

Gender-Based Violence: Creating (Catholic) Political Will

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Abstract: UNSCR 1325 remains unrealized after a quarter century, especially regarding gender-based violence. The experiences of Colombia and Kenya demonstrate that women’s representation in formal laws and political office is insufficient to achieve gender equality, if women remain embedded in gender-biased economic, political and ecclesial power structures. Political will for change requires expansion and localization by women’s activism, in which Catholic women’s initiatives are already engaged, yet under-recognized. Colombia and Kenya illustrate that Catholic women’s organizations and intercultural, interfaith women’s networks can be disruptive, creative, and powerful agents of political will in favor of the Women, Peace and Security goals.

THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF UN SECURITY COUNCIL Resolution 1325 brings an opportunity to celebrate and recommit to its Women, Peace and Security agenda. The Resolution’s unanimous adoption by the Security Council signals the critical importance of women’s inclusion in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction, as well as the prevention of all gender-based violence related to conflict. A cause for regret and lament, however, is the scant progress toward these goals made in the past quarter century. As of September 2025, only 108 countries had adopted the National Action Plan necessary to make the objectives of Resolution 1325 concrete, practicable, required, and enforced. While 72 percent of existing National Action Plans reference the importance of civil society engagement, only 36 percent made budgetary allocations for this or other means of practical implementation.¹ This helps explain why in 2023, women were still only 13.7 percent of conflict mediators, 9.6 percent of peace agreement negotiators, and

¹ Meghan Clark, Maryann Cusimano Love, and Caesar Montevicchio, “Call for Papers: Special Issue: The UN Women, Peace, and Security Agenda at 25: Catholic Perspectives and Reflections,” jmt.scholasticahq.com/pages/51-call-for-papers.

26.6 percent of peace and ceasefire agreement signatories.² Moreover, in 2023 the incidence of conflict-related sexual violence rose to 3688 (reported) cases—an alarming 50 percent increase over the previous year.³ The editors of this issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology* remind us that “a common critique has remained a lack of accountability for following through,” as well as a dearth of dedicated resources for action toward UNSCR 1325’s mandates. “The United States, for example, has updated its NAP several times”—while never providing the financial resources to back it.⁴ Nor has the “institutional” Catholic Church always taken overt and energetic steps to identify gender-based violence as a crime and sin, and to overturn the cultures of support or toleration to be found in ecclesial spaces.⁵ Nevertheless, as will be developed, “the Catholic Church” includes laity, groups, organizations, and movements that are active in politics and civil society, and in which women’s leadership and action are vital. These efforts have potential to support more effectively the goals of UNSCR 1325.

The premise of the analysis to follow is that implementation of UNSCR 1325 requires more than formal legal enactment of protections for women, and more than increased gender parity in institutional roles in politics and governance. It requires cultural support sufficient to ensure that laws are implemented and women office-holders are respected and effective. I will argue further that culturally-embedded respect for women, especially equitable labor opportunities and conditions, is essential to the implementation of 1325. The same is true of other treaties and laws guaranteeing women’s rights, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1979, and ratified as legally binding by 189 states.

The current reality is that many countries worldwide are seeing slow progress or even retrenchment on indicators of gender parity, especially “economic participation and opportunity.” Accordingly, “the scale and speed of progress are deeply insufficient to achieve gender equality by 2030.”⁶ In other words, the significantly lower

² United Nations Peace and Security, “Women, Peace and Security,” un.org/en/peace-and-security/page/women-peace-and-security.

³ UN Women, “Impacts of Crises and Conflicts on Women and Girls,” unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-women-peace-and-security.

⁴ Our Secure Future, “WPS National Action Plan Academy,” oursecurefuture.org/our-secure-future/project/wps-national-action-plan-academy.

⁵ See Léocadie Lushombo, *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 19 (2022): 141–157, doi.org/10.5840/jcatsoc202219110.

⁶ Kusum Kali Pal, Kim Piaget, Saadia Zahidi, and Silja Baller, “Global Gender Report 2024,” June 11, 2024, World Economic Forum, weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/digest.

social status and agency of women compared to men is forecast to continue for the foreseeable future, increasing women's vulnerability to violence. It is highly regrettable if not surprising that this can be true even in majority Catholic countries. This fact raises the question whether formal magisterial teachings about gender-based violence are backed by serious commitment on the part of the church's members, even where the Catholic Church enjoys significant social and political status.

The questions that follow are: What have Catholics and Catholic leadership done or failed to do, locally and concretely, to enhance women's social position and reduce violence? What are emergent Catholic, ecumenical and interfaith interventions that hold promise, and how can they be maximized? Building on the two case studies of Colombia and Kenya (yet not limiting attention to them),⁷ I will argue that behind the most holistic and successful "Catholic" initiatives in favor of the goals of UNSCR 1325, are women-led efforts that engage the complex identities of Catholic women, and that interface across society with actors and initiatives that do not self-define as Catholic, including interreligious collaboration.⁸

POLITICAL WILL NEEDS CULTURAL BUY-IN

The adoption of UN resolutions is the job of high-level country representatives. However, the true measures of national commitment are subsidiary laws, policies, social initiatives, and educational

⁷ I choose these two examples largely because I had opportunities in 2025 (and in the past) to participate in conferences in Colombia and Kenya where women and conflict, and women and gender-based violence, were important points of concern. On these occasions (especially in Kenya) I had the opportunity to consult with women leaders and activists about measures being undertaken by Catholic women and partners to reduce gender-based violence. The first conference was sponsored by the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, "Peacebuilding, Mining, and Integral Human Development," held at Javeriana University in Bogotá. It included a delegation from Chocó, in the Afro-Colombian region of Colombia; and participants from the Philippines, the UK, Vatican City, Canada, the US, Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The second was the 2025 conference of African Women Theologians, held at Hekima University College in Nairobi, Kenya—like Javeriana, a Jesuit institution. Its participants were from multiple African countries, including Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. A first AWT conference was convened in 2024 to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Hekima College. I am grateful for the experience with and perspectives on women's activism shared with me during AWT 2025, by Anne Arabome, Nontando Hadebe, Mumbi Kigura, Caroline Mbonu, Philomena Mwaura, and Josée Ngalula, among many other colleagues.

⁸ I am grateful to Boston College colleagues Joseph Loic Mben, Nelly Wamaitha, Teresah Kiragu, and Anne Achieng, for conversations on plans for this paper; as well as to the Fall 2025 BC Theology and Ethics Doctoral Colloquium for a discussion of a draft.

programs that give aspirational resolutions efficacy across the multiple levels and domains of social and political life. And in those more differentiated contexts, policy implementation is further and crucially reliant on local cultures of concern and commitment.

In other words, as advocates for women and legal scholars agree, international agreements and policies like UNSCR 1325 are ineffective unless backed by strong local legislation,⁹ as well as subsequent judicial interpretations of law that are not driven by the patriarchal bias prevalent even in countries so different as Sweden and South Africa.¹⁰ Equally if not more important are cultural shifts in gender perceptions that have made violence against women and girls acceptable or tolerated in the first place. Cultural narratives and norms about women's social and political rights, sexual and reproductive self-direction, roles and authority in marriage and family, access to land ownership, economic productivity, and control over the proceeds of their labor, constitute the cultural and social "fund" of meaning regarding women's status. Low levels of women's social status, and agency of and respect for women, heighten women's and girls' sexual vulnerability.

