

Addressing Chronic Violence from a Gendered Perspective

Fostering People-Centered Approaches at the National Level

CASE STUDY: HONDURAS

Highlighting the roles of young women leaders addressing chronic violence in Honduras and opportunities for building social cohesion

This case study is part of the *Addressing Chronic Violence from a Gendered Perspective: Fostering People-Centered Approaches at the National Level* report created by the Women PeaceMakers program.

Addressing gendered chronic violence

Violence has traditionally been viewed through the lens of armed conflict or specific, concrete violent incidents. However, it is necessary to understand that violence may be a chronic phenomenon— a persistent, deeply ingrained aggression affecting daily lives. Women and marginalized gender groups experience a particular type of chronic violence, stemming from deeply rooted patriarchal structures. These experiences, while diverse, share a common thread: they are manifestations of systemic oppression and inequality, from domestic violence to broader societal discrimination.

The report makes the case for reconceptualizing violence in the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and gender equality fields, building upon feminist conceptions of the continuum of violence to recognize that societal structures, systemic discrimination and even pervasive cultural norms can be sources of violence. Multidimensional strategies, inclusive policies and a global commitment are needed to elevate women's roles across sectors, from community development to high-level peace negotiations. Understanding the deep intricacies of violence can serve as the bedrock for constructing sustainable, equitable peace.

The report is co-created as part of the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship, led by the voices and perspectives of the 2022-2023 Women PeaceMaker Fellows. The report drew from the lived realities of women peacebuilders and their partners, and from experts working in the Women, Peace and Security and violence reduction fields. The full report provides both an international analysis and context-specific case studies.

Since 2002, the Kroc IPJ has hosted the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship program. The Fellowship offers a unique opportunity for women peacebuilders to engage in a cycle of learning, practice, research and participation that strengthens peacebuilding partnerships. The Women PeaceMakers Fellowship facilitates impactful collaborations between women peacebuilders from conflict-affected communities and international partner organizations. The Fellows also co-create research intended to shape the peacebuilding field and highlight good practices for peacebuilding design and implementation. This case study was created as part of this process and is also featured in the full *Addressing Chronic Violence from a Gendered Perspective: Fostering People-Centered Approaches at the National Level* report.

In this case study, Woman PeaceMaker Fellow Tania C. Martínez examines the pervasive issue of chronic violence in Honduras, focusing on the experiences and perceptions of young women leaders, and advocating for a multi-faceted, youth-centered approach that emphasizes gender equality, community engagement and policy reform to address the systemic roots of violence and promote social cohesion.



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Case Study:

Voices of young women
in building peace and
social cohesion at the
national and local levels

CASE STUDY

By Tania C. Martínez

*Highlighting the roles of young women leaders
addressing chronic violence in Honduras and
opportunities for building social cohesion*



Context

Honduras and other countries in Latin America suffer from chronic violence. Honduras remains one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the region. In 2020, 25.2 percent of the Honduran population lived in extreme poverty and almost half (4.4 million people) lived in poverty, according to official data.¹ In addition to high levels of inequality,² Honduras also experiences institutional fragility,³ high levels of mistrust,⁴ significant internal displacement⁵ that leads in many cases international migration,⁶ high rates of impunity,⁷ and high levels of insecurity – including a homicide rate of 35.8 percent,⁸ which is more than double the average in the region, 16.4 percent.⁹

According to Adams,¹⁰ chronic violence is a phenomenon with multiple causes and effects in a society. This case study focuses on two elements that Adams emphasizes: that chronic violence undermines social relations and provokes perverse social behavior that is naturalized among vulnerable groups and becomes a perverse norm that can be transmitted intergenerationally; and that chronic violence obstructs public engagement and endangers the practice of citizenship and weakens social support for democracy.¹¹

Adams emphasizes that if policymakers do not address these challenges, it will become increasingly difficult to build peace.¹² In the case of Honduras, poverty and inequality create an environment for chronic violence through different forms of violence, discontentment among the population and the weakening of the social fabric. Addressing these manifestations requires a comprehensive approach that includes policies and programs that promote equal opportunities and social inclusion, along with the eradication and prevention of violence in all its forms. Although the country has made progress on strategies and programs for preventing violence¹³ (such as domestic violence, sexual violence and homicides), the population cites insecurity, the economic crisis and corruption as the three main problems in the country.¹⁴ The majority of the population dreams of a country with opportunities and without violence.¹⁵



