

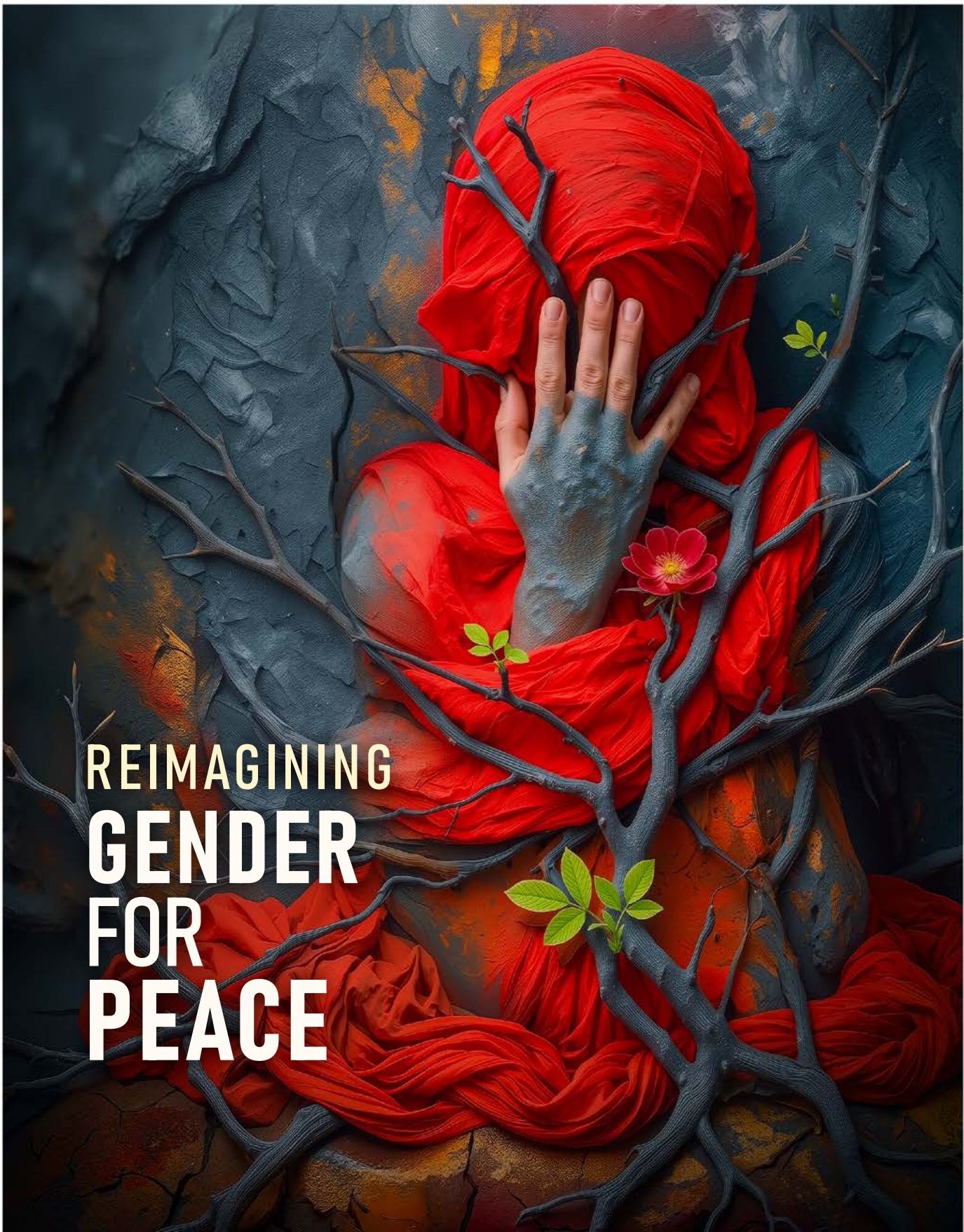
Bimonthly

Pax Lumina



Vol. 07 | No. 04 | July 2026

A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation



REIMAGINING
GENDER
FOR
PEACE



A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation

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the moment
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the last nail
that holds us
to fear.