According to a report from the United States Institute of Peace, sex and gender-based violence across cultural contexts "is more likely when individuals are socialized to devalue women and girls," is heightened by conflict (when women and girls may resort to "survival sex" and are vulnerable to traffickers), can be perpetrated by so-called "protectors" during conflict, and does not cease when war ends.¹¹

South Sudan, a new country that gained independence from Sudan in 2011, is riven by conflict going back to decades of civil war in Sudan. Scholasticah Nganda, a Kenyan Sister of Mercy writing for the Global Sisters Report (a project of the independent US newspaper, the *National Catholic Reporter*), described the current situation of women in South Sudan, where levels of gender-based violence are among the

⁹ Jillienne Haglund and David L. Richards, "Enforcement of Sexual Violence Law in Post-Civil Conflict Societies," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25 (2018): 280–295, doi.org/10.1177/0738894217695536.

¹⁰ Sarojini Nadar and Elisabeth Gerle, "Mediating the 'Sacredness' of Religion, Culture and Law in Contexts of Sexual Violence," *Agenda* 30 (2016): 104–114, doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2017.1284302.

¹¹ Amanda H. Blair, Nicole Gerring, and Sabrina Kim, "Ending Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in War and Peace," September 26, 2016, "Ending Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in War and Peace," 1 of 3, usip.org/publications/2016/09/ending-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-war-and-peace; and Nontando Hadebe, "'No Ceasefire for Women!' Resisting Violence Against Women in Conflict and in 'Peace': The Role of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," October 22, 2020, Armed Groups and International Law, armedgroups-internationallaw.org/2020/10/22/no-ceasefire-for-women-resisting-violence-against-women-in-conflict-and-in-peace-the-role-of-the-circle-of-concerned-african-women-theologians.

world's highest, conditions she believes mirrored in multiple other societies. "Horrendous" instances of "sexual violence and torture" arise during conflict as part of combatants' "winning strategy." Impunity for perpetrators of violence against women, whether armed men or family members, "is the status quo." Crimes are infrequently reported, due partly to mistrust of public adjudication processes in "the customary legal system," which is "highly patriarchal and rarely producing favorable outcomes for women and girls."¹² In South Sudan (where access to productive labor is under stress generally): women are more likely than men to be illiterate, and to resort to "vulnerable employment," to lack "formal work arrangements, social protection, and safety nets to guard against economic shocks; thus they are more likely to fall into poverty."¹³ Moreover, men often are entitled by "customary law" to control over women's income, from farming, for example—a gender culture on which colonial laws about ownership and taxation had a strong influence in many countries.¹⁴ This picture was confirmed by Hady Zurely Mosquera Velayes (Head Psychologist, Diocese of Istima-Tadó), one of the representatives from Chocó mentioned in note six. In a presentation at the Bogotá conference, she confirmed that lack of access to paid employment reinforces status differences between women and men which leads to violence against women; and that economic pressures increase domestic violence as well.

The high rates of social and economic disruption caused by conflict further marginalize and disempower women.¹⁵ Violence against women is normalized during conflict, and even post-conflict, men may use violence against women to reassert dominance and control. In 2025, it was reported that, globally, "Rates of conflict-related sexual violence have skyrocketed to staggering levels as nearly one-third of countries are grappling with state-based hostilities—the highest number since tracking began in 1946."¹⁶

¹² Scholastica Nganda, "Resilient South Sudanese Women Deserve Peace, Respect and Dignity," June 30, 2022, Global Sisters Report, globalsistersreport.org/social-justice/resilient-south-sudanese-women-deserve-peace-respect-and-dignity.

¹³ World Bank Group, "South Sudan," Gender Data Portal, data cited is for 2023, genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/south-sudan.

¹⁴ For a more expansive and detailed perspective on African women's unpaid reproductive labor and paid and unpaid productive labor (especially in agriculture) see Joseph-Loïc Mben, *A Gendered African Perspective on Christian Social Ethics: Empowering Working Women in Cameroon* (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021).

¹⁵ World Bank Group, "South Sudan," 3 of 13.

¹⁶ Jessica Anania and Dawn Le, "Conflicts to Watch in 2025: Women, Peace and Security in a More Violent World," Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, January 16, 2025, giwps.georgetown.edu/conflicts-to-watch-in-2025-women-peace-and-security-in-a-more-volatile-world.

CATHOLICS, CULTURES, AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Factors and conditions like these blight Roman Catholic cultures as easily as others, underlining the practical ineffectiveness of official teaching, which fails to address the intersecting social factors that contribute to women's vulnerability. Armed conflict, a violent societal environment, economic stress, and low socioeconomic status of women are all predictors of sexual violence, as is intra-familial violence and sexual abuse, which are not uncommon in Catholic families, especially when such violence is culturally tolerated or even validated.¹⁷ Proximity to violence correlates with low inclusion, justice and security for women, according to UNSCR's Women, Peace and Security indicators. In 2022 (which saw more battle deaths than any year since 1994), conflict-related violence against women rose, with the highest incidences in Catholic-majority Mexico and South America.¹⁸ In 2023, the Democratic Republic of Congo, a majority Catholic country where the bishops are respected, but which has also suffered generations of conflict and economic hardship, was second only to Ethiopia (majority Christian with a strong Islamic presence) in levels of sexual violence; the rate in the DRC escalated rapidly in 2024 and 2025.¹⁹

Meanwhile religious leaders, including Catholics, may be reluctant to speak out or take action on violence against women in their communities and congregations. This is due to combinations of factors, such as patriarchal norms and customs, stigmatization of sexually "dishonored" women, implication of members of their faith communities in these crimes, and prioritizing a hard line against abortion, "feminism," and "gender ideology" over decisive action in defense of women as "dignified agents" due social respect.²⁰ Roman Catholics, including clergy and bishops, are always partly products of and participants in their cultural milieux, even as they are called by the gospel to take the part of "the poor," including women. Meghan

¹⁷ Devin Watkins, "WMOF: 'Domestic Violence Affects Millions of Catholic Families,'" *Vatican News*, vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-06/wmof-family-violence-interview-christauria-welland.html.

¹⁸ Ava Kawamura, "Top Five Takeaways from the 2023 WPS Index," October 24, 2023, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, giwps.georgetown.edu/2023/10/24/top-5-takeaways-from-the-2023-wps-index.

¹⁹ United Nations Peace and Security, "When Our Bodies Become Battlegrounds," 2025, un.org/en/peace-and-security/page/conflict-related-sexual-violence.

²⁰ Meghan J. Clark, "Equal Dignity and Agency: Catholic Social Teaching and the Lives of Women," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2025): 112. Clark cites Francis, "Address to Members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization," September 25, 2015, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html (no. 112, note 10).

Clark is right that, “Looking back into even Catholic social teaching’s history, managing women often seems to be a concern.”²¹ It is hard to deny that, as Clark suggests, the Catholic Church and its social teaching are too often complicit in the pervasive patriarchy that enables the violence they ostensibly condemn.