In general terms, Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups, women and youth are the most marginalized and therefore most vulnerable to chronic violence. Women make up 51 percent of the Honduran population, and of that percentage, 28.5 percent (1.4 million people) are young women.¹⁶ As women in Honduras face challenges in different areas of their lives, politically, socially and economically, the compounded impact of different types of violence (such as femicide, domestic violence, economic violence, psychological violence, emotional violence, physical violence and sexual violence)¹⁷ in their lives undermines the possibility of a dignified and peaceful life. Honduras has the highest rate of femicides in the region, six per 100 thousand inhabitants.¹⁸ Additionally, the Report of the European Union Observation Mission on the 2021 electoral process indicated that women continued to be underrepresented in politics and that there were high levels of gendered political violence.¹⁹ The election of the country's first woman president, Xiomara Castro, who has been in office since January 2022, has not fostered a drastic change in these trends.²⁰

In 2022, young women under 30 had the highest rate of reported experiences of theft, sexual assault and human trafficking.²¹ In 2020, according to UNFPA, 55 percent of the victims of sexual violence were between 10 and 19 years old.²² In addition to physical insecurity, young women are also faced with economic insecurity; 63.8 percent of young people who work are men, while 36.2 percent are women. Of the young people who neither work nor study, 24.2 percent are men and 75.8 percent are women.²³

Women and girls who are migrants in irregular status across Central America face challenges on their migration route, including gender-based violence, discrimination and vulnerability to trafficking, kidnapping and murder.²⁴ According to the World Bank, in 2020, almost 49 percent of the 16.2 million migrants from Central America and Mexico were women.²⁵ At the same time, in a context of poverty and structural violence, as well as direct violence in the family, community and in schools, migration is considered one of the limited alternatives for adolescents to opt for a better future.²⁶ In fact, according to a 2023 CID Gallup opinion poll, in the last two years, the desire among the Honduran population to migrate has increased by 13 percent, particularly among younger people. The most cited reasons to migrate are to find work and better opportunities.²⁷ Additionally, some studies show that young women, who suffer disproportionately from gender-related violence and victimization, and are generally less likely to seek state protection, are more likely to attempt to migrate than young men.²⁸

This case study focuses on how young women in Honduras understand chronic violence and analyzes their experiences, challenges and visions for a peaceful existence in their context. Considering chronic violence in relation to young women specifically is important to protect their rights, promote gender equality and foster a safe and inclusive society for new generations. Addressing this issue is critical and requires comprehensive efforts, including policy changes, community engagement and support systems to ensure the wellbeing and empowerment of young women.

Methodology

This case study explores the perceptions of chronic violence among young women who are active in Honduran society, the challenges they face and the opportunities for tackling chronic violence and building social cohesion in their context. Specifically, the case study answers two interrelated questions:

- What is the understanding of chronic violence, peace and the relationship between the two among the new generations of young women?
- How have young women active in social movements, civil society organizations and governmental institutions tackled chronic violence and what ways have they found to work on peace in Honduras?

The case study used qualitative methods to answer the research questions. The instruments for data collection were 10 semi-structured interviews (40-45 minutes each) and one focus group with the participation of five young women leaders (22-32 years old) who work on issues of violence prevention and promotion of social cohesion (90 minutes). The participants were young women leaders and practitioners from different parts of the country who are involved in social cohesion processes, conflict prevention and prevention of violence in their communities. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with young women who have participated in social cohesion processes (2); young women working in international organizations (3); young women working in prevention of violence (2); young human rights defenders (2); and a national official (1). The focus group, on the other hand, included young women working in peacebuilding and prevention of violence at the local level, as well as young women part of the leadership of civil society organizations.