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A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation

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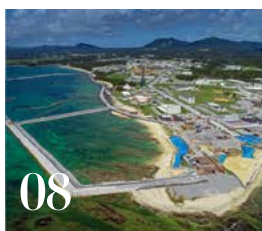
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Contents

Vol. **07** | No. **04** | July 2026

Pax Lumina
A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation



FEATURE





06



39



43



48



53



63



58



68

GENDER AND PEACE

Global Perspectives



Editorial

Nearly eight decades ago, the nations of the world solemnly proclaimed a timeless truth in the opening words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." More than a legal proclamation, this was an ethical vision that placed human dignity at the heart of peaceful coexistence. Yet, despite the passage of decades, this vision remains unfulfilled for millions across the world.

In a world marked by polarization, and structural violence, questions of gender have become central to the search for justice and sustainable peace. Across continents and cultures, societies are rethinking inherited understandings of gender roles, identities, relationships, and power structures. This issue of Pax Lumina seeks to explore how such reimagining can contribute to building more humane, inclusive, and peaceful communities.

Recent scholarship increasingly highlights the deep relationship between gender justice and peacebuilding. Sustainable peace cannot emerge without addressing systemic inequalities and patriarchal structures embedded within political

and social institutions. Similarly, contemporary gender discourse challenges simplistic binaries and recognizes gender as a lived social, cultural, political, spiritual, and personal reality.

In spite of having various attempts in advancing gender justice across the globe, many societies continue to experience discrimination, violence, exclusion, and unequal opportunities. Women, children, and transgender persons often remain vulnerable to social stigma, marginalization, and systemic injustice. At the same time, movements advocating equality and recognition are opening new pathways toward dialogue, healing, and reconciliation.

Pax Lumina seeks to amplify the voices of marginalized communities, grassroots movements, peace practitioners, scholars, and young people from diverse regions of the world. Bringing together contributors from Japan, Ecuador, Africa, the United States, Mexico, and India, it offers a rich multicultural perspective on gender, fostering a more holistic and nuanced understanding of this complex reality.

We commend these voices to you, trusting they will disturb, illuminate, and ultimately strengthen the community of conscience to which this journal belongs. Ultimately, Reimagining Gender for Peace calls for a transformative ethical vision that moves beyond domination and exclusion. Peace cannot flourish where dignity is denied; reimagining gender, therefore, becomes an essential pathway toward justice, reconciliation and sustainable peace.

Justice Kurian Joseph
Honorary Editor



Women's rights are human rights.

- Hillary Rodham Clinton



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WHAT JAPAN'S WPS LEADERSHIP HAS YET TO CONFRONT OKINAWA, MILITARIZATION, AND FEMINIST PEACE



Drawing on my participation in the civil society process surrounding Japan's first NAP, I examine how WPS has been translated into State policy. **Japan has not ignored WPS; rather, it has embraced it as a language of international cooperation, disaster risk reduction, peacebuilding, and diplomacy.**



In 2024, Okinawan women brought a long-standing question before the CEDAW Committee: why does Japan's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda remain so visible abroad, yet so silent about militarized insecurity at home? 'Be the Change Okinawa' argued that sexual violence perpetrated by U.S. military personnel in Okinawa should be understood not as an exceptional local problem, but as a central concern of WPS and Japan's National Action Plan (NAP) (Be the Change Okinawa, 2024). This demand was not new. During the drafting of Japan's first NAP on UN Security Council Resolution 1325, Okinawan feminists, including Suzuyo Takazato and other activists working against military violence, had already insisted that U.S. military bases, the Japan–U.S. Status of Forces Agreement, military sexual violence, and the unequal security burden imposed on Okinawa should be recognized as core WPS issues.

Drawing on my participation in the civil society process surrounding Japan's first NAP, I examine how WPS has been translated into State policy. Japan has not ignored WPS; rather, it has embraced it as a language of international cooperation, disaster risk reduction, peacebuilding, and diplomacy. The problem lies in what Japan avoids confronting: it has institutionalized WPS while sidestepping the domestic and historical forms of militarized insecurity that Okinawan women and feminist civil society actors have long identified.



Japan adopted its first WPS NAP in 2015. The drafting process created an opening for civil society actors, who sought to frame WPS not merely as a means of supporting women overseas, but as a lens through which Japan's own security policies should be examined. Civil society discussions encompassed ODA, PKO, disaster response, prevention, refugees and migrants, Okinawa, U.S. bases, and Japanese military sexual slavery, euphemistically referred to as the "comfort women" issue. The first NAP process thus raised the question of whose security counts and whether Japan could apply WPS to its own security arrangements.

