

Research Article

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND TRANSFORMATIONS FOR PEACE: VITAL EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN GOING THROUGH LEADERSHIP PROCESSES IN COLOMBIA

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In various parts of the world, women are actively involved in peacebuilding processes. As members of their communities, they take the lead in initiatives that recognize their role in various issues related to reducing violence and pursuing social change that contributes to peace. This study examines how the lived experiences of ten women leaders in Bogotá, Colombia, have contributed to redefining leadership in peacebuilding contexts. Using phenomenological qualitative design in-depth interviews and Dialogue of Knowledge, four thematic categories were developed: leadership characteristics, results of activities, social transformation, and peacebuilding. Findings reveal that participants enact horizontal, care-based, and transformational leadership models that challenge vertical and patriarchal structures. The study contributes to community psychology by foregrounding women's leadership as a form of social transformation and peacebuilding agency in post-conflict Colombia.

Keywords: women's leadership, lived experiences, peacebuilding, post-conflict, community psychology, social transformation.

1. Introduction

As we examine the peace process underway in Colombia, we realize how complex it is, given that violence has not ceased due to the hostile presence of various actors, which makes it difficult to sustain the transition to peace. However, within this context, a series of processes and initiatives are emerging that aim to foster peace at the local level. Within this scenario, we find a series of localized initiatives led by women who seek to ensure that peace is maintained and developed to help improve the quality of life, collective well-being, and social justice in Colombia. In this context, the objective of this study is to understand how women perceive their leadership roles in peacebuilding contexts, considering their life experiences and the expertise they have gained in peacebuilding in their regions.

Accordingly, this study was conducted in two phases, to recognize the leadership of different women in the city of Bogotá. In the first phase, the topic of leadership at international and national levels was explored, focusing on changes occurring in the transition from male-dominated to female-inclusive leadership. The second phase prioritizes women's participation as narrators of their own social transformations. Their peace-building projects emerge from individual and

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collective effort, with life trajectories shaped by political militancy and community service, fundamentally supported by collectives advocating for women's rights in the public domain.

The literature reviewed in the first phase revealed that within Western societies there are gender tensions playing an important role in understanding some phenomena associated with peace. In this research, we have focused on the need to recognize women's participation in different contexts that contribute to peace. Indeed, considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to the way in which women lead transformation processes in different latitudes (Bonilla Montenegro & Pardo Parra, 2023). This has been an ongoing struggle, as evidenced by the challenges they have faced over the years the historical delays and obstacles they faced in securing political rights and civic participation (Lesmes Caviatiba, 2019).

Women within a hetero-patriarchal society suffer, but not without resisting, the constraints on the balanced development of society and their participation in it. These factors are subject to their relationship with different contexts, such as “historical, political, social, and cultural” (UN Women, 2016, p. 2), linked unequally to women’s roles and experiences in life, both public and private, predominating in our Western societies.

There is also a pressing need to recognize different settings where women are leading. In Colombia’s case, we find an interest in contributing to the transformation within international cooperation objectives where women have been considered a relevant population for work and development. In Colombia, ECLAC recognizes that “Women have the right to work, economic autonomy, and access to social protection schemes. In addition to being a commitment to human rights, bridging inequality gaps between women and men significantly affects economic development, income distribution, and the reduction of poverty and inequalities. Closing the gaps is fair and efficient” (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas [DANE] et al., 2020, p. 24).

However, the current outlook is far from this, considering that even today, concerning women, there are “inequalities manifested in a strong vertical (internal power differences) and horizontal (generic differences in competency areas) segregation” (Batista Medina, 2013, p. 18). Thus, we must rethink the role of women not only in their participation in different settings but also in the reproduction of strategies that benefit spaces of action with women in leadership that transform contexts of high social impact.

It is worth highlighting women’s work in these contexts of social emergencies that provoke the reshaping of the social fabric, contributing to peacebuilding and making visible the reduction of gender gaps within society. Furthermore, in a context where the above is promoted, the role of women in these processes is decisive and increasingly recognised. “Women have been architects of peace and have consolidated it. They have been victims, change-makers, and caregivers” (Bouvier, 2016, p. 6), thus playing a leading role within these settings.

From a qualitative perspective that links elements of peacebuilding, community development, women’s leadership, and even the role of women. Authors such as De la Rey and McKay (2006) and Meagher et al. (2023) acknowledge the tension between women’s community leadership and their exclusion from formal power structures. On the other hand, Moosa et al. (2013) and Pepper (2018) demonstrate that these leaders prioritize relational and consensus-based models that strengthen the social fabric. Jaji (2020) and Reinke (2016) suggest that these actions not only

foster peace but also reshape local identities and forms of community development through an ethic of care.

Therefore, a phenomenological approach is used to investigate the experiences of women who lead peace processes and contribute to social change, considering their relationships in the context in which they exercise leadership. This approach was chosen because it offers an opportunity to understand the participants lived experiences by exploring the subject of study, which is consistent with qualitative phenomenological inquiry (Creswell, 2007) Its participant-centred orientation makes it particularly suited to capturing the nuanced, first-person accounts of women leading peace processes (Alase, 2017) This leads us to explore the participants' experiences in relation to their position as leaders of social processes, women, and workers in the country.

The work of psychology, particularly community psychology, focuses on groups and communities that are considered socially disadvantaged (Wiesenfeld, 2014) and promotes social awareness in favor of the less fortunate (Montero, 2005) the bond that is created with communities in pursuit of de-ideologization — that is, the critical questioning of socially dominant narratives (Martín-Baró, 1996) and social awareness (Rodríguez & Montenegro, 2016). These elements resonate in a psychology that is developed in the Latin American context and can be related to community psychology experiences in other parts of the world that promote community health and work with those who participate in social changes process Kloos *et al.* (2012) or Nelson, Kloos & Ornelas (2014) who seek processes that include communities to achieve transformations.

1.2 Women's leadership and transformation for peace

Women in contexts of armed conflict have been predominantly framed as victims and directly affected populations (Restrepo, 2016; Ayala & Osorio-Sánchez, 2016; Pardo Parra, 2022; Rojas-Rodriguez, 2024). However, a growing body of research challenges this framing by documenting the ways in which women who have experienced conflict actively develop leadership processes within contexts of social vulnerability (Mora & Lara, 2015; Bonilla Montenegro, Soto Sanguino & Muñoz Osorio, 2023). This tension between victimhood and agency is central to understanding women's leadership in peacebuilding.