The interviews delved into the perceptions and experiences of young women working on preventing violence at national and local level, through civil society organizations, social movements and governmental institutions. The focus group was conducted with young women leaders from different sectors to understand their experiences and journeys as young women leading changes and their perceptions about their impact and participation opportunities. The focus group and interviews were conducted in Spanish.

When designing and carrying out the research, the privacy, emotional and psychological wellbeing, safety and rights of the young women participants were always prioritized. The participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits of the case study, and everyone's participation was voluntary. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the data within the publication have been anonymized, to ensure the safety of the participants.

Manifestations of chronic violence

Reflecting on the most pressing issues in the country, especially in relation to chronic violence, the interviewees consistently emphasized the presence of inequalities, high levels of violence and corruption, organized crime, as well as the lack of quality education for the population more broadly. Some of the other manifestations of chronic violence that stand out from the interviews are linked to physical violence, sexual violence, domestic violence and structural violence. These answers coincide with perception surveys carried out at the national level, where the general population indicates that the biggest problems in the country are lack of opportunities (unemployment, lack of quality education), corruption and issues of violence and insecurity.²⁹ For the interviewees, these situations are an impediment to a full life, where one can enjoy wellbeing in personal and community life.

Some of the interviewees³⁰ insisted that it is necessary to focus efforts on addressing chronic violence not only in the big cities, but also in rural areas where development is precarious and inequalities, including in the workforce, persist. In the context of limited access to education denying young women the opportunity to develop critical thinking, empathy and conflict resolution skills, some of the interviewees³¹ mentioned the importance of programs and projects also being accessible to women in rural areas. Otherwise, these women losing the opportunity to participate, learn and give their opinion on issues that concern them. One of the interviewees who works with training processes for women in rural areas emphasized that it is necessary for young women to know different perspectives to analyze and make decision in an informed manner.³² On the other hand, the interviewees³³ felt there are very few spaces to receive training on dialogue, debate and conflict resolution, even though education plays a vital role in challenging cultural norms, breaking the cycle of violence and promoting alternative approaches to conflict resolution. As one of the young woman interviewees pointed out, "If we are not educated, we are vulnerable to any type of violence. Education is essential in a country; education changes our lives."³⁴



Some of the interviewees³⁵ emphasized that corruption and organized crime are serious problems in the country and are both manifestations of and contributing factors to chronic violence. When there is corruption in formal institutions,³⁶ there are fewer financial resources to meet the country's priorities. For example, one young woman who was interviewed³⁷ noted that if there are fewer resources to address the country's priorities, it fosters dissatisfaction, which could lead to protests or violence. Furthermore, three interviewees³⁸ also noted the impact of impunity on the whole society and on the persistence of violence, as the lack of an effective justice system can contribute to the reproduction of violence. Relatedly, three of the interviewees³⁹ stressed the need to strengthen governance and law enforcement in the country as a way of attending to the social demands and protecting the population, especially the most vulnerable populations.

Another manifestation of chronic violence is the high rates of femicides in the country. Some of the young women interviewed⁴⁰ agree that the state of physical violence in the country is deeply concerning. From January to July 20, 2023, the Women's Rights Center registered 259 violent deaths of women, according to print and digital media.⁴¹ This is an alarming rate of femicides, regardless of the decrease in the overall homicide rate in recent years.⁴² Some young women interviewed for this study⁴³ further acknowledged various forms of violence that impacted them, including economic violence, political violence and domestic violence. Some interviewees⁴⁴ note that marginalized populations, such as Indigenous peoples, rural women and youth, bear the brunt of the existing insecurity, often leading to instances of irregular migration or forced internal displacement.⁴⁵

Chronic violence implications for young women

Reflecting on the implications of chronic violence in the lives of young women, even though not all the interviewees were familiar with the term, they agreed that Honduras is in a situation of chronic violence and that it manifests itself in different ways in their lives. Some of these implications include deep feelings of insecurity, pressure to follow cultural norms embedded in the society and limitations of professional growth and loss of leadership spaces.