Yet the final government document narrowed that potential. Motoyama shows how Japanese gender diplomacy has adopted the language of women's empowerment while avoiding politically difficult issues such as wartime responsibility and domestic gender inequality (Motoyama, 2022). Akibayashi's work on Okinawan anti-militarist feminism similarly reminds us that the issue is not simply whether more women are included in security institutions, but whether militarized security itself is recognized as a source of gendered and colonial violence (Akibayashi, 2020). Japan's first NAP was, therefore, an event that exposed the limitations of feminist civil society and an early example of State containment: WPS was accepted as a framework for international cooperation, but not fully as a critique of Japan's militarized order.

Japanese military sexual slavery belongs in this discussion not as a separate historical controversy, but as a test of Japan's WPS commitments. WPS is concerned with conflict-related sexual violence, justice, reparations, memory, and guarantees of non-repetition. Yet Japan's NAPs have not placed wartime responsibility at the center of the agenda. CEDAW had already urged Japan to



adopt a victim-centered approach, ensure truth, justice, and reparations, and address the issue through education and public memory (CEDAW, 2016). Okinawa is not simply a contemporary local issue, and Japanese military sexual slavery is not merely a matter of the past. Together, they reveal a continuum of militarized sexual violence that Japan's WPS leadership has been reluctant to confront.

Japan's later NAPs did not fundamentally alter this pattern. The second NAP, adopted in 2019, emphasized implementation, monitoring, indicators, and the rationalization of objectives. The third NAP (2023–2028) reorganizes the agenda into areas such as international cooperation, prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, disaster risk reduction, climate change, domestic implementation, and capacity-building (Government of Japan, 2023). This expansion is not inherently problematic.

Disaster risk reduction can form an important component of the WPS agenda when women's leadership, carework, evacuation, shelter violence, and climate insecurity are taken seriously. The problem is that it has become a politically safe avenue for demonstrating WPS leadership, while Okinawa, U.S. military bases, the Status of



Disaster risk reduction can form an important component of the WPS agenda when women's leadership, care work, evacuation, shelter violence, and climate insecurity are taken seriously. **The problem is that it has become a politically safe avenue for demonstrating WPS leadership, while Okinawa, U.S. military bases, the Status of Forces Agreement, Japanese military sexual slavery, and sexual violence within security institutions remain insufficiently addressed.**



Forces Agreement, Japanese military sexual slavery, and sexual violence within security institutions remain insufficiently addressed. If WPS enters defense policy without confronting harassment and gendered hierarchies within security institutions, it risks legitimizing existing structures rather than transforming them.

Comparison makes Japan's avoidance more apparent. South Korea's fourth NAP does not directly criticize the presence of foreign troops, but it addresses women's human rights violations and exploitation around military bases, military-related sexual violence, and support for survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery (Republic of Korea, 2024). Sri Lanka's first NAP, developed with support from the Government of Japan and UN Women, addresses the legacy of internal armed conflict, including displacement, women ex-combatants, military and police widows, female-headed households, and conflict-related sexual violence (Government of Sri Lanka, 2023). Neither plan is without limitations, but both demonstrate that NAPs can engage with domestic conflict, militarization, and historical violence. Japan has supported such WPS initiatives abroad, while remaining hesitant to apply the same logic to Okinawa and to its own wartime responsibility.

This contradiction is particularly stark today. Japan is implementing its third NAP while presenting itself internationally as a leader in WPS. Yet the



2024 CEDAW concluding observations made clear that Japan's WPS commitments cannot be confined to overseas assistance. The Committee highlighted challenges arising from the U.S. military presence in Okinawa and urged Japan to ensure women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding efforts, including negotiations concerning bilateral military agreements affecting Japanese territory (CEDAW, 2024). This echoes what Okinawan women have long argued: WPS must also address the everyday insecurity produced by Japan's own security arrangements.