Regarding the development of women's participation in various social spheres, we find different scenarios of work with groups, communities, collectives, among others, Women's leadership has been documented across a range of contexts, including organizational, entrepreneurial, and business settings (Radović-Marković *et al.*, 2012; Deputy, 2015; Stacey, 2017), domains that have historically been male-dominated. Nonetheless, there is research that differentiates the leadership styles adopted by both men and women in organizational spaces. These gender comparisons can be found in some recognized works such as Lupano Perugini *et al.* (2011), Gutiérrez Valdebenito (2015), and Radu *et al.* (2017).

In addition, gender gaps or barriers to leadership development are evident (Rincón *et al.*, 2017; Alqahtani, 2019; Offermann & Foley, 2020). There are considerable elements to define an adequate field of research featuring women as protagonists and promote a reconceptualization of the attributes of leadership that have traditionally been encapsulated around the male figure—

for example, contemporary transformational and transactional leadership styles (Silva & Mendis, 2017).

Leadership also resonates in educational settings, as explained by Díez-Gutiérrez, Valle Flórez et al. (2003), Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), Kishore and Verma (2012), Zuluaga Goyeneche and Moncayo Orjuela (2014), Navarro Obeid et al. (2018), and Lopes Cardozo et al. (2022). Emphasis is placed on leadership positions and actions associated with educational institutions or specific roles such as management or teaching.

Women's capacity for action in social emergencies has been widely documented, from early foundational research to contemporary regional analyses. Early studies established the central importance of women's participation in peacebuilding within their communities (Marshall, 2000; Manchanda, 2005; Porter, 2007; Klot, 2007; Charlesworth, 2008), framing them not as passive beneficiaries but as agents contributing to social transformation. Moreover, research on post-conflict reconstruction and community capacity-building has advanced across various geographic regions, including sub-Saharan Africa (Gizelis, 2011; Mwambari, 2017; Angom, 2018), the Middle East and North Africa (Athie, 2017; Al-Gawfi et al., 2020) and South Asia (Faria, 2011; Issifu, 2015; Naqvi & Riaz, 2015). Collectively, these authors emphasize that women's leadership in societies affected by violence and war is a determining factor for sustainable development and the reconfiguration of social peace.

Although we have talked about various contexts of action for women leaders, our work prioritizes community, political and social contexts, where we also find several gender gaps that place men at the center. These persistent inequalities are recognized at the global policy level: SDG 5 explicitly calls for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, encompassing the elimination of violence, equal political participation, and equitable access to economic resources (Consejo Económico y Social de las Naciones Unidas, 2017). In the Colombian context, however, the gap between this normative framework and lived reality remains substantial, making community-level women's leadership not merely desirable but structurally necessary.

This body of literature offers a critical framework for understanding how localized female initiatives actively dismantle gender inequalities through capacity-building. In the specific field of peacebuilding, research by Bautista-Bautista and Bedoya Calvo (2017) and Ruiz Herrera and Huertas Díaz (2019) underscores the transformative power of women's collective memory and social leadership in regions recovering from protracted conflict. Expanding on these foundations, contemporary studies—including Opiyo (2023), Akpan et al. (2024), and Mohamed and Ramdhan (2024)—highlight the intersection between community-based work and the reconfiguration of political structures. Furthermore, the recent contributions of Presta (2024) and Tripp, Maiga, and Yahi (2025) argue that women are not merely participants but indispensable architects of peace, whose leadership prioritizes an 'ethic of care' that reshapes the social fabric from the bottom up. Collectively, these works transition the discourse from seeing women as victims to recognizing them as strategic actors in the promotion of sustainable, inclusive social changes.

Peace initiatives primarily serve communities affected by the ravages of war or armed conflict. In the case of women as protagonists, the work of Van Reisen (2015) compiles some vital elements for recognizing women in various countries affected by violence. In these processes, we reflect on security, social changes, political leadership, culture, and even new technologies and how they can contribute to peace experiences from the perspective and action of women.

In addition, the International Republican Institute [IRI] (2016) presents the challenges of women empowerment at the community level and political participation in contexts of violence and prioritizing the African continent where research is being conducted on the inclusion of women in leadership contexts. This exercise highlights the work in countries where armed conflicts of diverse origins have occurred (for example, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Cameroon, and Morocco, among others) and in which the role of women in peacebuilding is acknowledged.

From this perspective, women in leadership contexts can exert their influence in favor of the transition toward peace. Furthermore, it can be recognized that the role of women in these contexts “gives rise to reparation initiatives adjusted to the gender dynamics that permeate violence, and from the logic of their resilient and self-compensation endeavor, to glimpse reparatory needs through the appreciation of their experiences, narratives, and mythologies” (Andrade Salazar et al., 2017, p. 299).

This is interesting since “The context of armed conflict accentuates the gender differences and inequalities that have traditionally characterized the economic, political, and cultural spheres” (Cifuentes Patiño, 2009, p. 129). Examining women's experiences within peace-oriented processes thus reveals not only individual trajectories of leadership but broader structural transformations in Colombian society. Nevertheless, the literature remains limited in its engagement with the subjective, lived dimensions of these leadership experiences — particularly the ways in which women themselves narrate, make sense of, and construct their roles as agents of change. This gap motivates the present study.

2. Materials and methods

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design (Larsen & Adu, 2021; Packer, 2018; Smith, 2015) to reconstruct and interpret the lived experiences of women recognized as leaders within their communities and social contexts. Phenomenology was selected because it allows access to the subjective meanings that participants attribute to their experiences, making it particularly suited to the study of women's leadership as a socially embedded and experientially constituted phenomenon. Within the research methods, we implement participatory strategies such as in-depth interviews and “diálogo de saberes”, it is a collective process in which local and academic knowledge is reclaimed and reinterpreted on a horizontal level through a political and educational lens. (Ghiso, 2015). It is like a process that is built from the bottom up, from those who have been marginalized, who struggle to place their knowledge, their cultures and their identities at a level like that of other dominant actors, to build democratic meanings. In this case, it is used to create a horizontal communication space and get closer to the participants lived experiences in social and community leadership, social transformation, empowerment, contributions and strategies of social connection, and the construction of spaces, settings or efforts aimed at peacebuilding.