When it comes to the deep feelings of insecurity, fear and helplessness that young women experience, five of the interviewees⁴⁶ referred to street harassment as something that is normalized in society and that young women feel unsafe in the streets. In fact, one of the interviewees specifically talked about how street harassment leads to young women's limited participation in certain spaces.⁴⁷ Women feel in danger in their communities, and because of that fear they do not participate or develop their potential, which is also normalized. Some interviewees⁴⁸ stated that they have stopped doing activities because they do not want to expose themselves to uncomfortable situations where they cannot stop or prevent the harassment. Street harassment and feelings of insecurity have detrimental effects on the lives of young women as it creates a diminished sense of safety, restricts their freedom and causes them to alter their routines. Street harassment undermines self-esteem, generates panic, anxiety and frustration, and perpetuates gender-based violence and inequality. One of the young women interviewed stated that she lives in constant fear, always present and alert when in the streets: "I perceive it [the fear] very much alive on a day-to-day basis. We all have a fear of going out, of going to a certain neighborhood, of not leaving anything in the car [for fear of being robbed]."⁴⁹

"It is hard not having free access to enjoy the things I like; I can't walk because it means death for me. I have felt the little space to participate to raise my voice on issues that I consider to be wrong." -Young woman working in social cohesion processes

Not only do young women feel unsafe in their environment, but they also say they do not have confidence in the institutions that should protect them from violence. One of the young women interviewed expressed that “who should take care of us is who harasses us, scares us.”⁵⁰ The political and public domain implications go even further, as according to a young woman interviewed, “a woman does not participate freely in politics for fear that someone will reveal her personal life.”⁵¹ She said, “since I was young, I had political aspirations, I wanted to be president of the law school. I was very young, they made a web page to talk about me, this intimidated me and made me give up participating... I don’t want to imagine what happens at the highest level.”⁵²

In terms of the pressure to follow cultural norms embedded in the society, machismo has perpetuated gender inequalities that contribute to systemic violence against young women. This has contributed to gender-based violence, including the normalization of domestic violence, sexual harassment and femicide.⁵³ These norms not only undermine the safety and wellbeing of young women but also hinder their access to justice and support systems, reinforcing a cycle of violence. One of the interviewees stated that it is necessary to make changes in traditional attitudes against women, otherwise “there is not much that can be done in a macho society, it is something normalized.”⁵⁴

Chronic violence can limit professional growth and close leadership opportunities. One of the interviewees noted, “there is a form of violence that extends beyond physical harm. Specifically, individuals have the capacity to undermine your confidence and make you doubt your abilities solely based on your gender, especially as a young woman.”⁵⁵ The interviewees stated that sometimes in their first workplaces, for instance, they were minimized due to their age and/or for being a woman.⁵⁶ They do not receive the same salaries as their male colleagues with similar responsibilities or are not considered to be leaders because they are young women. Ageism may lead to the marginalization and devaluation of individuals. When young women are perceived as weak, dependent or insignificant, they may become more vulnerable to various forms of violence, including physical, emotional and financial abuse. The denial of opportunities for professional growth can also have psychological and emotional impacts on young women. Young women can come to believe that their talents, skills and ambitions are undervalued and unimportant, which can lead to feelings of frustration, self-doubt and diminished self-worth. Instead, some of the young women interviewed⁵⁷ for this case study work to create a culture of respect and inclusion, which can contribute to reducing chronic violence and creating a safer and more equitable environment. Some of the interviewees⁵⁸ indicated that much of the work to address chronic violence is led by social and feminist organizations, as well as international organizations. The government addresses the issue to a lesser extent. During the interviews, three of the ten young women interviewed⁵⁹ expressed that they had decided to work on prevention of violence against women and particularly young women because they themselves were victims of violence (work-related violence, economic violence or domestic violence) and wanted to help other young women to stop cycles of violence. Overcoming these manifestations not only benefits individual young women but also contributes to building a more just, united and equitable society for all.

Gendered responses to chronic violence

When asked how to address chronic violence in Honduras, interviewees reported that approaches need to address youth and the issues they face. Some interviewees⁶⁰ believe that the current approach is adult- and urban-centered, ruling out the possibility that young rural women have a leading role in their future. This vision limits the empowerment of youth leadership, which is critical for addressing the priorities of young women⁶¹.

