Gender Just Landscapes

Gender based violence and community protection in the context of climate and environmental change and conflict

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a significant global health and human rights issue, affecting one in three women globally. The risk of gender-based violence grows in contexts with environmental change and conflict. Therefore, the scale and endemic nature of both GBV and the environmental and climate crisis means that understanding the risks and drivers of GBV, along with women-led GBV prevention and response methods, is urgently needed.

For more information about *Gender Just Landscapes*, scan the QR code or email project PI Lora Forsythe at the Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich, via l.forsythe@gre.ac.uk.

UN Women defines gender-based violence as "harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender". These acts take many forms, including physical, sexual, physiological, and economic. Gender-based violence is rooted in systemic gender inequality, the abuse of power, and harmful social norms; these manifest in multiple areas of life, including in the relationships between people, their livelihoods, and nature.

The *Gender Just Landscapes* project sought to engage with women's groups to understand GBV risk in different *'territorios'* which are experiencing environmental change and conflict. These sites also represent locations of women-led resistance, care, nature protection, and peace initiatives. This provides important insights about the environment and peacebuilding — and specifically how Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) can effectively engage with women-led strategies.



Holding outdoor research workshops helped participants connect with each other and feel more at ease while discussing sensitive topics.



The project involved shared creativity, building trust via arts and nature. (Photo: Rebeca Rocha)

As elements of the project's participatory action research, the team used audiovisual, creative, and nature engagement methods to discuss issues of violence with women, which are often 'unspeakable'. These methods also serve to help raise critical awareness about the risk of gender-based violence and highlight women's agency for peacebuilding and social change. *Gender Just Landscapes* hopes this patchwork of stories will lead to greater investment in gender-based violence prevention and response and Unarmed Civilian Protection strategies in areas of environmental and climatic change.

A young girl in Putumayo, Colombia, holds a sign proclaiming "Women are like waters: We also have the right to overflow". (Photo: Rebeca Rocha)



Gender Just Landscapes. Contact: PI Lora Forsythe at the Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich: l.forsythe@gre.ac.uk. Research partners:

University of Greenwich, Natural Resources Institute · CARRD · cinep · programa por la paz · Bayero University, Kano · International Land Coalition Asia

funding provided by: Creating Safer Space · GCRF Global Challenges Research Fund · UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council



Women farmers in the Maguindanao province

The Philippines

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The ecosystems of the Maguindanao provincial landscape are rich in forests and biodiversity. Use of the forests is regulated through customary governance systems, which largely support sustainable use among the Indigenous communities of the Teduray, Lambangian, and Manobos peoples. However, ongoing land conflict and extractivism in the region, linked to private sector interests, armed forces, and group identity, has displaced many Indigenous communities from their ancestral territory.

Our research focused on three displaced Indigenous communities in Central Mindanao. During long-term engagement with communities, community maps were created using a combination of GPS, the sharing of stories, and group walks. These maps were used as a way to initiate discussion around land and nature rights and the violence that Indigenous women have experienced in the displacement context.

Women expressed the difficulties they face navigating their changing roles in their territory, which has experienced drastic environmental and political change. For example, traditionally, Indigenous women and girls have significant authority over farming. However, displacement and land conflicts are creating a political space that is solely occupied by men, as well as increasing women's care work, which excludes women from decision-making.

Perceptions are that gender-based violence is common in a society where armed conflict and criminality is commonplace. *Inged Fintailan*, an Indigenous women's organisation, reported 124 cases of gender-based violence among three displaced communities, taking place in camps and resettlement sites as well as in some common spaces. Many incidents took place while women were obtaining food and water.

> ***"In resettlement sites, instances of gender-based violence, both intra-community and inter-community, are present… …rape is at least triple what they have documented before."***
>
> — case worker

Local women's initiatives are documenting and responding to gender-based violence cases among Indigenous communities, as law enforcement was found inadequate. They have also established local peace infrastructure by creating women's mediation networks, which aim to peacefully settle disputes through customary structures and restorative justice practices, which present common links with Unarmed Civilian Protection methods. Our research aims to increase national and international awareness of these initiatives and their effectiveness in gender-based violence prevention and response.

Coding and labelling a community map during participatory research in the Maguindanao province (Photo: Jayson Ulubalang)



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Río Pepino in Putumayo

Colombia

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Colombia has a history of militiarisation, natural resource 'grabbing', and large-scale extractivism causing significant social and environmental damage. Rural women from different origins (including Afro-descendant, Indigenous, and *campesina*) have been impacted acutely by violence arising within this context. During shared time spent in nature, we spoke with women's collectives at the foothills of the Andes-Amazon (Putumayo) and the Caribbean Sea (Córdoba) to discuss environmental change, the continuum of violence against women's bodies and territory, and their resistance.