Roman Catholicism is an international institution with potentially great influence against violence, which it has exercised in some areas, notably conflict mediation and peacebuilding. The Roman Catholic Church is global and culturally embedded; it has authority as teacher and sustainer in its local settings; and it has authority as a public voice in many if not all cultural and political environments. Strong condemnations of violence against women go back at least to Pope John Paul II;²² recent popes have defended the familial, social, economic and political equality of women as well. In 2015, The Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, who was then Archbishop Bernardito Auza, spoke in favor of UNSCR 1325, strongly denounced crimes of violence against women and girls, and called for attention to root causes and for the reintegration of victims of sexual violence into families and communities (though repudiating abortion as a means).²³

Despite forceful programmatic exhortation and positions, however, Catholic leadership, global and local, has not been a strong and consistent advocate for concrete, contextually effective, and sustained measures toward women’s immunity to violence based on their gender. Few steps are taken to specify what contemporary Catholicism’s ideal vision of women’s equality would require in practice, or to ensure that Catholic clergy and laity around the world take this problem seriously. It is no surprise, then, that Catholics more broadly reflect the attitudes, norms, and imaginative possibilities (or limits) of their surrounding cultures when it comes to gender.

Reformist measures undertaken by Catholic representatives cannot be limited to emphatic but politically abstract repudiations of violence or affirmations of respect for women. They must take into view legal

²¹ Clark, “Equal Dignity,” 113. Specifically, “Women’s lives end up bifurcated based upon segregating the public (social/economic) realm and the private (marriage/family) realm in ways that do not respond ‘to the concrete reality of women’s lives and equal dignity.’”

²² His most forceful statement is perhaps the “Letter to Women,” 1995, prepared in advance of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing later that year, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html.

²³ Archbishop Bernardito Auza, “Statement at the Security Council Open Debate on the High-level Review of the Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security,” October 13, 2015, holyseemission.org/contents/statements/statements-562ff38f901c88.10088571.php.

and policy objectives; as well as, and more importantly, initiatives against gender-based violence that are holistic, culturally deep, and culturally wide. Catholic communities emerging from armed conflict—whether they are institutional representatives or the laity in local communities—not only should but can take much more effective steps than they have done toward the legal, economic, cultural, religious, and familial inclusion of women as social participants on an equal basis with men.

REMEDIES AND BARRIERS

The UNSCR 1325 goals of women's presence in peace processes and in social rehabilitation after peace accords imply that an important early step after conflict is to ensure that women have formal roles on peace commissions and in post-conflict political institutions, by both appointment and election. Greater representation of women in government, often as guaranteed by gender quotas, is often a goal of women's advocacy groups and peace activists, among whom there are many Catholics (even if not the outright support of Catholic institutions). Negotiated settlements provide a good opportunity to introduce women into political leadership and national institutions such as the legislature.

Even so, high-level formal political representation does not ensure meaningful inclusion of women's voice and authority, much less sustainable social equity going forward. Women in decision-making roles may or may not contribute to the durability of peace, participatory institutions, the reduction of corruption, and an increase in social welfare spending. Such women may meet with a backlash if they go contrary to prevailing role stereotypes and expectations.²⁴ In fact, there is "a significant pro-male bias in the responsiveness of local politicians (both men and women) to their constituency preferences." Such bias is present in societies generally, among both men and women, which is reflected in politicians' behavior.²⁵ Evidence is abundant that sociopolitical goal concurrence with the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, is broadly absent. Even where national constitutions affirm women's rights and criminalize rape, for example, there may exist little or no follow-through in terms of concrete and reliable protections for women—even in Catholic countries.

²⁴ Sarah Shair-Rosenfield and Reed M. Wood, "Governing Well After War: How Improving Female Representation Prolongs Post-Conflict Peace," *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 3 (2017): 995–1009, doi.org/10.1086/691056.

²⁵ Daniel M. Butler, Margit Tavits, and Dino Hadzic, "Gender Bias in Policy Representation in Post-Conflict Societies," *Political Research Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2023): 200, doi.org/10.1177/106591292110450.

Thus, despite the opportunities provided by post-conflict transition, progress to gender parity and lessened gender-based violence has been uneven; women still “remain grossly underrepresented” in economic and political life.²⁶ Across cultures and countries, “gaps persist in the promise of justice [post-conflict] and the realities in their community, workplace, and home.” Among the threats and barriers particularly confronting women (especially in situations of forcible displacement) are domestic violence, conflict-related sexual violence, and discriminatory property and inheritance laws.²⁷ Customary and informal justice systems often do not include women in traditional dispute resolution and are not equipped to deliver justice according to norms of gender equality. Lack of identity documents relating to property, housing, marriage, children, and immigration status affects women’s access to benefits and services.²⁸

The implementation of UNSCR 1325 cannot stop by targeting gender-based violence as such. It must address gender disparities more broadly. Women’s labor participation is a particularly critical factor in post-conflict recovery, in women’s effective political participation, and in women’s immunity to violence. Women’s labor may increase during conflict, but it still tends to be limited to unpaid and/or low-skilled jobs in the informal sector, particularly agriculture, construction, and textiles, a limitation that persists after conflict.²⁹

²⁶ Agathe Christien and Jeni Klugman, *Advancing Women’s Participation in Post-Conflict Reconstruction*, a report commissioned by the Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations and written by a team (led by Christien and Klugman) at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. Copyright Permanent Mission of the UAE to the UN 2020, giwps.georgetown.edu/resource/advancing-womens-participation-in-post-conflict-reconstruction.

²⁷ Christien and Klugman, *Advancing Women’s Participation*, 28.

²⁸ Christien and Klugman, *Advancing Women’s Participation*, 28, 29–30. The requirement of documentation of “rights” derives in many societies from colonially imposed systems or subsequent “modernization” efforts. Social participation would in traditional societies have been contingent on recognized social roles and relationships among members of longstanding and integral communities. Women and other vulnerable populations (especially in forced migration) can be placed in untenably uncertain positions when conditions like marital status, property, and citizenship, that were recognized by customary law in their places of origin, must be defended in a different communal, cultural and legal context where criteria of belonging change. Documentation like passports is one way to create cross-communal standards of recognition, but not all populations are prepared to meet these “outsider” standards.

²⁹ Melanne Verwee and Agathe Christien, “Part II: The Post-Conflict Window: A Critical Opportunity to Advance Women’s Participation in Post-Conflict Societies,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, April 23, 2020, gja.georgetown.edu/2020/04/23/part-ii-the-post-conflict-window-a-critical-opportunity-to-advance-womens-participation.

WOMEN, POLITICAL WILL, MIXED CATHOLIC HISTORIES, AND COMPLEX CATHOLIC IDENTITIES

“Political will” refers to active, sustained, practical commitment to realize political goals that are endorsed in theory or in law. Political will is often treated as an attribute or responsibility of key, high-level decision-makers. In reality, political will is equally and often more importantly a capacity and responsibility of a much broader base of stakeholders, whose political power may even counter and outweigh the lack of political will of elite institutional representatives. If the political will of the latter is “lacking” in relation to certain objectives guaranteed by law and policy, that is typically because it is tacitly “active” in favor of other objectives, objectives not reflected in, even contrary to, *prima facie* legal protections. Networks of resistance and reform “from below” may be a necessary and potentially effective remedy.

Women are Catholicism’s most powerful yet underrated generator of political will for the implementation of UNSCR 1325. Important aspects of Catholic women’s efficacy are their complex, adaptive, and resourceful identities as “Catholic” and their appreciation that the ideals of UNSCR 1325 will become reality only when there is broad support in their favor across society, as engaging multiple identity groups, including faith traditions.