The choice of participants is made on a convenience basis; the people included in the research meet the characteristics that are of interest to the researchers according to the topic concerned and are better or easier to access than other populations or study groups (Hernández & Carpio, 2019; Mendieta Izquierdo, 2015). Convenience sampling was complemented by purposive

criteria: participants were selected based on their sustained leadership activity across multiple years, the documented public impact of their work, and their willingness to participate. As Martínez-Salgado (2012, p. 616) notes, this approach prioritizes accessibility; in this study, however, accessibility was combined with relevance to the research focus, ensuring that all participants had direct, sustained experience of the phenomenon under investigation. For this reason, we use snowball sampling in the research because the participants help to recruit other participants for our study (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019; Noy, 2008); the 10 women who appear in the text are selected for their experiences as leaders in the social, political, community and educational spheres. In this way, we do not have an age range, but on the contrary, we take into account the actions they have carried out as leaders in different contexts and how they have done it for several years, which has generated an impact on their groups or communities; indeed, the impact of their work is documented in the public domain and active participation with other women, as they were referred to by the criteria of those who were joining the research.

The women who are part of this research share their experiences of their own volition and the ease of access to the researchers, thus exalting women who live and carry out their activities in Bogotá, who have led initiatives as leaders in different social groups in order to generate, build, establish and maintain processes of social recognition, female empowerment, reduction of violence against women and above all, who have led activities aimed at activities that contribute to peace in the community, the territory or between communities to which they belong (see Table 2).

Table 2. Research participants

Pseudonymous participants	Profile
Andrea	Leads processes with homeless people, children, adolescents, and victims of armed conflict.
Paola	Leads community garden projects
Juliana	Leads working groups with the Afro-Colombian community, the university community of Afro-descendants, victims from the LGBTQ+ sectors, victims of armed conflict, victims of forced displacement, and substance users from Afro-descendant communities.
Daniela	Leads processes of social and political representation for one of the indigenous peoples "Nasa".
Perla	She is a midwife and leads programs that support pregnant women, part of the sexual and reproductive health observatory with political influence.
Gina	Leads processes with populations engaged in sex work, street dwellers, and victims of forced displacement.
Valentina	Belongs to the national network of women for social and political representation in public advocacy and the development of public policies and laws in the country.
Diana	Leads community training processes with children on topics related to community gardens, music, and popular education. Works with market square communities on community innovation.
Samanta	Leads community and political advocacy processes in a feminist collective working for the recognition of women's rights.
Carolina	Leads training processes with girls in the territory in educational, social,

emotional, and training skills.

Note: The table lists the pseudonyms of the participants and their profiles as leaders of different initiatives.

2.1 Data analysis

Consequently, four categories and their respective subcategories are proposed to analyze the information provided by the participants, which will be presented hereafter. To achieve this, the basic steps for phenomenological research proposed by Greening (2019) methodological rigor was maintained throughout four key stages: bracketing, in which the researcher must distance themselves from the pre-existing assumptions about the phenomena; intuiting, characterized by an immersive presence and openness to the participants' narratives; analyzing, we approach the search for common elements that allow us to carry out coding within the study; and in describing, we seek to amplify the voices of the participants to bring people closer to the lived experience of women's leadership.

To implement bracketing, the topic of interest was approached neutrally, setting aside preconceived notions regarding female leadership to prevent bias. Subsequently, the process of intuiting involved identifying meanings attributed to the phenomenon based on prior studies and existing research to uncover common elements. This step was executed through a systematic coding process, beginning with in-depth interview transcriptions. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded with participants' written informed consent, and transcribed verbatim by the first author using a combination of automated speech-to-text tools and manual line-by-line verification against the original recording. Transcripts were subsequently reviewed by the second researcher for completeness, and key excerpts used as evidence in the Results section were translated into English by a bilingual member of the research team.

Following this, axial coding was applied using the paradigmatic model of Strauss and Corbin (2016), facilitating the third step: analyzing. During this phase, categorization was performed to make sense of the participants' shared meanings, effectively linking categories and subcategories through their causal conditions, contexts, actions/interactions, and consequences. Finally, the describing stage involved understanding how the phenomenon of interest has been interpreted based on the description of the results. This stage invites a review and contrast of the elements studied based on the participants lived experiences, integrating and contrasting these findings with the theoretical framework. These processes were managed using ATLAS.ti software, facilitating the emergence of core categories that explain the studied phenomenon of female leadership.

Based on the above, the categories and subcategories analyzed in the preceding sections are presented. Thus, the first category encompasses leadership characteristics, differences between the leadership of men and women, leadership types, leadership strategies, and activities carried out. The second category is the activities' results, including achievements, difficulties, and challenges. The third category involves social transformation, including individual and community transformation. Finally, the fourth category includes peacebuilding and, in turn, incorporates peace initiatives and contributions to peace. Below are the results for each category.

To ensure research trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), three criteria were systematically addressed. Credibility was established through: (a) prolonged engagement across multiple interview sessions with each participant; (b) data source triangulation, involving ten women from

diverse communities and leadership contexts; (c) theoretical triangulation, cross-referencing findings against existing leadership frameworks; and (d) member checking, whereby a summary of preliminary findings was shared with participants to verify interpretive accuracy and invite corrections. Dependability was ensured through the maintenance of an audit trail within ATLAS.ti documenting all analytical decisions from initial open coding through axial coding to the final four-category structure, enabling external verification of the analytical process. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive bracketing (Greening, 2019): both researchers maintained individual reflective journals throughout data collection and analysis to document pre-existing assumptions, evolving interpretations, and positional influences, ensuring that findings reflect participants' perspectives rather than researcher preconceptions.

3. Results

Among these previously described categories, there are some relationships (see Figure 1), which become more evident with the stories and experiences lived by each participant. We found that the activities carried out by each of these women are associated with the characteristics of leadership, leadership types, and individual and community transformation.