Reimagining gender for peace requires more than adding women to security institutions or promoting gender-sensitive assistance abroad. It requires asking how national security policies themselves can produce insecurity, and whose experiences are left outside official definitions of peace. Okinawan women have long challenged Japan's WPS agenda to confront military bases, sexual violence, unequal security burdens, and the silencing of local voices. Japan's WPS leadership will remain incomplete if it fails to address both the historical violence of Japanese military sexual slavery and the ongoing militarized insecurity experienced by women and girls in Okinawa.

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GENDER DIVERSITY, CONSTITUTIONALISM, AND THE PURSUIT OF PEACE IN **LATIN AMERICA**



This article argues that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through formal legal recognition alone.

In many Latin American contexts, constitutionalism has simultaneously promoted inclusion while preserving mechanisms of social control over gender and sexuality.



Across Latin America, constitutional reforms and judicial decisions have increasingly recognized the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ persons. Courts have expanded protections related to equality, non-discrimination, gender identity, marriage equality, and dignity. These developments are often presented as evidence of democratic progress and social peace. However, despite these important legal advances, many societies in the region continue to reproduce structural violence, exclusion, and symbolic forms of subordination against gender-diverse communities.

This article argues that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through formal legal recognition alone. In many Latin American contexts, constitutionalism has simultaneously promoted inclusion while preserving mechanisms of social control over gender and sexuality. Legal systems may recognize diversity while continuing to frame it as exceptional, controversial, or only conditionally tolerated. These tensions reveal the limits of purely formal equality and demonstrate the persistence of subordinated diversity.



Latin America has become one of the most dynamic constitutional laboratories for advancing gender and sexuality rights. Several countries have incorporated anti-discrimination clauses into their constitutions, recognized same-sex marriage, or adopted gender identity legislation. Constitutional courts and international human rights bodies have played a decisive role in this process. Decisions such as *Atala Riffo v. Chile* by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, together with numerous national constitutional rulings, have strengthened the principle that sexual orientation and gender identity are protected categories under human rights law.



These developments are undeniably significant. They have provided legal visibility and institutional recognition to historically marginalized communities. For many people, constitutional recognition offers protection against criminalization, exclusion, and public humiliation. It also creates symbolic spaces in which dignity can be affirmed within democratic institutions.

Yet legal progress has not eliminated violence or exclusion. Across the region, transgender persons continue to experience disproportionately high levels of poverty, discrimination, and physical violence. Public debates surrounding gender identity and sexuality are often shaped by moral panic, religious polarization, and political manipulation. Educational initiatives that promote gender equality frequently become targets of disinformation campaigns portraying diversity as a threat to the family, culture, or national identity.

This contradiction reveals an important tension within contemporary constitutionalism. Legal systems may formally recognize rights while social and institutional practices continue to subordinate those who embody gender diversity. Inclusion can coexist with stigmatization, and equality remains incomplete when recognition is conditioned upon conformity to dominant moral expectations. In this sense, peace becomes fragile because exclusion is not fully dismantled; it is merely transformed into subtler forms.

The relationship between peace and gender justice, therefore, requires deeper reflection. Peace is not simply the absence of armed conflict or overt repression. It also depends on the existence of social conditions that enable individuals and communities to live with dignity, participation, and recognition. Where fear, stigma, and structural inequality persist, peace remains partial and unstable.

Reimagining gender for peace demands moving beyond frameworks of tolerance toward genuine inclusion. Tolerance alone often implies that certain identities are merely endured rather than fully accepted as equal participants in public life. A peaceful society requires institutions capable of recognizing diversity not as a problem to be managed, but as a constitutive dimension of democratic coexistence.

Educational institutions, constitutional courts, civil society organizations, and faith communities all have a role to play in this transformation. Education can foster empathy and critical reflection. Constitutionalism can provide safeguards against discrimination and the abuse of power. Social movements can challenge normalized forms of exclusion. Religious and ethical traditions can contribute narratives of compassion, dignity, and solidarity rather than those of fear and condemnation.

In many Latin American countries, public understanding of gender issues remains shaped by misinformation, sensationalism, and polarized political discourse. **As a result, gender-diverse persons are frequently portrayed not as citizens entitled to dignity and equal participation, but as threats to moral, cultural, or religious values.**



An essential dimension of this transformation involves promoting public awareness and educational campaigns capable of addressing prejudice, misinformation, and fear surrounding gender diversity. Legal reforms alone cannot dismantle deeply rooted social stereotypes if broader society continues to reproduce narratives of exclusion. In many Latin American countries, public understanding of gender issues remains shaped by misinformation, sensationalism, and polarized political discourse. As a result, gender-diverse persons are frequently portrayed not as citizens entitled to dignity and equal participation, but as threats to moral, cultural, or religious values.