Two of the interviewees⁶² recognized that there has been progress in the country in terms of legislation and prevention of violence against women and girls; however, there is still much to do. According to two of the interviewees,⁶³ the institutions responsible for providing services for women victims of violence need to strengthen their capacities and make these services accessible to women in rural areas as well. From the national institutional framework, it is necessary to strengthen efforts to create a comprehensive approach to chronic violence and to promote coordinated work between government institutions.



“The fact that the adult believes that we cannot do anything and tells us that because we are young, they tell us that we do not have the experience to make changes.”
- Young woman national official

In terms of young women’s inclusion in these efforts, most of the interviewees expressed that young women are not listened to or respected as they should be.⁶⁴ At the national level it is more difficult, but at the local level and with civil society organizations there is space to be heard in their work,⁶⁵ as there are organized spaces that promote the participation of young women. The cultural issue in some sectors is more notable since, as stated by one of the interviewees, “when a woman is in traditional male spaces, she is inhibited, but when only women are present in some places, then they [women] participate and give their opinion.”⁶⁶

Civil society organization and international organizations work to respond to chronic violence by offering training programs, which were viewed positively by respondents.⁶⁷ They perceived that these programs provided young women with necessary information and tools to prevent domestic violence, create spaces for protection and avoid femicides. Some felt that local women’s organizations are the most important organizations for promoting safe spaces for victims of violence. However, one of the interviewees⁶⁸ stated that even human rights defenders face threats and are victims, even while they are trying to defend someone else. According to these respondents, education and inclusion of young women are key factors to promote safe spaces and encourage citizens to participate in positive change in their communities. The young women interviewees said that more and more women are participating in local spaces and, as one of them stated, “when a woman is educated, she is empowered, changes are generated in society.”⁶⁹

“When a woman wakes up, she is unstoppable, she generates a social impact.” - Young women’s rights defender

Creating social cohesion and building peace in Honduras

In interviews and exchanges with the young women who participated in this case study, it was clear that they understand the manifestation of chronic violence and the importance of their role in building social cohesion. Honduras is a small and diverse country, and the young women interviewed – even among those of different ages and ethnic origins – agreed that they are working for positive change, promoting inclusive participation and influencing decision-makers to prevent violence.

What is peace?

Responses of interview participants when asked to define peace

“Peace is that our rights are guaranteed.”

“Peace is well-being.”

“For me, it means an environment where anyone feels safe and that their basic needs are met.”

“Peace is that we are all equal, that women go down the street, without fear. Where girls can go and not be harassed and not get pregnant.”

Some of the young women are working to promote social cohesion and build peace in Honduras by providing training and education on human rights issues for the reduction of inequities. Many of the interviewees are focused on training young women about their rights and on new masculinities.⁷⁰ One of the interviewees emphasized, “we must all be educated on these issues, and men must respect women. When this happens, this will be an ideal place for young women.”⁷¹ These trainings also include addressing issues of leadership and empowerment for young women. Two young women interviewed⁷² highlighted that the support they need is related to mentorship, to be heard and to access more spaces for participation. The young women emphasized the importance of mentorship because they felt a need for accompaniment by more experienced women in order to advance their goals.

The interviewees also discussed young women’s political participation. Some interviewees expressed the need for the state to promote opportunities for all people, including those who live in rural areas. They cited the need for decent employment, particularly since many young women migrate out of Honduras because of a lack of economic opportunities. There is a need for more open and accessible ways to be heard and influence public policy. In addition, one of the interviewees mentioned the need for opportunities to access financial resources to implement projects for young women.⁷³

Interview participants also identified the need to create safe spaces, facilitate dialogue and protect victims of violence. Interviewees emphasized that dialogue to facilitate and center the participation of young women is essential. One of the interviewed mentioned that change “starts with something simple, spaces for dialogue, with spaces like these, it is how peace is built, it is not just thinking that there is no war, peace is built day by day... Sitting down, talking, building, instilling the culture of debate... that there is no polarization that restricts us from achieving these objectives.”⁷⁴ It is necessary to continue to open spaces for dialogue between national authorities and communities to reach agreements and collaborate to address the causes of chronic violence.