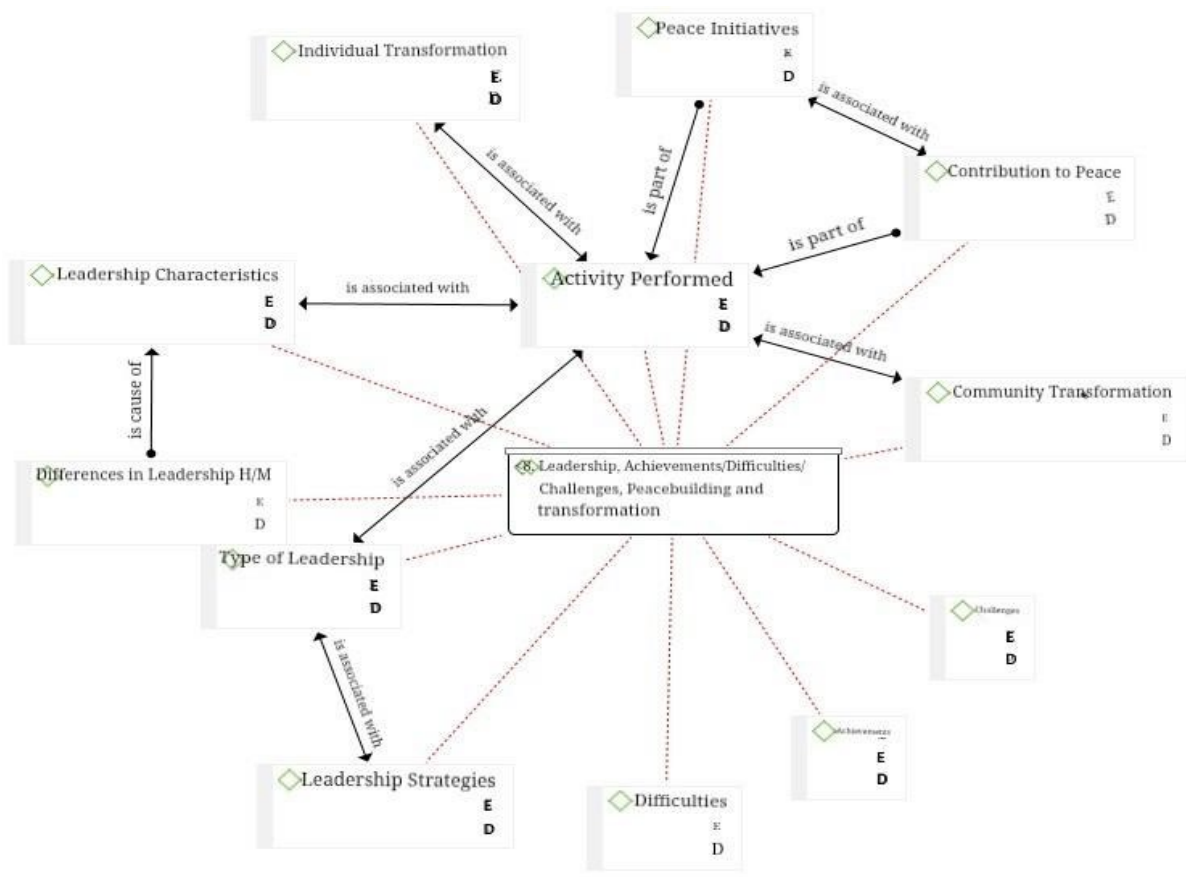


Figure 1. Relationship between categories

Note. The figure presents the relationships, associations, and causes between the categories and subcategories studied. Own source. Figure made with ATLAS.ti.

The analysis begins with participants' shared understandings of leadership consistently identifying the characteristics women leaders should have as part of different social groups such as the following: women who dedicate themselves to being midwives both in their communities and outside of them; indigenous women who lead local, national and international processes for the recognition of the rights of their indigenous communities; professionals in health sciences, politics and economics; women from feminist groups; Afro-descendants; belonging to the LGBTI community; unions of women in prostitution; working with people who live on the street and victims of the armed conflict who represent women's collectives.

Although each of them is part of a different group or community, they understand leadership from their own experiences in different ways or even consider that it does not exist, all of them refer to a series of knowledge, skills, abilities and actions that people must have when leading. These are: helping others to achieve common goals, serving, learning, cooperating, not commanding, listening to others, being creative, empathetic and tolerant, guiding others, teaching, respecting others and their opinions, seeking equality and having diverse knowledge. In some way, each of them emphasizes that the woman leader initiates her process or adopts her role when she does not agree with the situations she may be living and wants to make a change.

The activities carried out by the women leaders and the characteristics of leadership are related to their motivation within the groups to which they belong. Their primary motivation is to help others and look for a way to defend the rights and causes of other people: *"I am motivated every day to be that person who can confront those who trample in one way or another the lives of vulnerable populations, taking ownership of their needs"* (Samanta, personal communication, October 10, 2021). This account illustrates how participants view leadership not as a formal position sought for personal gain, but as a moral responsibility toward vulnerable communities. For Samanta, leadership emerges as a form of resistance against systemic injustice, in which the needs of others become the primary catalyst for political action and the defense of the community.

Other motivations include transforming the lives of others, harnessing one's potential to work within the community, or preventing people from experiencing discrimination or physical, psychological and sexual abuse. Besides, these leaders have had previous experiences with their families, showing that they are politically active in denouncing and changing the social reality of their groups. This proves that they have an interest that is far from their own or economic benefits: *"I have never been paid for being a leader nor have I earned a cent for leading something, but the satisfaction of seeing the community advancing in some way is a pretty good payment"* (Carolina, personal communication, September 7, 2022). This account suggests that, for these leaders, the "reward" is not monetary but symbolic, and stems from the collective progress of the community and its territory. Carolina's remarks reinforce the idea that leadership in emergency situations is based on a logic that is distinct from the market, in which the pursuit of social transformation takes precedence over any individual economic interest.

When contrasting leadership characteristics and leadership types (see Figure 2), it was found that the participants believe that a leader should be someone who stands out from the rest, can

help their community, and sets common goals, thus seeking equality among the members of their group, collective, or community. However, one of them, who is part of an indigenous community, explains that being a leader is understood as a political leader in indigenous communities, which is why they explain it as follows: *“For us there is leadership. Being a political leader within our communities is someone who commands by obeying or listening to the community and puts all those voices, those words of the community, so to speak, into leading”* (Daniela, personal communication, May 25, 2021). This perspective reflects a distancing from the authority associated with traditional leadership, aligning instead with a communalist model in which power does not reside in a single individual but is delegated by the collective. Daniela’s account emphasizes that leadership is a process of mediation and radical listening, in which the leader acts as a bridge for the diverse voices of the community rather than being the sole decision-maker. Additionally, the participants also believe that being a leader means caring about others and speaking up for those who do not or do not know how to do so, given that leadership should be related to collaborating with others.



Figure 2. Leadership

Note. The relationships between leadership and characteristics, strategies, types, differences, and the activities carried out by women leaders are shown.