Awareness campaigns can play a crucial role in countering these dynamics by fostering empathy, dialogue, and social understanding. Educational initiatives in schools, universities, media platforms, and community spaces can help challenge stereotypes and normalize diversity within democratic life. Such campaigns are not merely instruments for disseminating information; they are also mechanisms for peacebuilding because they create opportunities for mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence across differences.

Importantly, these efforts should not be limited to urban or academic settings. Peacebuilding requires inclusive strategies capable of reaching diverse social sectors, including rural communities, faith-based groups, families, and young people. Public institutions, civil society organizations, educators, journalists, and religious leaders all share responsibility for promoting narratives grounded in human dignity rather than in exclusion or fear.

Moreover, awareness campaigns should avoid relying solely on abstract legal language. Human experiences, personal testimonies, and everyday realities often possess greater transformative potential than purely technical discussions of rights. When societies begin to recognize gender-diverse persons not as abstract political controversies but as neighbours, students, workers, family members, and fellow citizens, the conditions for peaceful coexistence become more attainable.

In this sense, reimagining gender for peace requires not only constitutional guarantees and institutional reforms, but also cultural transformation. Sustainable peace depends upon societies capable of embracing diversity as a source of democratic enrichment rather than social fragmentation.

Ultimately, peace without equality is unsustainable. Latin America's constitutional experience demonstrates that legal recognition, while essential, is insufficient when social structures continue to reproduce hierarchy and exclusion. Reimagining gender for peace requires more than institutional reform; it requires an ethical commitment to human dignity and to the full participation of all persons in democratic life. Only then can peace move beyond formal declarations and become a lived social reality.

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Pax Lumina 7(4)/2026/17-20

TRANSGENDER GENETICS FACT OR FANTASY?

As it happened, those who regarded genetic factors as determinative and traits as binary came to prevail in the field. **The notion that traits might exist along a spectrum and be shaped by multiple influences was considered unconvincing and remained eclipsed for many years.**



When he observed that wrinkled or smooth peas, green or yellow peas, and tall or short pea plants all behaved as binary traits, Gregor Mendel (1822–1884) deduced that a discrete causative agent must possess immutable integrity and exist in two alternative forms, one corresponding to each of the traits in question. It was from this insight that the science of genetics emerged.

In the years immediately following the “rediscovery” of Mendel’s long-neglected work in 1900, two schools of thought, each with its own investigational and conceptual framework, became established. As it happened, those who regarded genetic factors as determinative and traits as binary came to prevail in the field. The notion that traits might exist along a spectrum and be shaped by multiple influences was considered unconvincing and remained eclipsed for many years.

We now know that numerous genes contribute to a series of biochemical processes that culminate in what we call hair colour. This explains the remarkable diversity of hair colours and why it would be manifestly nonsensical to describe any one of them as the normal hair colour. One important stage in this biochemical pathway may be altered, resulting in the absence of typical pigmentation (albinism), while another gives rise to the distinct characteristic known as red hair.

The terms complex or multifactorial are used to describe traits that are influenced by multiple genes as well as a range of environmental factors, including ambient temperature, nutrition, exposure to toxins, prenatal maternal influences, and other developmental conditions. Thus, a family may exhibit a genetic predisposition towards tall stature, yet the eventual outcome is shaped by environmental influences and interactions with other genes. This is why stature, along with other complex traits such as intelligence and cholesterol levels, follows not a binary distribution but a bell-shaped curve.

Gender is a multifactorial trait. The presence of a Y chromosome in a zygote will usually result in a male newborn, but there are many ways in which this outcome may be modified. Furthermore, the development of maleness in a newborn depends upon a complex series of biological events that must occur before that individual’s sexual phenotype is fully expressed. The Y chromosome may be regarded as necessary for a male developmental pathway, but it is certainly not sufficient. Multiple genes each play important roles throughout this process, and environmental influences also contribute to the eventual outcome.