One of the most emphatic responses focused on the importance of organizing, networking and joining groups that are interested in transforming communities. These spaces must be open to facilitate learning and participation and to allow gender roles to be questioned. As emphasized by one of the interviewees, “Young women must learn to question that bullying, adult-centrism, is not normal. It is necessary to educate with social awareness.”⁷⁵



The young women interviewed for this study identified spaces for dialogue, training, and work for social cohesion as critical; it is also important to recognize that many young women are already contributing to reducing inequities and preventing violence. However, this can be a heavy burden to bear. One of the interviewees stressed the importance of not putting too much weight on young women: “it is not our job to save the world.”⁷⁶ One of the interviewees mentioned that it is important to “empower oneself, I cannot help others if I do not feel well. We must continue fighting for our dreams so that other women know that it is possible. I wanted to help others when I did not feel good, but it is better to work for one first to inspire.”⁷⁷ Self-care is essential to be better equipped to support others and contribute meaningfully to the prevention of violence.

Young women are asking to be heard, and to have the freedom to shape the development agenda. One of the interviewees expressed, “I have hope because I see the young people who participate with me, I see how women lead community processes.”⁷⁸

Conclusion and recommendations

Chronic violence is intertwined with social factors like poverty, inequality, fragile institutions and high levels of violence. Addressing chronic violence requires a comprehensive approach involving prevention, intervention, provisions of support services, education, policy change and a commitment to creating safe and inclusive environments for all, particularly for young women.

By promoting gender equality and fostering a culture of non-violence, Honduras can reshape the structures that uphold chronic violence and work to create safer and more peaceful communities. In order to do so, it is necessary to promote social cohesion, a culture of peace and inclusion. The young women who were involved in this research exhibit tremendous potential to lead these efforts, as they are actively striving to contribute for a more just, equitable and peaceful society in Honduras.

The following recommendations stem from the insights and experiences shared by the participants.

Recommendations for the government

- Develop comprehensive approaches that include policies and programs that promote equal opportunities and social inclusion, along with the eradication and prevention of violence in all its forms.
- Protect young women’s rights and promote gender equality to ensure the inclusion of young women in spaces where they feel represented.
- Strengthen systems to ensure the wellbeing and empowerment of young women.
- Focus efforts on addressing chronic violence not only in the big cities, but also in rural areas where inequality gaps are greatest.
- Increase funding for prevention and support, to ensure sufficient resources for implementing development projects for young women.
- Strengthen response capabilities among different government institutions, including law enforcement, healthcare, social services and education, to share information, coordinate efforts and implement effective interventions that address the needs of young women.
- Develop educational programs targeting schools, communities and the public, raising awareness about the consequences of chronic violence, promoting social cohesion and conflict resolution skills such as respect, empathy and new, alternative masculinities.
- Create more safe spaces for dialogue with authorities to share the priorities of young women and to empower young women.
- Promote legislation against harassment as one of the steps in creating an environment where young women feel safe, supported and free to live their lives without the constant burden of street harassment and insecurity.
- Promote more communication campaigns against street harassment.

Recommendations for civil society organizations

- Collaborate and establish networks among civil society organizations working on chronic violence issues to share resources, expertise and best practices.
- Support the creation and funding of young women's organizations.
- Provide training programs for community members and volunteers, including men of all ages, on recognizing, responding to and preventing chronic violence, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to address the issue effectively.
- Foster community involvement in addressing chronic violence by supporting community-led initiatives, empowering local young women leaders and engaging locals in prevention activities.
- Champion victims of violence by providing them with opportunities to share their experiences, access support services and contribute to policy discussions and program development.
- Develop and implement mentoring programs within civil organizations that promote leadership, non-violent behavior, conflict resolution skills, empathy and respect,
- Create safe spaces for dialogue and reconciliation, bringing together individuals, families and communities affected by violence to foster understanding, healing and the building of stronger social bonds.
- Create alliances between organizations and initiatives that promote the participation of men in combatting violence against women in all its forms.



Endnotes

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- 12 Adams, 2012a.
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