Moreover, the differences in leadership between men and women (see Figure 2) are caused by leadership characteristics, finding that most female leaders (8 out of 10) do find differences between leadership styles, while 2 out of 10 consider that they are equal in conditions, that these differences do not exist because they are concepts imposed or brought from outside the communities, as occurs in indigenous and Afro communities, or that they derive from the roles that women and men must fulfill socially; hence, we all have the same capabilities. Regarding the differences, the 10 participants recognized as fighters, stronger, and weavers. Regarding gendered differences in leadership, participants described women leaders using terms such as fighters, stronger, and weavers — qualities they contrasted with male leadership styles. These descriptions

reflect a perception, voiced across accounts, that female leadership is characterized by care, endurance, and collective weaving of social bonds, as illustrated by Andrea's account:

It is a historical issue. Feminists call this patriarchy—an ideology that supports a way of thinking, a structure of thought, a matrix of thought that maintains that there are only two sexes and that one is superior to the other. This results in a series of demonstrations at work. (Valentina, personal communication, October 25, 2021)

Participants identified several leadership strategies that intersect with the types of leadership they enact. These include active listening, demonstrating honesty, and seeking support from others who can contribute to the processes they lead. Art also emerged as a distinctive strategy for community engagement, as illustrated by Juliana's account: [quote]. This use of artistic and culturally rooted methods reflects a form of leadership that operates through affective and identity-based connections rather than institutional authority:

Art helps bring a young woman closer. So, I have used art to change structures or harsh realities. When I work with communities, I speak with the words of my grandparents; I always speak from my ancestry. (Juliana, personal communication, July 8, 2022)

The women leaders recognize that another of the strategies related to their work is focused on teamwork; recognizing that they are not alone while carrying out their activities, regardless of whether they are the visible faces of these processes, there are other people who help shape the social fabric. On the other hand, they mention elements such as sincerity, spirituality, knowledge about the territory, transparency in the processes and democratic communication within the group to which they belong. 'Together, these elements — sincerity, spirituality, territorial knowledge, transparency, and democratic communication — shape a model of leadership that is deeply participatory, grounded in horizontal dialogue, and oriented towards collective problem-solving rather than individual authority .

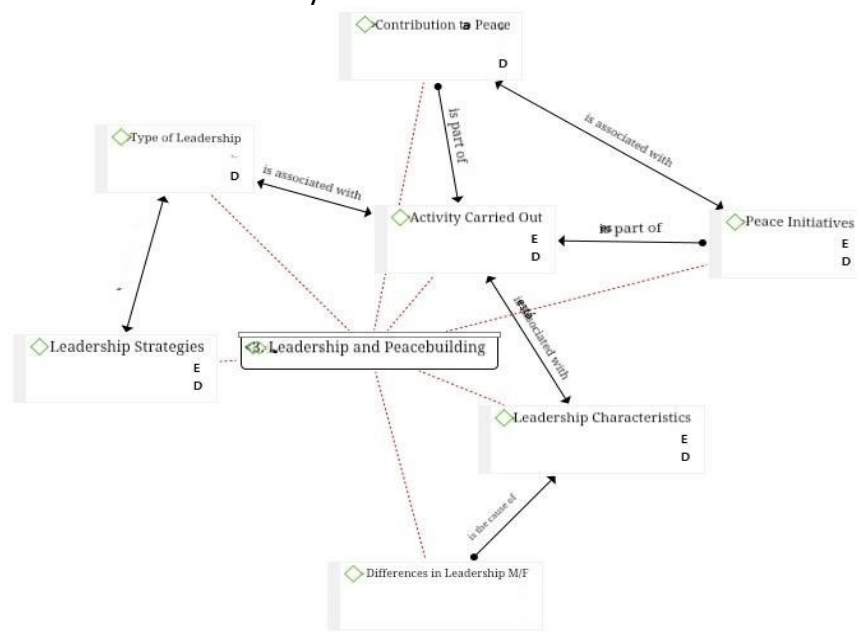


Figure 3. Leadership, activities they carry out, and peacebuilding

Note. The relationships between the leaders' leadership, their activities, and how they are associated with peace initiatives are highlighted.

There is a relationship between women's initiatives and their contribution to peace (See Figure 3), where emphasis is placed on elements such as personal and family values, the need to carry out reconciliation processes, decision making or community management, with dialogue, respect and empathy as a starting point, as well as equity and recognition of rights, and the emphasis on activities related to productive or artistic processes: *"Transforming their reality can also transform their economy, so production projects have been implemented through art for communities"* (Diana, personal communication, 12 October, 2021). The previous section highlights the importance of peacebuilding for these women leaders, which is closely linked to economic autonomy and creative expression. In this case, by integrating artistic production with community projects, the participants redefine peace not only as the absence of violence, but as a comprehensive transformation of the material and symbolic conditions of their territory. In addition to this, being in harmony, caring for the territory and maintaining balance with Mother Earth are also peace initiatives. In addition, the self-management of resources, the reconstruction of the social fabric, food sovereignty, self-owned economies, education, and the protection of those who want peace are necessary to talk about peace initiatives.

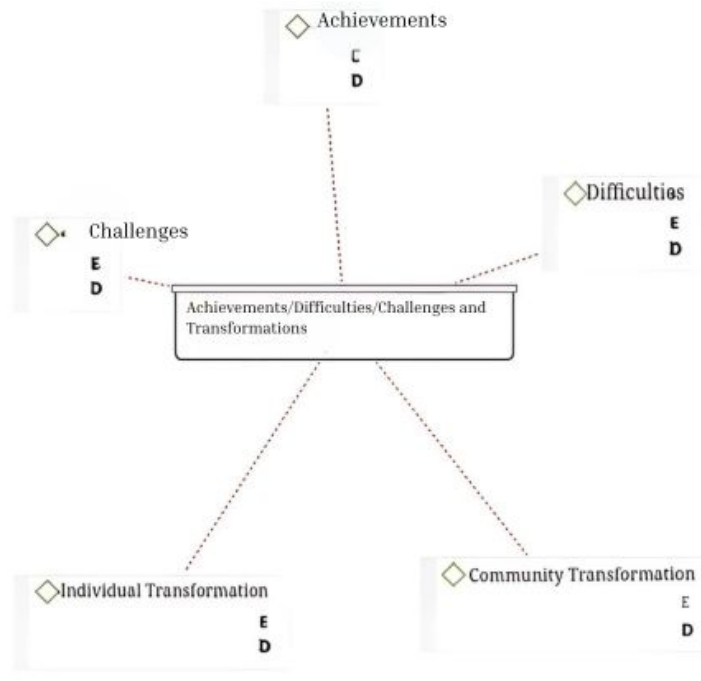


Figure 4. Co-occurrence between achievements and transformation

Note. A low co-occurrence between both categories is demonstrated.