It is true, nevertheless, that the ability or at least credibility of Catholicism as an advocate for peace and gender justice in local contexts is haunted by the very fact that it is the religion of the colonizers. At the same time, it should be remembered that Christianity in Africa, for example, does precede modern colonialism. Archeologists have discovered a church in today’s Ethiopia dating back to the fourth century CE; and in Egypt, protective amulets with gospel verses from the sixth century, during the Coptic period.³⁰ Yet, in cultures of the global South, Catholicism and Christianity generally are colonial religions; appeals to the Catholic Church as an international institution are premised on the universal identity and mission of the church, which precisely as “global” is compromised by colonialism, affecting both current leadership and women’s self-understandings.³¹

³⁰ Andrew Lawler, “Church Unearthed in Ethiopia Rewrites the History of Christianity in Africa,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 10, 2019, smithsonianmag.com/history/church-unearthed-ethiopia-rewrites-history-christianity-africa-180973740; and Biblical Archeology Staff, “Ancient Amulets with Incipits,” January 6, 2018; Biblical Archeology Society website, biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/artifacts-and-the-bible/ancient-amulets-with-incipits.

³¹ On this theme, see Agnes Brazal, Christina Lledo Gomez, and Ma. Marilou S. Ibita, eds., *500 Years of Christianity and the Global Filipino/a: Postcolonial Perspectives*

This does not call for Catholic disengagement, but it does recommend self-awareness and self-criticism.

The modern social encyclicals advocate for the poor and for solidarity, while rejecting worker exploitation, unrestrained capitalism, and disregard of non-European, non-modern political, cultural, and economic traditions. They affirm the wisdom of indigenous cosmologies and lifeways. However, the religious and political perspective from which they have done so is still largely Eurocentric (excepting themes in some encyclicals of Paul VI, Francis, and Leo XIV, the first Peruvian pope). This is certainly true of teaching on gender, with its emphasis on binary gender identities, domestic femininity, and nuclear-family motherhood—despite affirming entitlement to equality in the “public” spheres of politics and work. These characteristics are relevant to the effectiveness of the “teaching Church” as a mediator of the goals of UN 1325 into the continuing social reality of conflict-related violence against women.

Atalia Omer raises objections to Christian peacebuilding, to the extent that it does not move beyond “Western,” Christian, and liberal premises and evaluative lenses. Some of these critiques also trouble anti-violence activism under the aegis of Catholicism. Among them are the frequency with which religious traditions and organizations: define “good” and “bad” religion in simplistic ways; fail to acknowledge the historical roles of their own tradition in violence and other forms of systemic injustice; tacitly view problems and solutions through a liberal or neoliberal lens; “individualize” solutions to violence as a matter of better interpersonal understanding and acceptance; fail to realize that the cessation of specific forms violence may require disrupting political and economic systems; and issue “elicitive” calls for local leadership and solutions, yet still interpret and evaluate bottom-up strategies according to “liberal” conceptions of “peace” and “development.” Catholic campaigns for peace and nonviolence and for gender justice alike especially fail when they urge close-focus peacemaking or gender parity, without acknowledging or moving to change the larger colonialist, capitalist, liberal, neo-liberal or patriarchal systems by which forms of violence and gender injustice are sustained.³²

(Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), and Atalia Omer, *Decolonizing Religion and Peacebuilding* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

³² Omer, *Decolonizing Religion*; Christina Kenny, *Reimagining the Gendered Nation: Citizenship and Human Rights in Postcolonial Kenya* (Boydell & Brewer, 2022), 3, takes the somewhat similar view that “we need to look outside the mono-valence of human rights narratives to encourage other, more complex and challenging subject positions to be heard.”

For Omer, viewing religious reform projects through “a decolonial lens means disrupting their closed and bounded self-understandings.”³³ For example, theology that is “emancipatory” is “often intersectional, queer and ecofeminist.”³⁴ Conversely, postcolonial and decolonial critiques of Christianity can themselves be invested more in “epistemological undoing” than in practical relevance to the specific situations and religious beliefs of women activists against violence.³⁵ The realities of women that Omer has studied (in Kenya and the Philippines) include combinations of religiosity and resistance that often produce what she calls “sticky notes” religion, in which traditions are recrafted by local consensus, with uneven reference to doctrinal and ecclesial norms. The result can be an eclectic embrace of religiosity and of peacebuilding that does not square either with traditional gender expectations or with “queer, feminist, and otherwise ‘woke’” political programs.³⁶ It follows that women can embrace a “Catholic” identity, while not necessarily envisioning it or practicing it in the ways prescribed by the male-governed, Rome-focused, institutionally guided (post-)colonial church. Indeed, African instituted churches (or African independent churches) were and are formed precisely to embody Christianity in indigenous ways, not captive to or controlled by colonial norms.³⁷

As Agnes Brazal, Cristina Lledo Gomez, and Marilou Ibita assert of Philippine Christianity five centuries after colonization, “decolonizing does not mean returning to some pure state of existence before the colonizers arrived in the Philippines. All existences are mixed or maybe better imagined as matrices.” In that spirit, they approach Christianity as “a mixed gift to the Philippines.”³⁸ As Brazal explains, Catholicism has been “complicit in stripping the colonized peoples of their agency, identity, and dignity,” yet still provides “the tools or the discourse for resistance”³⁹—less so in the case of gender, unfortunately. Also working from the Philippine experience, Daniel Pilario concurs that by translating Christianity into local culture,

³³ Omer, *Decolonizing Religion*, 257.

³⁴ Omer, *Decolonizing Religion*, 256.

³⁵ Omer, *Decolonizing Religion*, 273.

³⁶ Omer, *Decolonizing Religion*, 258.

³⁷ See “African Instituted Churches,” World Council of Churches website, with a link to further research, oikoumene.org/church-families/african-instituted-churches.

³⁸ Agnes Brazal, Christina Lledo Gomez, and Ma. Marilou S. Ibita, “Philippine Christianity: 500 Years of Resistance and Accommodation,” in *500 Years of Christianity and the Global Filipino/a*, 14.

³⁹ Agnes Brazal, “Roman Catholic Tradition from a Liberation-Postcolonial Optic,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 24, no. 3 (2024): 335. She also points to the emergent “epistemological decolonization of theology.”

"Spain converted our identities to serve its colonial interests."⁴⁰ Yet Brazal discerns that an "epistemological decolonization of theology" has emerged since Vatican II.⁴¹ As Brazal, Lledo Gomez and Ibita elaborate, the Philippine identity is characterized by "hybridity" in the postcolonial sense (Homi Bhaba): "a product, in the context of unequal power relations, of both accommodation and resistance to colonial domination."⁴² Pilario adds that even colonial practices possess a "double truth" (from Pierre Bourdieu) because, while they are products of socio-political contexts and structures, they are also subject to creativity and innovation, including "ingenious revolutionary elements."⁴³ These insights bear on expressions of Roman Catholicism in other settings with a colonial past.

In local contexts, the creative synergy of indigenous worldviews and colonially derived Catholicism may be necessary to produce a spirituality and practice that rises to effective local action (sometimes with a broader if not global economic agenda), especially by women. Not only will women's spirituality and politics vary contextually; women activists may well turn out to contest local renditions of "official" (global) Catholicism, incorporate elements of traditional and indigenous cosmologies and lifeways, dissent from "liberal feminist"/Catholic feminist rejections of complementarity and maternalism, and disregard "postcolonial" insistences that all vestiges of European Christianity be uprooted.