The fact that some children are born with genitalia that confound the adults around them is by no means a recent phenomenon. In earlier centuries, such conditions were attributed to the influence of the planets, demons or witches, maternal impressions (things seen or imagined by the pregnant mother), and other supernatural or speculative causes. In the modern scientific era, we have more sophisticated explanations,



including atypical chromosomal constitutions and pathogenic variants in genes that regulate the proliferation and migration of cells involved in the formation of the urogenital system.

Approaches to managing these atypical neonates have also evolved. In ancient times, many were “exposed”—abandoned in the wilderness to be killed by predators or cast from cliffs or into rivers. During the twentieth century, the confidence, and at times hubris, of surgeons led to attempts, with varying degrees of success, to impose a binary model of sex through surgical intervention, often with mixed outcomes for the individuals concerned. Such approaches characterised the management of conditions including congenital adrenal hyperplasia, androgen insensitivity syndrome, and related variations in sexual development.

Our terminology has likewise evolved. Terms such as “hermaphroditism”, “intersex”, and “gonadal dysgenesis”, once commonly used, have gradually been replaced. More recently, the expression “disorders of sex development” (DSD) gained acceptance in clinical practice, although there is now an increasing preference for the more neutral and less pathologising term “differences of sex development”.

We now have a fairly detailed and useful understanding of the specific genetic factors that can enable an individual with a 46,XY chromosomal constitution to develop typical or near-typical female anatomy, and vice versa. Crucially, however, we have no comparable insight into how or why an individual, whether with typical or atypical anatomy, comes to discover the object of their sexual attraction: most commonly the opposite sex, but sometimes the same sex.

Many years ago, a pastor who was meeting me for the first time, and who had just learnt that I was a clinical geneticist, exclaimed that he looked forward to the day when my colleagues and I would discover “the gay gene”. Taking a deep breath, I explained that sexual orientation is a complex trait in which many genes may play a part, alongside psychosocial and other environmental influences. I also assured him that we would never discover a single, neatly binary gene (such as the one that determines whether peas are yellow or green). Decades later, that assessment still appears to have been correct.

It is now several decades since the first convincing studies demonstrated that there is, indeed, a biological basis for same-sex attraction. However, that biological underpinning is neither binary nor ineluctable; rather, it is one component in a complex interplay of genetic and environmental influences.

It is now several decades since the first convincing studies demonstrated that there is indeed a biological basis for same-sex attraction. **However, that biological underpinning is neither binary nor ineluctable; rather, it is one component in a complex interplay of genetic and environmental influences.**



Even less do we possess any genetic insight into why or how a person with otherwise typical genital anatomy may experience an internal sense of being, as it were, “in the wrong body,” and consequently feel compelled to live, act, and present themselves as someone of the opposite (binary) sex. Most people find it difficult to imagine such an experience. Unfortunately, some assume that their inability to imagine it entitles them to dismiss or devalue those who genuinely experience it. Such a response is morally questionable and reveals a lack of gratitude to God for the wonders and diversity of creation.

Similar failures of imagination and humility have confronted us before. One need only recall the initially hostile responses to the profound and transformative insights of Nicolas Copernicus (1473–1543) and Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), or later to those of Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955). Hubris served us poorly in those instances, and it will serve us no better in this one. More troubling still, beyond impoverishing those who embrace it, hubris inflicts unnecessary suffering upon those who become its victims.

We do not yet know which biological or genetic factors contribute to sexual orientation or to transgender experience. The search for a single on–off genetic determinant is almost certain



to prove unsuccessful. We should acknowledge this with humility and awe as we contemplate the mystery of being human and encounter creation in all its rich and intricate complexity.