Within the analysis of co-occurrence, there is also a relationship between the achievements and individual and community transformation (see Figure 4), thus understanding that these achievements transform both the people they lead and their communities:

I believe that the most important achievement is, let's say, when one assumes leadership. One creates a vision of oneself, and to that extent, I believe that my self-image is very positive, and I have much faith in myself. (Andrea, personal communication, April 15, 2022)

There is also a union with other people with the idea of connecting with others, motivating, teaching, and learning from them, understanding that this can give rise to conflicts with people or communities with other interests. One must be willing to face these difficulties and solve them with the support of others.

Accordingly, the participants mentioned that the fact of being leaders has allowed them to be trained in different areas. They consider that they are better people since they have developed greater responsibility, reflective thinking, bonds of trust with the community, the opportunity to be listened to and respected for their decisions, among others.

On the other hand, they report that this work has allowed them to make their communities visible, to have recognition in their territory, the possibility of having guarantees in terms of rights and to strengthen close ties with the communities, having the opportunity to carry out different activities with those who participate, as well as generating spaces for political mobilization to benefit and promote the achievement of objectives of those who belong to their social group. It is worth noting the results of their leadership and the obstacles they faced in achieving their goals, or more directly: the following section details the outcomes of their leadership and the challenges overcome.

Achievements: helping others, financially supporting initiatives, offering health and artistic settings and campaigns, scholarships, seats in public universities, recognition of indigenous and Afro communities, educational opportunities to exalt their knowledge as a community *"facility could be given so that people could standardize their knowledge from the peasantry to the university in matters of agriculture"* (Juliana, personal communication, July 8, 2022) Juliana's previous comment highlights that the recognition of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities cannot be based solely on symbolism; there must also be a structural opening of the types of facilities to authenticate the empirical and ancestral knowledge of the land and its sciences.

This leads us to investigate the demands of the participants in relation to the institutional framework relates to escalating requests to government entities for the protection of the rights of communities and leaders, reporting threats, having differential services, public entities' respect for the cultural practices of these groups, economic and food support, regulatory modification regarding the recognition of women's rights, creating public policy initiatives, and training in rights.

Difficulties: Within what has been shared in this process, a negative public perception of the leaders can be found. Although they have supporters, social and political difficulties arise that threaten the very lives of the leaders. To the point of having to make decisions about their safety *"I have had to move because I have been threatened, I have been persecuted, I have been attacked. I have survived very ugly attacks against me, I have had to move"* (Juliana, personal communication, July 8, 2022). In this case, we find that during the process they mention enemies,

they tend to feel vulnerable to violence, feeling threatened, as well as the lack of support from financial resources, corruption.

Furthermore, they report having to make the decision to leave their own homes to focus on their work in the communities they lead, having less time for their families and partners, without clear boundaries between their spheres, functions and activities, and political changes that affect certain efforts or funding " *I think that in my community work, problems sometimes arise because I have to choose between helping my family, taking care of the household, or working for the community. So, it really takes a lot of effort*" (Perla, personal communication, July 8, 2022). Perla's intervention shifted the focus toward the inherent tensions of the double burden faced by women. It underscored the persistent friction between public and private spheres, highlighting the imperative to intensify efforts to support their contributions in both domains

Challenges: economic sustenance, gaining the trust of others, struggles with other people who have interests in the non-continuity of their operations or even in their territories, bringing together people belonging to the community, having the funds to offer food or transportation as many have no way to support themselves, corruption and not being permeated by it, starting processes several times:

It's starting from scratch, working and leading in my family. Let's say that I have had to face those challenges. They have been a great challenge, but I have been able to move processes forward, and I love that. Yet, at some point, one must know when to stop and let somebody else run the show if one can't take it anymore. (Gina, personal communication, November 3, 2021)

This testimony illustrates the exhausting yet transformative nature of community leadership, where the struggle for territorial autonomy frequently encounters systemic sabotage and economic precarity. Gina's account reveals that leadership is not simply a process of coordination, but a rigorous exercise in ethical resistance against corruption and the discontinuity of social processes. The recurring need to start over in these processes underscores a form of resilience and resistance that is both a strength and a burden; it highlights a landscape where mobilizing a community requires overcoming the most basic barriers to survival. In this sense, her reflection on the need to know when to stop introduces a vital perspective on the ethics of care and sustainable activism.

Furthermore, within these challenges, we can find segregation, discrimination, and lack of support from the community because they have different interests than those who lead processes. Being a woman is also deemed a challenge and a difficulty, as they are attacked and ignored. Likewise, collective construction where vertical structures are not maintained is a challenge: "*You have to rotate not only because participation and avoiding vertical structures for activism but also to care for whoever is in charge of physical, emotional, spiritual care*" (Daniela, personal communication, May 25, 2021). It suggests that leadership from their own perspective involves the wisdom to recognize personal limitations and the strategic ability to promote collective change, ensuring that the social fabric remains intact even when the individual must step back to preserve their own well-being.

4. Discussion

These research findings extend feminist leadership theory (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Helgesen, 1990) into a post-conflict community psychology context. The horizontal, relational, and collectivist leadership practices described by participants align with what Helgesen (1990) termed the 'web of inclusion' and what Eagly and Carli (2003) identified as the transformational advantage of women leaders. Crucially, in the Colombian context, where patriarchal structures have been reinforced by decades of armed conflict and forced displacement, participants' adoption of horizontal leadership is not merely a stylistic preference but a political and relational strategy for reconstructing social trust and collective agency in post-conflict communities. This moves beyond Silva and Mendis (2017), situating horizontal leadership not only as an organizational style but as a peacebuilding praxis. This is linked to the literature on female leadership, which recognizes a particular set of skills and perspectives for understanding women in these spaces (Tarbutton, 2009).