Systems of unjust relationship such as empire, armed violence, patriarchy, and economic exploitation are age-old and resilient. While it is important to keep these larger dynamics on the table, and for theorists to analyze and expose their machinations, it is notoriously difficult to specify accessible change strategies that are reliably successful on a grand scale. It may be necessary for local adversaries of gender-based violence to focus their strategies more directly on factors and conditions that are immediate, context-specific, and over which they have some hope of control.

⁴⁰ Daniel Franklin E. Pilario, "The Double Truth of (Colonial) Mission," in Brazal, Lledo Gomez, and Ibita, eds., *500 Years of Christianity and the Global Filipino/a*, 56.

⁴¹ Brazal, "Roman Catholic Tradition," 342–343.

⁴² Brazal, Lledo Gomez and Ibita, *500 Years of Christianity and the Global Filipino/a*, 6.

⁴³ Pilario, "Double Truth," 49. Cristina Lledo Gomez develops what this would mean for the Filipina indigenous-Christian woman, in a study of the interrelation of the traditional female *Babaylan* and Jesus Christ as a figure of empowerment; "Bangon Na, Pinays Rise Up: Reclaiming Pinay Power Dismantled by a Christian Colonial Past and Present," in *500 Years of Christianity and the Global Filipino/a*, 262–265.

COLOMBIA

In 2016, the national government of Colombia and the country's largest paramilitary, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), signed a landmark peace strategy, aiming to put an end to decades of conflict. (Another major illegally armed group, the National Liberation Army [ELN], was not a party to the agreement.) Behind the conflict was '*La Violencia*,' a ten-year civil war (1948–1957) between the Liberal and Conservative parties, sparked by the assassination of a leading Liberal Party candidate, Jorge Eliécer Gaitan. The ultimate power-sharing agreement excluded the Communists, who took up arms against the new unified government. Behind the conflict's endurance are unresolved land and wealth inequalities, alliances between some wealthy elites and armed actors, and the large and lucrative illegal drug business in Colombia. The violence took the lives of over two hundred thousand people and involved countless atrocities against rural communities, as well as the forced conscription of young people as fighters. A part of the peace agreement was a transitional justice system with special tribunals to adjudicate war crimes.

Members of the Roman Catholic Church, especially representatives of the bishops' Episcopal Conference of Colombia (ECC), Caritas Colombia (an agency of the ECC), and the Jesuit Center for Research and Popular Education, were heavily engaged during the four-year peace process. Their roles went far beyond general exhortations to nonviolence and peace and included not only negotiations with, but also ministry to parties in conflict, such as members of the government, wealthy landowning families, peace activists, and guerillas subsisting in the jungle.⁴⁴

Yet Catholic bishops and clergy have not always enjoyed the status of trusted peace mediators in Colombia. The Roman Catholic Church was integral to Colombia's colonial history, operating under the Spanish colonial patronage system which allowed the Spanish king to appoint bishops, as well as manage Catholic dioceses and revenues.⁴⁵ After the formal alliance of church and state ended in the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church aligned with the Conservative party and wealthy landowning families. The Second Vatican Council (1962–

⁴⁴ Some of these experiences are recounted by John Paul Lederach, "The Long Journey Back to Humanity: Catholic Peacebuilding with Armed Actors," in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers (Orbis Books, 2010), 23–55.

⁴⁵ Pierregiusepe Parisi and Adelaida Maria Ibarra Padilla, "The Colombian Catholic Church's Quest for Legitimacy in the Colombia Armed Conflict," *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 20 (2025): 3–4.

1965) opened a way for the Catholic Church to recover its gospel vocation and embrace the cause of social justice. The relation of the Colombian Church to vulnerable communities is complex, however.

For example, tensions between the spiritualities of “ancestral peoples” and Catholic teaching that led to stigmatization of indigenous cultures by the colonial Catholic priesthood, produced a legacy of distrust. In addition, spiritual leadership in indigenous religions is diffuse, another seed of conflict with Catholic religious authorities. The Catholic transition in the direction of social justice advocacy has never been complete; some Catholics and bishops opposed the 2016 agreement. Yet during the 1980s and beyond, the Catholic bishops on the whole committed increasingly to the reduction of socioeconomic inequality and to peacebuilding, based especially on pastoral concern for “the suffering of communities caught in the midst of armed conflict.”⁴⁶ The Catholic Church gained credibility on the basis of protection and accompaniment of local communities, especially “willingness to share in the risks faced by the civilian population.”⁴⁷

Beyond clergy and bishops, religious sisters and other Catholic women are advocates for displaced people and victims of violence. Pope Leo XIV in 2025 elaborated on the contributions of women religious in *Dilexi Te*.⁴⁸ During the Colombian conflict, lay women and religious sisters ran community centers, provided material and social support to internally displaced families (living in the slums of Bogotá, for example), and personally urged young combatants to remember and respect ties to their communities. Hundreds of women peace defenders fought for an end to violence and in that cause, lost their own lives, both before and after the 2016 agreement.

UNSCR 1325 was an instrument that women’s groups and other civil society groups in Colombia used to lobby for the inclusion of gender equality as a key dimension of the peace process, including the design and processes of the Colombian Truth Commission established by the 2016 Peace Agreement.⁴⁹ The Peace Agreement has been recognized “as a benchmark for gender mainstreaming in peace pro-

⁴⁶ Parisi and Ibarra Padilla, “The Colombian Catholic Church’s Quest,” 5.

⁴⁷ Parisi and Ibarra Padilla, “The Colombian Catholic Church’s Quest,” 17.

⁴⁸ Pope Leo XIV, Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te* (On Love for the Poor), 2025, [vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html).

⁴⁹ Dawn Walsh and Emma Murphy, “Gender Quota Adoption for Commissions in Post-Conflict Societies,” *International Political Science Review*, January 5, 2025, doi.org/10.1177/01925121241304749.

cesses,”⁵⁰ and “a milestone in peacebuilding,”⁵¹ due both to the participation of women and women’s organizations in the peace negotiations, and to women’s involvement in the incorporation of provisions for gender in all aspects of the agreement. This included a focus on the election of women to political office through the incorporation of a gender quota.

Despite these efforts, the representation of women in peace negotiations, peace accords, and early electoral policies and results did not accomplish the hoped-for improvements in the political participation or social status of women. According to human rights lawyer Luisa Salazar-Escalante, elections of women to office continued to be shaped by the same conflict-era dynamics of “patronage, elite capture, corruption, and the enduring power of status quo interests.”⁵² The majority of women who have attained political office come from traditionally dominant families, “represent traditional patriarchal structures,” and often owe their financial backing to elites profiting from the extraction of natural resources.

Despite these structural barriers, some women with elite connections have been effective in their municipalities, maintaining connections to the community and providing public services and infrastructure projects.⁵³ Nevertheless formal measures like new laws, gender quotas and women in elected office are tied down by “gender instrumentalization” and continuing structural forms of gender-based violence. These undermine women’s public agency and even intensify violence against social reformers. What is needed to sustain “the full and effective inclusion of women” are “more integrated approaches.”⁵⁴ Absent such approaches, gender-based violence is sure to continue. A woman from the southwest of Bogotá, “the epicenter and product of an armed conflict,” insists that there is a fundamental set of necessary requirements beyond the removal of armed actors: “social justice,

⁵⁰ Luisa Salazar-Escalante, “Engendered Peace Processes and Women’s Political Participation: Lessons from Colombia,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 26, no. 4 (2024): 517–518, doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2023.2212521.