For a more detailed discussion

Robert Roger Lebel (2011): Gender: Genetics, Genitality, Generosity (Grace), Gentility, *Theology and Science*, 9:4, 435–450.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2011.616017>

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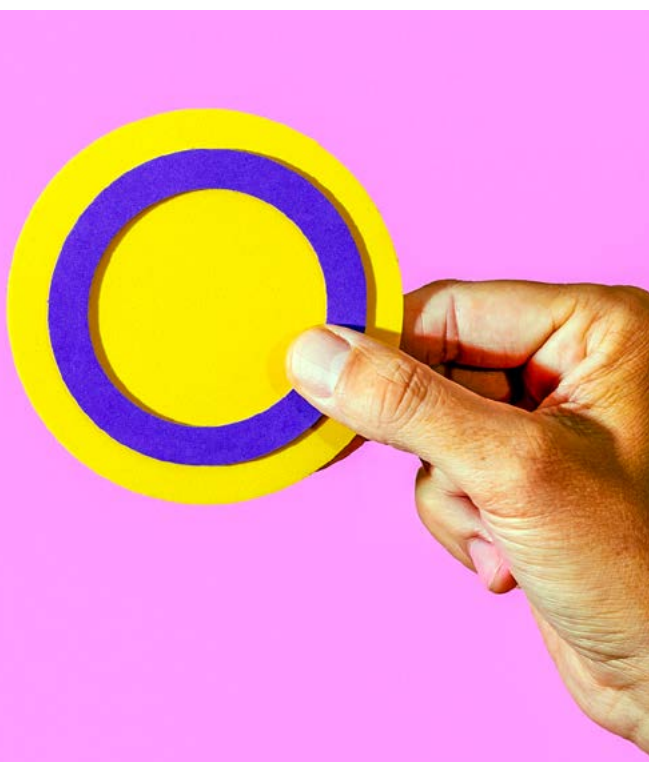
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BEYOND THE RIGIDITY OF IDENTITY

Pax Lumina 7(4)/2026/21-24



English, in particular, is a language of binary imprisonment. It forces the observer to choose, **to categorize, to become either “he” or “she,”** effectively silencing the nuanced, expansive reality of human experience.



The origins of gender are not found in the ancient texts we cling to, but in the psychological need of the ego to create order through division. We have been conditioned to believe that the myth of Adam and Eve is the singular, immutable truth of creation—a binary starting point that excludes the vast diversity of life.

By dogmatizing this creation narrative, society has deemed the intersex body as a “mistake” or a “deviation,” while simultaneously erasing the reality that the Divine, in its creative abundance, did not craft only two poles. The presence of intersex individuals, born with diverse sex characteristics, does not contradict creation; it is a testament to the fact that the Creator’s canvas is far wider than the narrow script of Adam and Eve.

We must clarify a profound misunderstanding: Intersex persons are not transgender. Intersex is a biological reality regarding diverse sex characteristics; transgender is a matter of gender identity.

To conflate them is to deny the specific bodily autonomy of intersex individuals. The problem begins in the delivery room, where society—and often the medical establishment—fears the “in-between.” Doctors, trapped in the same binary conditioning as the rest of society, are often unwilling even to acknowledge a child as intersex. They rush to “correct” what they perceive as a failure, forcing infants into the categories of male or female through non-consensual surgeries.

To speak of peace is first to examine the structures of the mind that insist on conflict. We live in a world tethered to the tyranny of language, where labels act as borders, dividing the fluidity of existence into rigid, unyielding compartments. English, in particular, is a language of binary imprisonment. It forces the observer to choose, to categorize, to become either “he” or “she,” effectively silencing the nuanced, expansive reality of human experience. When we are forced to define ourselves within the constraints of such a language, we are not speaking; we are performing an act of conformity.



It is a victory for human dignity that the High Courts of Madras, Kerala, and Delhi have intervened to ban these medically unnecessary, traumatic interventions on intersex infants and children, based on my work. These rulings recognize that a child's body is not a project to be engineered to fit a social blueprint.

Even our legal framework reflects this confusion. It is a striking reality that the Constitution of India—a living document of immense foresight—does not actually include the term “gender.” It speaks of “sex,” yet we have spent decades layering “gender” over it, creating a legal and social quagmire.

We have imported colonial concepts of gender identity, transplanting frameworks never designed for our cultural context. Decolonizing these terms means returning to the realization that the soul has no sex. When we impose Western binaries upon our society, we fracture the cohesive, inclusive fabric of our communities.

This rigid obsession with sexual identity extends even to the divine. We have boxed God within the narrow confines of human biology. We project our own insecurities onto the infinite, creating deities who must be “he” or “she” but not “they or ze.” We limit the limitless. If the divine is, indeed, all-encompassing, it must be beyond the reach of human categories of sex and gender. How can that which is the intelligence of the universe be contained within the petty

constraints of human anatomy? When we attribute a fixed, heteronormative sex identity or gender to the Divine, we are not worshipping; we are domesticating the sacred to suit our own limited perspectives.