The relationships between transformational and transactional leadership can be observed, where participants recognize themselves as part of their groups and how they can participate and make decisions collectively, allowing them to achieve common goals and carry out actions that benefit all members of their communities (Batista Medina, 2013). Thus, both in the previous research and in the results found, this type of leadership recognized by the participants allows them to achieve goals that favor the objectives established as a group, as well as to recognize the difficulties that exist in these processes and in the way new challenges are taken on.

In addition to this, we find that contemporary theories of transformational leadership (Silva & Mendis, 2017) emphasize elements mentioned by the participants, such as motivation, inspiration and collective achievements. Furthermore, when comparing the participants' comments on gender barriers between different leadership styles, there is consistency with previous studies such as those (Rincón et al., 2017; Alqahtani, 2019; Offermann & Foley, 2020) who recognize changes in leadership styles in terms of knowledge, capabilities and skills. Participants consistently noted that leading processes requires a series of competencies inherent to the leadership role; however, they observed that their male counterparts often adopted authoritarian and patriarchal practices that diverge from these relational norms.

On the other hand, participants recognize that leadership is related to the skills, abilities, actions, and experiences they have had, finding new ways of management, participation, and even strategies for working together, as Alfonso Gallegos et al. (2017) explain, the adoption of effective work strategies is essential for fostering leadership growth. In practice, this is reflected in the participants' ability to listen and lead with empathy, consistently seeking horizontal and creative ways to communicate and guide others. This is in line with works such as those by Van Reisen (2015) or the International Republican Institute [IRI] (2016), which highlight examples that emphasize these elements mentioned by the participants and that characterize female leadership, especially when their initiatives contribute to peacebuilding.

Regarding the participants' community roles, this study found that leadership is exercised through emotional support and collective care. This phenomenon reflects a broader global trend explored by authors such as Opiyo (2023) and Akpan et al. (2024), among others (Mohamed & Ramdhan, 2024; Presta, 2024; Mari Tripp et al., 2025). In general, these studies argue that when women lead through solidarity and affection, they break down traditional management roles to become key agents of social transformation and peacebuilding within their territories.

Likewise, despite the fact that their experiences show that there are still differences between men's and women's forms of leadership, their participation in these scenarios together with the recognition of women's rights, as well as supporting the creation of programs for rural women related to their ancestral knowledge, decent childbirth and the recognition of women's participation in relevant social and political environments, that correspond to community initiatives as well as some efforts of national and international entities that have as a focus of interest the reduction of inequality gaps between population groups prioritizing issues such as gender in relation to women's leadership (National Administrative Department of Statistics [DANE], Presidential Advisory Office for Women's Equity [CPEM], United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women [UN Women], 2020).

Furthermore, that the development of these initiatives, seeks to respond to the Sustainable Development Goals (Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, 2017), despite the lack of resources, recognition, threats, displacement, corruption among other problems at the economic, political, cultural and social level hinder the fulfillment of these objectives, the efforts are significant and the work in territory has an impact on the lives of communities, social groups and the personal lives of women. In our case, from the work of leadership.

The initiatives presented by the women leaders who are part of this research show that they, along with other women, have consolidated their experiences, knowledge, and strategies to be change-makers (Bouvier, 2016) for their communities. Still, segregation, discrimination, detractors, and the lack of support from people inside and outside their communities pose more challenges, thinking about how everyone should contribute, moving away from building collectively, and even perpetuating vertical forms of leadership.

All this without leaving aside that women leaders have lived different experiences where they have had to leave their homes, children, family and places to support their own communities, understanding that they must overcome limitations, problems and assume challenges where violence is present (Van Reisen, 2015; The International Republican Institute [IRI], 2016) and transversely affects the processes that are carried out, which affects collective efforts and common results. Women's work is a matter that falls within the scope of community psychology in Latin American perspective (Martín-Baró, 1996; Montero, 2004; Wiesenfeld, 2014) as these frameworks allow women to be identified as actors who contribute to social transformation, de-ideologization, and the awareness of groups or communities, understanding the importance of confronting gender gaps and amplifying women's participation in the community. This approach fosters inclusive and participatory environments for peacebuilding, in which women transform their social contexts and move from being marginalized figures to central proponents in peace processes.

And in peace processes, As well as the commitment of communities to seek ways to address their difficulties in order to improve health, quality of life, and well-being within social groups or communities Kloos *et al.* (2012); Nelson, Kloos & Ornelas (2014) something that women recognize as part of their interests and scope as leaders and that it is present in the characteristics of community psychology, a field of study that helps us to understand and reflect on local and global issues and encourages us to reconsider our connection to the world through people's participation (Francescato, 2020).

This research is grounded in the field of community psychology, as it facilitates direct interaction with individuals within their specific social contexts. By seeking to promote social change through the actions of marginalized groups, this work aligns with Martín-Baró's (1996) transformative paradigm. This is particularly true because it aims to validate the lived experiences of women and how these contribute to reclaiming the struggles and resistance of those facing high-impact situations, such as rural life, social exclusion, and gender discrimination. This approach reflects the characteristic commitment of community psychology in Latin America, drawing on the theoretical contributions of Montero (2003; 2004), Wiesenfeld (2014), and Bonilla Montenegro (2025), who discuss social transformation, self-management, and alternative disciplinary practices.

This becomes a meeting point for community psychology, which is also interested in empowerment Christens (2012), mobilization Fraser, et al. (2019) and recognition of the possibilities of peace building mediated by women's leadership Meagher et al (2023) This responds to the interest in relating women's works scenarios within community psychology regarding the role women play, which has become increasingly important Hassan & Silong (2008) in this sense, women's leadership across diverse contexts enriches community psychology by informing the development of strategies that promote social change, equity, and justice contributes to psychology, particularly in community psychology, in the development of strategies that promote social change, equity, and social justice, elements that seek the discipline in its field of action.

The specificity of the Colombian post-conflict context merits explicit theoretical attention. The 2016 Peace Accords between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP included a Gender Chapter (Enfoque de Género) that formally recognized women as protagonists of territorial peace processes (Presta, 2024; Bonilla Montenegro & Pardo Parra, 2023). Yet the participants' accounts of threats, forced displacement, lack of institutional resources, and political indifference illustrate a persistent gap between formal recognition and lived reality. This is theoretically significant: it demonstrates that women's leadership in Colombia cannot be understood simply as an expression of individual empowerment, as mainstream leadership literature tends to frame it, but must be understood as an act of survival, community repair, and structural resistance under conditions of ongoing political violence (Andrade Salazar et al., 2017). The institutional architecture of transitional justice, particularly the Jurisdicción Especial para la paz (JEP), creates a specific opportunity structure that either enables or constrains women's leadership at the community level. Future research should investigate how women leaders in different Colombian territories navigate, challenge, and potentially transform this institutional framework.