⁵¹ *Special Report of the Kroc Institute and the International Accompaniment Component, UN Women, FDIM, and Sweden on the Monitoring of the Gender Perspective in the Implementation of the Colombian Final Peace Accord: Special Report December 2016–June 2018*, October 3, 2021, curate.nd.edu/articles/report/Special_Report_of_the_Kroc_Institute_and_the_International_Accompaniment_Component_UN_Women_FDIM_and_Sweden_on_the_Monitoring_of_the_Gender_Perspective_in_the_Implementation_of_the_Colombian_Final_Peace_Accord/24734370?file=43562979.

⁵² Salazar-Escalante, “Engendered Peace Processes,” 518.

⁵³ Salazar-Escalante, “Engendered Peace Processes,” 526.

⁵⁴ Salazar-Escalante, “Engendered Peace Processes,” 530.

rights, housing, basic sanitation,” which might lead to “a different way of life.”⁵⁵

The Colombian Special Jurisdiction for Peace tribunal, established post-conflict, determined that over thirty-five thousand people, mostly “women, girls and people with diverse sexual orientations, identities and expressions of gender,” suffered gender based violence during the five-decade war.⁵⁶ In a 2017 visit to Colombia, the year after peace accords, Pope Francis denounced “psychological, verbal and physical violence towards women,” alluding to the reality that communities “are still weighed down with patriarchal and chauvinistic customs.”⁵⁷ In the wake of the peace accords, “gender violence [including femicide] in Colombia continues with devastating effect,” while, as of 2025, “the most vulnerable groups of women, particularly Afro-descendant, indigenous, rural, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, and women with disabilities, disproportionately suffer serious violations without State protection or access to justice.”⁵⁸

The participation and influence of women have gone largely without recognition in episcopal and other “official” Catholic literature on the Colombian conflict and peace process. However, in 2023, several Catholic NGOS and women’s organizations participated in a conference on violence against women and the LGBTQI+ community. Speakers from affected regions and groups included indigenous women, campesina women, rural women, women from the city of Bogotá, and women from the Afro-Colombian region of Chocó, a region with a distinct cultural heritage, rich biodiversity, high poverty, and exposure to armed conflict and continuing violence. The resulting report, *Colombia: Violence Against Women, Girls, and the LGBTQI+*

⁵⁵ ABColombia, *Colombia: Violence Against Women, Girls and the LGBTQI+ Community—Its Causes and Consequences*, November 24, 2024, 37, abcolombia.org.uk/colombia-violence-against-women-girls-and-the-lgbtqi-community-its-causes-and-consequences. ABColombia is an advocacy project of a group of UK and Irish organizations, including Christian Aid and Oxfam GB, which are Protestant-ecumenical Christian; and SCIAF, CAFOD and Trócaire, which are Roman Catholic. Additional sponsors of the report were CINEP, a Jesuit justice and peace organization; Sisma Mujer and CIASE, Colombian feminist organizations; and CODACOP, a support organization for grassroots community action.

⁵⁶ “More than 35,000 Victims of Sexual Violence in Colombia’s Conflict, Tribunal Says,” *Reuters*, September 27, 2023, reuters.com/world/americas/more-than-35000-victims-sexual-violence-colombias-conflict-tribunal-2023-09-27/.

⁵⁷ Anastasia Moloney, “Visiting Colombia, Pope Addresses Patriarchy, Violence Against Women,” *Reuters*, September 8, 2017, reuters.com/article/world/visiting-colombia-pope-addresses-patriarchy-violence-against-women-idUSL2N1LP1FO.

⁵⁸ Julie Goldscheid, “Gender Violence Against Afro-Colombian Women: Making the Promise of International Human Rights Law Real,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* (HRLR Online), (May 27, 2020): 252, hrlr.law.columbia.edu/files/2020/05/10-Goldscheid_Final.pdf.

Community—Its Causes and Consequences,⁵⁹ relays the “lived experiences” of women and girls, their efforts, successes and difficulties in resisting armed actors, influencing government decision-makers, and attempts to bring about structural change.⁶⁰ As of 2024, the first of the Recommendations for the Colombian Government (and the only one all in bold-face) was still “That the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAP 1325) includes budgeted, operational measures to address SGBV.”

To this reader, it seemed that the majority of conference speakers whose presentations became part of the report were still preoccupied with voicing, decrying, breaking the silence around, and building solidarity against ongoing violence—not celebrating successful resistance strategies that could become models for the future. Work by women’s civil society organizations did lead to a new government program to protect women leaders and defenders, with the adoption of a two-year Action Plan in 2022. Yet as of 2024, implementation was still “low to non-existent on aspects of tackling impunity and prevention.”⁶¹

As indicated in the Executive Summary, indigenous women are still working to exchange knowledge and develop spiritual strength and healing among themselves, and to expose power dynamics and structural violence (e.g., the prevalence of sexual abuse in families). The representative from Chocó concludes by saying that since women lack access to decent jobs, they are forced to work for illegal mining operations, where they are frequently raped, but do not report the crimes in fear of retaliation. Suicides among young people have risen tragically. And this in service of the strategy across the entire Pacific and Caribbean region: “to dispossess communities from collectively owned land, making way for the Pan-American Highway.”⁶²

KENYA

As we turn to Kenya, similar patterns persist, although Kenya, relatively speaking, is not a high-conflict country; unlike Colombia, it has not been ravaged by a generation of strife and atrocity. The most

⁵⁹ See note 50.

⁶⁰ ABColombia Report Launch, introduction, 26 November 2024, abcolombia.org.uk/colombia-violence-against-women-girls-and-the-lgbtqi-community-its-causes-and-consequences.

⁶¹ ABColombia, *Colombia: Violence Against Women*, 12.

⁶² ABColombia, *Colombia*, 25. A section on “Transformative Justice in Chocó” sends a similar message that guarantees of the safety of women, especially indigenous women in the territories, are a goal and a hope, not an emerging reality. “The authorities in these territories practically have not heard of women’s rights and they do not recognize the rights that have been won at the national and regional level” (42).

prominent form of repeated societal violence in Kenya today is riots and retaliations that follow disputed elections. Despite Kenya's 2010 Constitution, violence around elections occurred not only in 2007, but again in 2013 and in 2017, yet diminished in 2022. Violence against Kenyan women during elections illustrates the larger reality that women worldwide and historically become targets during periods of social stress and conflict. Kenya is additionally under pressure from neighboring conflicts in Somalia, The Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Burundi, which have brought small arms proliferation, refugee influx, and the rise of extremist groups.⁶³

In a study of the gendered conditions and meanings of citizenship in Kenya, Christina Kenny offers an account of Kenyan women's "sociopolitical rights," as they developed from the period of late colonization through independence, and into the contemporary period. Across time, she argues, Kenya has seen "the establishment and entrenchment of colonial ethno-patriarchal politics and its insidious reproduction in the postcolonial republic." Thus, "rather than an extraordinary deviation from an otherwise peaceful life, electoral violence is symptomatic of a wider sphere of pervasive institutional and everyday violence."⁶⁴

Gloria Kenyatta Nyambura points out that, despite the Constitution's gender reforms, including a quota system for women, and the localization of elections to unlock more leadership positions, the political participation of Kenyan women is impeded by social norms, limited financial resources, political party structures, and continuing gendered violence.⁶⁵ Other research confirms that in Kenya, as in Colombia, gender quota design can increase inequalities among women in government, while women's perceived 'takeover' of male spaces can provoke backlash, exacerbating gender oppression.⁶⁶

The constitutional and legal rights of women set precedents and standards that can become the reference points of reforms. Yet more than formal democratic institutions and processes with constitutional guarantees, ordinary Kenyans' lives are affected by the high cost of housing, education, health care, and other essential services, and "the precarity of employment even for university graduates."⁶⁷ Due to

⁶³ Vicky Karimi, "Securing Our Lives: Women at the Forefront of the Peace and Security Discourse in Kenya," African Peacebuilding Network Working Papers: No. 20, Social Science Research Council (2018): 7, ssrc.org/publications/securing-our-lives-women-at-the-forefront-of-the-peace-and-security-discourse-in-kenya.