Women connected with nature and each other during the PAWAY forest walk. (Photos: Rebeca Rocha)

Putumayo

Community women, leaders, and gender-based violence experts met at the PAWAY nature reserve, where they took a forest walk as a somatic practice, exchanged stories, and provided support to each other. The walk enabled women to safely share their experiences of the aftermath of a flash flood that took the lives of many Indigenous and Afro-descendant women and girls who were living precariously by the river. Historically, women in the area have faced multiple forms of physical and sexual violence within their households; violence is also perpetrated on women by armed forces and corporations, and they feel further violation by the uneven, inequitable reconstruction of the area as well as growing social inequality.

> ***"When we talk about the reconstruction of [our communities] we talk about brick, cement, houses, bridges, but we do not talk about the human fabric."***
> — forest walk participant

Córdoba

We spoke with a Women's Agrarian Association (WAA) who came together to purchase land and farm with an agroecological perspective. During collective work on the farm and a visit to the sea, members shared experiences of violence they have had since starting the farm. In a regional context largely dominated by oil palm and teak plantations (which were introduced after growing internal armed conflict), this women-led agroecological initiative disrupted the established landscape and challenged patriarchal structures of access and control. At the height of the violence, the farm was "invaded" by people wanting to claim the land from the women. Many of their assets were destroyed.

> ***"They stole ten cows and a bull; burned the hives, the bees, and the honey canteens; stole fish from our fishpond. We lost our money and our efforts…They shouted to us that with the same machete they used to slaughter our cattle, they will put it on our neck, and our families."***
> — WAA member

Verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and institutional violence embroiled together in ways that attempted to disband the association and their land. Women are also unable to freely travel to the farm unaccompanied, due to fear of violence from surrounding communities and illegally armed groups.

> ***"We do not visit our farm alone anymore. Before, I went and walked the whole farm alone. Now, I do not dare… someone wants to take that property away from us, but we are not going to let that happen."***
> — WAA member

See more nature photography and participatory action research from the PAWAY forest walk:
desbordee.wordpress.com



Timeline of extractivism and violence in Colombia

Women from our discussions in Colombia said that they valued the supportive environment and engagement with nature that took place as part of the research, which enabled them to feel safe while discussing difficult and traumatic experiences of violence. They wanted their stories to be shared with others in their country and internationally, hoping they would foster greater support for women's collectives and environmental peacebuilding.

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Nigeria

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Northern Nigeria

The Lake Chad area is rich in biodiversity and culture. However, the region has experienced violent conflict and terrorism for more than a decade. This has been fuelled by several interconnected issues: extreme weather, environmental degradation, resource scarcity, ineffective governance, high unemployment, the destruction of livelihoods, displacement, poverty, and hunger. Our research focused on Maiduguri in the northwestern region of Nigeria. Two artists were invited to discussions with victims/survivors of gender-based violence, case workers, and community and youth leaders to capture their insights for gender-responsive peacebuilding. The resulting illustrations were used to deepen discussions.



Summary illustrations of focus group conversations serve as a record of discussion and as tools for fostering further reflection.

Our conversations centred on the range of physical and sexual violence, abduction, and exploitation experienced by women and girls, as well as by men and boys. In addition to the trauma itself, victims/survivors frequently experienced stigma afterward. Women and girls displaced by conflict were found to be at particular risk of exploitation, related to the loss of livelihood options. Farming was a key activity for many women, but poor soil, conflict, and land mines render farming difficult, if not impossible. Women would also face additional risk of violence while traveling to and working on the farm. These realities led women and families to shift to urban centres, where women would take up selling food at the roadside as one way to have income — but this work put them at further risk of violence.



Travelling to work on the farm puts women at greater risk of GBV.

> ***"Since the beginning of the Boko Haram insurgency, many girls — especially those displaced — have been raped, resulting in unwanted pregnancies and leading to all sorts of psychological effects, including trauma."***
> — case worker

Women's collective efforts involved providing shelter, sustenance, and support for new livelihoods to women and girls affected by violence. Traditional birth attendants play a crucial role in supporting rape survivors/victims, providing compassionate care for their physical and emotional wellbeing. Women's groups have also addressed the stigmatisation of survivors/victims and helped to safeguard women's rights to their land, preserving their means of sustenance and economic independence in the aftermath of violence. Peacebuilding efforts, such as Unarmed Civilian Protection, will need to address intersectional issues of gendered violence and livelihoods, drawing on existing women-led responses.



Women-owned farms can be a target for gender-based violence.

Niger Delta



Rivers women en route to market.

Women working in fish value chains in Rivers state are navigating their livelihoods around a precarious environment of petroleum-related conflict. Using photography, observation, and beach walks, our discussions with women helped to unpack the challenges they experience and the protective measures they take as they work to ensure food security in their homes. In these contexts, women risk financial and physical abuse as well as sexual exploitation in their work, particularly when securing transportation and engaging in food sales.

In response to the threats and harassment, groups of women have developed powerful collective associations to seek alternative measures of protection and livelihood security. Together, they take action such as hiring communal security staff and purchasing shared boats and fishing equipment so they have more direct control over their work. Local peacebuilding infrastructure needs integration with these important areas of women's leadership.



Women in the fishing industry frequently experience gender-based violence, but collective action is a powerful way forward.

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