserving respect.'<sup>40</sup> A common reverence for faith and spirituality is especially relevant in rural areas of Colombia. Accordingly, faith has provided opportunities to access particularly hard-to-reach communities, specifically those in rural areas.<sup>41</sup> In many parts of Colombia, armed actors have only permitted churches or religious organizations to work on the ground, with the Catholic church having historically more influence than other denominations, especially in political negotiations. Being from faith-based backgrounds also allows women mediators to engage in advocacy as well as mediation, as they are perceived as apolitical, a critical element, especially when politics is a source of conflict.



*Photo: The Institute Foundation for the Construction of Peace (FICONPAZ), CONPAZ Narino Departmental Meeting, 2022*  
*Departamental Nariño, 2023*

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Ana Deida Secué, 2023, February 25, Carlotó.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Jenny Neme Neiva, 2023, January 21, Bogotá.

<sup>40</sup> Interviews Monsignor Héctor Fabio Henao, 2023, January 31, Bogotá; Jenny Montoya, 2023, February 1, Barranquilla.

<sup>41</sup> Interviews with Juana Alicia Ruiz, 2023, January, 26, Mampuján and Jenny Montoya, 2023, February 1, Barranquilla.

*First, I should be well in myself in order to look after other people. I have learned to rest in God and to manage my emotional and mental health.*

*Jenny Montoya*

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### Building relationships to gain access

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While affiliation with a religious or spiritual institution or organization is important, WFBMs perseverance to build and sustain relationships is essential for gaining the trust and access of conflicting parties. Josefina Perdomo's respected position as an experienced laywoman in the Catholic Church aided her in gaining access to an extremely closed-off region in Caqueta in the early 2000s. Her access was the result of persistent engagement to develop and maintain relationships with the local communities and formal institutions. The persistent and meaningful engagement by WFBMs also played a role during the COVID-19 humanitarian crisis, where their presence on the ground and continuous involvement in the community successfully negotiated humanitarian access for the Catholic Church with both the communities and armed groups.<sup>42</sup>

Building relationships is another strategy used by WFBMs to create entry points into the conflicting parties and to build trust on which to base future mediation. These relationships provide an opportunity to collectively work together and to reduce individual risk.<sup>43</sup> Existing groups such as GemPaz, consisting of women of faith, have successfully worked together to support local mediation in cases of youth detainment or amongst communities confined by armed groups. Katherine Torres, who started her career in mediation with the Mennonite Church, has been involved with the Colombian Women Mediator Network. Through this Network, she has shared her experience with other females in mediation efforts between the ELN and FARC in Arauca. Additionally, she has shared the diverse perspectives of armed groups as it relates to women's participation in negotiations. The disparities in views may be influenced by the internal policies of the armed group, the opinions of commanders or the specific contextual factors at the time of negotiation.

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Rosa Inés Floriano, 2023, February 15, Bogotá.

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Gloria Luna Rivillas, 2023, March 3, Quibdó.

Working with male allies can also be of benefit to help counteract physical risks and create entry points.<sup>44</sup> Engaging male colleagues throughout mediation efforts has proven an asset to prevent sexual harassment, predominately in male-dominated environments, such as in prisons or with armed actors. Sympathetic male negotiators also play an important role in advocating for WFBM's participation. Male colleagues can insist on including women at the table when an armed group refuses to allow women negotiators or introduce women in secondary roles, with the motive to demonstrate their credibility and legitimacy.<sup>45</sup> For example, Pastor Adelaida Jiménez worked closely with Monsignor Hector Fabio, a male faith-based mediator in the ELN negotiations. She was moved by an act of allyship by Hector, who invited her as a co-celebrant at mass. This act of inclusion by her male counterpart supported her efforts to build trust between the parties and legitimize her role as mediator.

International support from donors, organizations, government and multilateral institutions is often cited as a way of ensuring, 'that women do not arrive last to the negotiation table,'<sup>46</sup> especially in predominantly male-driven track 1 and 1.5 negotiations. The appointment of more women to the ELN talks, including WFBM Pastor Adelaida Jiménez as government negotiator, can partly be attributed to the international pressure to increase the number of women engaged in the process. This engagement on the national and international stages is trickling down to local level<sup>47</sup> as, '...the armed groups see women engaging at a national level and are more open to negotiating with them [as representatives of] the community.'<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Adelaida Jiménez, 2023, February 8, Bogotá; Interview with Rutillio Rivas, 10 February 2023, Istmina.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with José Rutillio Rivas, 2023, February 10, Istmina.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Adelaida Jiménez, 2023, February, 8, Bogotá.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Pastor Láciedes Hernández, 2023, February 3, Medellín; Interview with José Rutillio Rivas, 2023, February 10, Istmina.

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### Gender roles as an asset

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One of the cultural stereotypes that provides a unique entry point for WFBMs is the association of women with motherhood and motherly attributes, such as being caring and gentle. Many WFBMs believe that being seen as 'motherly' makes them less intimidating compared to their male counterparts, particularly in the eyes of men in the armed groups. This perception has enabled them to enter into spaces predominantly occupied by male actors by establishing close relationships and receiving confidential information and 'confessions,' in their role as mother figures. In the instances of Caquetá and Chocó, WFBMs have negotiated with groups for the release of children forcibly recruited, leveraging their trust they have built with the group in their role as mother figures.



*Photo: The Institute Foundation for the Construction of Peace (FICONPAZ), CONPAZ Cauca Departmental Meeting, 2022.*

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with José Rutillio Rivas, 2023, February 10, Istmina.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite differences in their religious or spiritual affiliations, backgrounds, and contexts, WFBMs encounter similar challenges stemming from gender stereotypes and discrimination. As the country grapples with a long history of armed conflict and violence, the efforts of WFBMs to mediate and reconcile become more crucial in fostering sustainable peace. However, their potential will not be recognized without gaining legitimacy, credibility, and entry into mediation spaces.

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### *Recommendations provided by WFBMs*

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- 1 Support women's leadership, participation and meaningful engagement within mediation processes, especially in high-level decision making, in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.** This includes increasing the visibility of WFBMs work and impact, which will have a long-term impact on changing perceptions and enhancing their credibility in the space. WFBMs are well placed to design and implement agreements given the trust communities have in them.
- 2 Support existing networks of WFBMs to encourage exchange of best practices and welfare.** Ensure these networks help to motivate younger generations to engage in peacebuilding and broader peace mediation efforts. Examples of such networks include Grupo Ecumenical de Mujeres Constructoras de Paz (GemPaz) or the work of United States Institute of Peace (USIP) with the Colombian Women's Mediators Network. Networks can support access for WFBMs in training opportunities in both mediation methods and skills to support public-facing work.
- 3 Support the economic stability of WFBMs.** Often the work of WFBMs is unpaid or their economic remuneration is not considered necessary. Supporting WFBMs through small business management training or funding economic stimuli for mediation work through international donors will allow them to continue their mediation work while financially supporting their families and livelihood. Additional resources should be provided to support the psychological wellbeing of women.
- 4 Ensure WFBMs have access to safety measures.** WFBMs have communicated that fear of violence is affecting their wellbeing and that of their families. WFBMs need to have access to protection protocols derived from the Ministry of the Interior to ensure their safety and wellbeing in the mediation space. Policymakers must ensure these protocols include an understanding of the gendered risk dynamics, implement effective security measures and risk analysis for WFBMs to safely engage in mediation efforts and ensure the protection of their families.





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