⁶⁴ Kenny, *Reimagining the Gendered Nation*, 180.

⁶⁵ Gloria Nyambura Kenyatta, "The Political Participation of Women in Kenya," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 25, no. 2 (2023).

⁶⁶ Marie E. Barry and Yolande Bouka, "Implementing Inclusion: Gender Quotas, Inequality, and Backlash in Kenya," *Politics & Gender* 17, no. 4 (2021): 640–664.

⁶⁷ Kenny, *Reimagining the Gendered Nation*, 183.

gender disparities, women's vulnerability to these factors, and to the social and familial stresses they produce, is greater than that of men, and more likely to bring exposure to domestic and sexual violence.

Kenyan women, and by extension reformers (including the Catholic Church) in Kenya, must, with Colombia, travel two unavoidable routes to change that are difficult to access: greater social and economic empowerment of women, and the engagement of local communities and women's groups in negotiating the first path successfully. Theologian Lorene Maseno notes in the "strongest terms that gender-based violence is a pandemic globally, regionally and nationally."⁶⁸ The vice affects "those outside the church and those in the church." Silence around this issue is pervasive. Nor do courts provide recognition and justice for rape victims. Maseno stresses, in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 16 (adopted in 2016 by all UN member states, with a fulfillment target of 2030), that the political incorporation of women is a nonnegotiable precondition of prevention of violence against women. Measures must be taken "collaboratively at local, national and regional levels where women in communities, civil society organizations, governments, regional bodies and the private sector must all play a role."⁶⁹ Efforts must aggressively address underlying factors in gender-biased exclusion and violence, including economic marginalization, poverty, corruption, and the destruction of the natural environment, especially of ecosystems essential to indigenous peoples and traditional spiritual values.

Turning specifically to UNSCR 1325 and its implementation in Kenya, the human rights lawyer Vicky Karimi emphasizes that within the African Union, significant progress has been made in terms of protocols, laws, and NAP frameworks, as well as in the representation of women in elected office. Kenyan women were influential participants in the mediation of the 2007 past-electoral violence, and have made progress in creating a legal regime that supports women's equality. The 2010 Kenyan Constitution provides a platform for advancing women's rights. However, significant WPS implementation challenges remain, including gender-stereotyping of the abilities of women in office, and inadequate resources for gender-responsive training, monitoring structures, and integration with civil society—and more fundamentally, lack of political will.⁷⁰ Karimi

⁶⁸ Lorene Maseno, "Gender, SDG 16, Peacebuilding and Development in Kenya," in S.M. Kilonzo, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Religion, Peacebuilding, and Development in Africa* (Springer Nature, 2023): 708.

⁶⁹ Maseno, "Gender, SDG 16," 713.

⁷⁰ Karimi, "Securing Our Lives," 6, 15–16, 19, 23–24. See also Claire Castillejo and Pilar Domingo, *Women's Participation and Influence in Post-Conflict Reform: The Case of Kenya*, ODI Synthesis Report (ODI, 2022), odi.org/en/our-work/the-women-

concludes that “SGBV continues to be a major concern in the everyday lives of women and girls in Kenya,” and confirms the insistence of many analysts that vulnerability to violence cannot be remedied without addressing “inequality in the social, economic and environmental spheres.”⁷¹

Shifts in laws and norms about land ownership and control of natural resources during and after conflict can create entry points for women’s economic empowerment. Yet, although women in many spheres and levels of society are affected by endemic inequality and gendered violence, they experience different forms of marginalization, and have different interests; for many, reforms to justice systems and family law, including customary law, will be necessary to afford them effective access to new economic or land rights.⁷² Women with power to influence reform represent a similar range: “women in politics, government bureaucracies, legal institutions, CSOs, academic institutions, media, and the private sector.”⁷³

Reforms at the “higher” echelons of society, especially formal legal reforms, will not improve the status of rural women or poor urban women, unless they are mediated into their environments by advocates, organizations, and movements that include stakeholder women. As one report on WPS and Kenya sees it, to the extent that processes of transitional justice after conflict have made gains in regard to violence against women, “in all cases, women’s organizations have been at the center.”⁷⁴ The success in Kenya of UNSCR 1325 depends upon localization at the county level, attunement to specific needs of women, and “engagement with local women’s organizations and activists as the core drivers of this agenda.”⁷⁵ In both Kenya and Colombia, “transnational networking among women’s organizations” sometimes supported by international donors, resulted in peer exchanges and the cross-fertilization of experiences to support more strategic and successful mobilization in favor of goals compatible with the WPS agenda.⁷⁶

peace-and-security-agenda-breaking-down-silos. This report cross-references similarities between Colombia and Kenya.

⁷¹ Karimi, “Securing Our Lives,” 25–26.

⁷² Castillejo and Domingo, “Women’s Participation,” 19.

⁷³ Karimi, “Securing Our Lives,” 15.

⁷⁴ Castillejo and Domingo, “Women’s Participation,” 8.

⁷⁵ Karimi, “Securing Our Lives,” 21–22.

⁷⁶ Castillejo and Domingo, “Women’s Participation,” 9.

KENYAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Evidence is abundant that sociopolitical goal concurrence with the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, is broadly absent. Even where national constitutions affirm women's rights and criminalize rape, for example, there may exist little or no follow-through in terms of concrete and reliable protections for women. One salient Kenyan example of women's change agency, as interfaith and intercultural, is Rural Women Peace Link. It sponsors programs to educate and empower women economically, and to prepare women's leadership in conflict mitigation and governance, empowering grassroots women to become "active agents of change in their communities."⁷⁷ Christian and Catholic efforts with similar goals and women's leadership are likewise active and effective, both in relatively local contexts and across networks of local and national efforts, with diverse funding and support sources.

The force behind these engines of change are very often Catholic women's religious congregations—though their resources may be few, and their ecclesial status quite secondary to ordained leadership.⁷⁸ Representatives of the Kenyan Conference of Catholic bishops have united with Protestant and interfaith groups, along with the UN, to combat "the triple threat of HIV infections, gender-based violence (GBV), and adolescent pregnancies."⁷⁹ Such goals are put into action by, for instance, the Sisters of Charity of the Good Shepherd who run a shelter and programs in Mombasa to support girl victims of sex tourism. Trafficking and sex work are driven by the destabilization, poverty, and violence spread by armed conflict; and enabled by weak law enforcement, especially when "girls are viewed as financial assets" and as "acceptable partners for older men." The shelter's ministry, which belongs to the local archdiocese under Caritas Mombasa, provides refuge, education, vocational training; and a renewed sense of value, identity, and "a path forward."⁸⁰ For broader

⁷⁷ See Rural Women Peace Link, ruralwomenpeacelink.com.