This study addresses a gap in the academic literature on women's leadership in Colombia: the scarcity of research on peace processes that focuses on the subjective dimensions experienced from the perspective of community leadership. Given that various initiatives and collective processes led by women have emerged in different parts of the country, it is worthwhile to explore ways to enhance their visibility in academic and professional circles. For this reason, this research provides an opportunity to document these contributions, in which women leading these processes express their challenges, difficulties, and contributions regarding the work on social transformation that arises from the participants' own experiences within social processes.

The interpretive depth of this study is closely linked to the sociopolitical and methodological limitations of the context. A key consideration is the influence of social desirability bias, whereby

participants may have adapted their narratives to align with perceived academic expectations during the process — a response rooted in historical scepticism towards external academic processes. Additionally, the ongoing and uncertain security climate in Colombia might have led to a certain degree of self-censorship, employed as a method to reduce the fear of retaliation from violent groups. These factors are not just obstacles but also reflect the contextual nature of community leadership. In response, the research project promoted ethical and responsible knowledge production oversight to ensure that women's participation did not compromise their safety or integrity.

On the other hand, the narratives collected offer significant depth. The scope of the study may be limited by its focus on Bogotá. The possibility of expanding the sample to include other regions of Colombia or other contexts of conflict and violence would provide a more robust understanding of how women's leadership manifests in different territorial realities. Additionally, the opportunity to understand the importance of community psychology in helping to reduce gender-based violence in marginalized communities (Di Napoli, Procentese & Visser, 2024).

Furthermore, a reflective analysis of the process acknowledges the researcher's position of enunciation. In this case, the presence of a male researcher in a study focused on female leadership may have affected gender power dynamics during the process. This could have had an impact on the participants' comfort level or their willingness to delve into sensitive aspects of their lived experiences. Articulating these interactions is important because individual agencies and social transformation are sometimes consolidated through shared identities. For this reason, gender differences may have influenced the depth of the dialogue regarding personal, private, or gender-specific struggles.

Finally, while this study offers an approach to female leadership in Bogotá, it serves as a starting point for a broader conversation about territorial peace throughout Colombia. The narratives shared by these women reveal that peacebuilding is a process involving emotions, sustained by networks of solidarity that challenge traditional structures. Considering these gender nuances contributes to strengthening work processes in these territories from a community psychology perspective committed to the experiences of historically marginalized groups, not only in Colombia but throughout Latin America. It also opens the possibility of finding strategies that promote transformative changes processes prioritizing social justice (Dutta, Sonn & Lykes, 2016). Duconsidering the implications of these women in peace processes, where their work around emotions and care is recognized as the fabric upon which a society moving toward peace is reconfigured.

5. Conclusions

The experiences compiled in the research allow us to recognize a series of individual and collective implications that nurture the exercise of women's leadership; additionally, we have been able to identify some aspects that highlight the importance of women's work in community and social scenarios. On the other hand, it is important to contrast aspects at a theoretical or conceptual level since the traditional explanations sometimes differ from the experience of the participants, other efforts, works and styles of leadership, including the joint work with the members of a community.

In addition to this, the experiences of the women leaders within the research should be highlighted, since they show a tendency to leadership styles that exercise horizontal dialogues and move away from vertical dialogues, since they have in common the fact that the people who are part of their community participate directly in community development, which leads them to seek strategies to promote support, capacities, knowledge, contributions and collective constructions in order to seek to guarantee processes of change or social transformation. The gender issue is an important element, since cultural practices still make it difficult to have a balanced number of women participating in leadership roles.

The peace initiatives and contributions are of utmost relevance and there are different efforts on the part of the women leaders that contribute to making their work, their communities and the different problems they face visible, always seeking possible benefits for the community. However, they face little recognition, help, or financial support. Other people's self-interest, corruption, and even threats and displacement from their places of origin prevent them from achieving their goals.

The findings of this research acknowledge that women's role in peace initiatives goes beyond mere participation; it encompasses a constant commitment to social transformation and peacebuilding. With regard to care work, it functions as a strategy of territorial resistance, where female leadership is redefined and resists the dynamics inherent in marginalized environments. From the perspective of psychology's social commitment in Latin America—such as in liberation psychology— these actions embody processes of personal and collective healing that challenge structural and symbolic violence. By focusing on affection and solidarity, these leaders affirm that peace is not built solely through daily practice to rebuild the social fabric from the ground up and transform society from below.

The lived experiences and life trajectories of these women have fostered unique leadership practices and ethical concerns that redefine participation in social processes. Their work reveals a variety of strategies that allow them to address territorial challenges in diverse contexts. This underscores the need to document these women-led processes, where they act as catalysts for social transformation, contributing to the construction of contextualized peace and seeking lasting peace in their communities.

We find that despite their efforts as participants within their spaces, processes of segregation, discrimination, and distancing have still been perpetuated, which manifest as forms of resistance and tension to the recognition of women's contributions both in leadership matters and in actions aimed at particular social changes. Therefore, it would be advisable to amplify the actions carried out by women in different leadership roles, as these are experiences that seek to build peace and strengthen this line of action within the field of community psychology.

It is also important to recognize the women's voices from other places of enunciation, strengthening not only women but also the feminine perspective in social transformation and peacebuilding. This broadens the scope for future research that addresses other issues related to femininity, women, and participation in contexts of social vulnerability and the changes that may arise from women's actions.

Finally, the main contribution of this research lies in demonstrating how the community leadership of a group of women in Bogotá Colombia, serves as a form of psychosocial resistance, fostering social change to mitigate territorial conflicts and promote spaces for collective care and social mobilization. Regarding potential impact, it is recommended that these initiatives be made

more visible so that state institutions and policymakers can implement formal funding mechanisms and legal protection strategies that allow women to continue their work on initiatives with community impact. In addition, further research in this field should expand this inquiry through comparative or longitudinal studies in different parts of Colombia that contribute to understanding intersectionality regarding ethnicity or rurality in peacebuilding. In this regard, the work of community psychology can help dismantle traditional power structures, considering situated knowledge and leadership as the fundamental basis for a sustainable, inclusive, and pluralistic peace.

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