⁷⁸ Two projects to empower sisters themselves, in church, society, and ministries, are the Sophia Institute, with its companion interfaith project to empower African women (directed by Sr. Anne Arabome, SSS), studywithsophia.org/general-6; the Bakhita Project; and Watawa wa taa, a project for sisters that highlights the enhancement of intercultural ministry (directed by Sr. Mumbi Kigutha CPPS), watawa.org.

⁷⁹ UNESCO News, "Kenyan Religious Leaders Unite Against HIV, GBV, and Adolescent Pregnancy," May 29, 2024, unesco.org/en/articles/kenyan-religious-leaders-unite-against-hiv-gbv-and-adolescent-pregnancy.

⁸⁰ Doreen Ajiambo, "Stolen Childhoods: These Sisters are Rescuing Kenya's Girls from Child Sex Tourism," July 29, 2025, globalsistersreport.org/sections/trafficking-0.

impact, the sisters work with local leaders, chiefs, and faith groups, organizing workshops in villages and educating parents.

Another initiative of this congregation reaches teenage mothers in Kenya's Meru County, where there are striking rates of gender-based violence (336 cases between January 2024 and May 2025) and teen pregnancy (over 9500 cases in 2023). The Good Shepherd Sisters partner with the Center for Rights Education and Awareness, which provides counselors and trainings on financial literacy, offering small business micro-grants to young women who complete the program. More widely the congregation brings together community stakeholders, including the area chief, health care professionals, police officers, and teachers.⁸¹

Catholic lay women's organizations are also active in Kenya. Of note is the Catholic Women's Association, founded in 1964, and today visible especially in Kenya and Cameroon. The CWA works within Catholic parish structures, magnifying women's contributions to peace, reconciliation and justice, under the aegis of "social cohesion." Yet a 2024 study of a parish in Kenya concludes that "The role of the Catholic Women Association in promoting social cohesion is still overshadowed by men in the Catholic Church." The authors observe that while "community service, advocacy, education, and interfaith dialogue" are important contributions of the CWA, women still lack recognition and voice through formal parish leadership roles.⁸²

The impact of African Catholic and Christian women against gender-based violence in Kenya expands beyond strictly ecclesial auspices. The Collaborative Centre for Gender and Development is chaired by Philomena Mwaura, an ecumenical theologian who has studied African instituted churches, and is a longstanding advocate for gender equity.⁸³ The CCGD was founded in 1996 to defeat gender

⁸¹ Mourene Achieng, "Sisters Empower Kenyan Teenage Mothers, Raise Awareness on Gender-Based Violence," September 15, 2025, Global Sisters Report, globalsistersreport.org/ministry/sisters-empower-kenyan-teenage-mothers-raise-awareness-gender-based-violence.

⁸² Babirye Annet, Wilkister Shanyisa, and Peter Mbaro, "The Role of Catholic Women Association in Promoting Social Cohesion: A Case of St John the Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, Nov. 11, 2024, rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/articles/the-role-of-catholic-women-association-in-promoting-social-cohesion-a-case-of-st-john-the-evangelist-parish-archdiocese-of-nairobi-kenya. The authors are from the Centre for Social Justice and Ethics, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi.

⁸³ Mwaura was a participant and keynote speaker at the African Women Theologians conference (mostly Catholic) sponsored by Hekima University College, referenced in note 6. She is associate professor of philosophy and religious studies at Kenyatta University in Nairobi and a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women. She is the author of "African Instituted Churches in East Africa," *Studies in World Christianity* 10, no. 2 (2004): 96–115, <https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2004.10.2.160>; and

discrimination, and takes as its base points national and international treaties, including the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UN Sustainable Development Goals, UNSCR 1325, and the Kenyan Constitution. Despite policy gains in Kenya, though, implementation “has not been effective enough to consistently reduce and close identified gender gaps.” Instead (as of 2022), “Kenya is witnessing a backlash on equality gains” that “threatens to roll back progress.” Thus, the CCGD’s 2023–2027 plan aims to increase voice, capacity and impact by investing in technical and financial partnerships with government agencies, academia, civil society organizations, and stakeholders in the private sector,” maximizing the voice and participation of marginalized women, and addressing “intersectional issues of sexual and gender-based violence.”⁸⁴

Based on the experience of the CCDG, partnerships across society are valuable. Yet the most effective route to policy goals is “enhancing the voice, agency, and participation of marginalized women and girls.”⁸⁵ Policy priorities of the organization are to: reduce sexual and gender-based violence through services and education (e.g., reducing stigma through the message that GBV is not the victim’s fault); reduce young women’s vulnerability by enlarging employment and business opportunities; expand quality childcare services; improve food security and livelihood initiatives; build skills to respond to and manage climate change and disasters; achieve a robust (and enforced) definition of sextortion as a form of corruption; “gender mainstream” in infrastructure decision-making, construction and delivery; empower women and youth through sustainable business ventures; and enable gender equality organizations to operate freely in East Africa, by protecting civic space and strengthening physical and virtual dialogue platforms, especially among young people.⁸⁶ Steps toward this vision are already underway in the nine Kenyan counties in which CCGD now has programming. Philomena Mwaura stresses the organization’s current focus on building grassroots leadership; providing childcare and safety for cross-border traders in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda; and educating for financial competence, another way of raising consciousness about the causes of and resistance to gender-based violence.⁸⁷

“A Spirituality of Resistance and Hope: African Instituted Churches’ Response to Poverty,” in *A New Day: Essays on World Christianity in Honor of Lamin Sanneh*, ed. Akintunde E. Akinade (Peter Lang, 2010), 129–131.

⁸⁴ Philomena Mwaura, “Foreword,” in “Strategic Plan 2023–2027,” 2, ccgdcentre.org/our-strategic-focus-areas.

⁸⁵ CCGD, “Strategic Plan 2023–2027,” 12, ccgdcentre.org/our-strategic-focus-areas.

⁸⁶ CCGD, “Strategic Plan, 15–18.

⁸⁷ Personal conversation, September 2025.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me suggest three possible take-aways from this study.

First, both top-down and bottom-up—as well as “middle out”—action is necessary to meaningful, sustainable change. Movement generated at the bottom and moving upward has historically been the most successfully ignored and suppressed. Conversely, power is most likely to generate and accumulate at the “top” (which also applies to authorities in subordinated or suppressed communities). Hence the Catholic “preferential option for the poor” and Pope Francis’s and Pope Leo’s encouragement of justice-guided populisms.

Second, the Roman Catholic Church certainly includes but goes beyond the episcopacy and other institutionally designated leaders. Whereas most analysts of Catholic advocacy for UNSCR 1325 associate Roman Catholicism with formal documents and office-holders, the more comprehensive Catholic contribution is not only more diffuse, decentralized, and inclusive; it is more dynamic, adaptive, and unexpected.

Third, consensus is strong among critics of UNSCR’s implementation record that localization through women’s organizations and activism is a *sine qua non* of political will for change. Atalia Omer has argued that women’s identities, including Catholic identities, are unlikely to fit anticipated orthodoxies. This is a predictor of the energy and creativity of disruptive networks, including those engaged by Catholic women. As interactive with the first two factors, it is highly promising for the power of Catholicism in the realization of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. **M**

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