True observation requires a mind that is free of these conditioning influences. Can you look at a human being and see the whole, without the screen of “male,” “female,” or “intersex” interfering?

We are not born with an identity, nor are we “born this way” into a fixed, rigid category. Instead, we are all born with great potential, an expansive capacity for life that society immediately stifles. The moment we label a child as a “boy” or a “girl,” we begin the process of narrowing that limitless potential into a social performance. The labels we use, even the ones meant to empower, often serve to perpetuate the division.

The struggle for justice is not merely a political negotiation; it is an invitation to psychological liberation. When we demand rights, we are asking for space within a corrupt system. When we demand transformation, we are asking for the system to dissolve. Peace cannot be engineered through policy alone. These frameworks are necessary to mitigate immediate violence, but they do not touch the root of the conflict: the observer who clings to identity.



Pease is neither the victory of one sex or gender over another nor merely the peaceful coexistence of different labels. **Peace is the dissolution of the wall between the thinker and the thought, between the body and the ego.**



To reimagine gender is to realize that the psychological structure of “identity” is what creates the “other.” In the silence of non-duality, where the mind no longer reacts from the baggage of tradition, there is no gender. There is only the flowering of life.

We must stop teaching children to boast that they are a “boy” or a “girl” and start showing them that they are an unfolding mystery. We must stop using religion to police the body and start recognizing that the spirit is not a prisoner of the anatomy.

The decolonization of our minds is the only way to arrive at a society that does not require “gender justice” because it has already transcended the need to judge.

Let us end the performance. Let us cease the categorization of the infinite. Peace is neither the victory of one sex or gender over another nor merely the peaceful coexistence of different labels. Peace is the dissolution of the wall between the thinker and the thought, between the body and the ego.

When the mind is truly free, when it is no longer holding onto the crutch of identity, you will find that the divine, the human, and nature are all the same, fluid, and brilliantly beyond the binaries we have so desperately constructed. Only then, in that silence, can there be a transformative, compassionate coexistence that does not know the meaning of the word “stranger.”

Peace, therefore, is not a destination, but a shedding of skins. It is the courageous act of discarding the borrowed masks of identity that have been forced upon us by histories of conflict. When we recognize that the rigidity of our current definitions is merely a reflection of our collective fear, we begin to open the doors of our humanity, where all are one, unbound by the past, free at last, and present in this moment of pure, boundless, universal love.

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GENDER IDENTITY FOR EVERYDAY PEACE





Growing up, I often understood peace as the absence of violence or conflict. But through my work as a community development worker in Kibra, I have slowly come to understand peace in a different way. Peace is also about dignity, fairness, inclusion, and whether people feel valued within their homes and communities. A community may appear calm on the outside, but still may carry deep forms of suffering and inequality beneath the surface.

Over the years, I have worked closely with women in local savings groups and community initiatives. Many of these women shoulder enormous responsibilities. They care for children, support families, manage small businesses, and hold households together during difficult times. In many ways, they are already peacebuilders, even though society rarely describes them that way.

I have seen women contribute quietly, but consistently to the stability of their families and communities. Some mediate conflicts within their homes. Others support vulnerable neighbours or organize collective responses during moments of hardship. However, despite these contributions, many women still remain excluded from meaningful decision-making both at the household and community levels.

One lesson that has stayed with me deeply is that economic empowerment alone is not enough. Through my work, I have seen women start small businesses, gain access to savings, and contribute financially to their households. In some cases, this reduced tension and conflict at home. I remember one woman saying, “He knows I can leave now because I have my own money.” That statement revealed both pain and strength at the same time.

However, I also learned that earning money does not automatically lead to freedom or equality. Some women still had little control over how their earnings were used. Others continued to bear the full burden of caregiving and domestic work even while contributing economically. In many homes, decisions about money, leadership, and authority remained largely in male hands.

Over time, I have also come to realize that some of the deepest forms of violence are not always physical. They can take the form of silence, exclusion, unequal opportunities, and the normalization of unequal power within homes and communities. When people are denied dignity or voice because of gender, peace becomes fragile even in the absence of open conflict.

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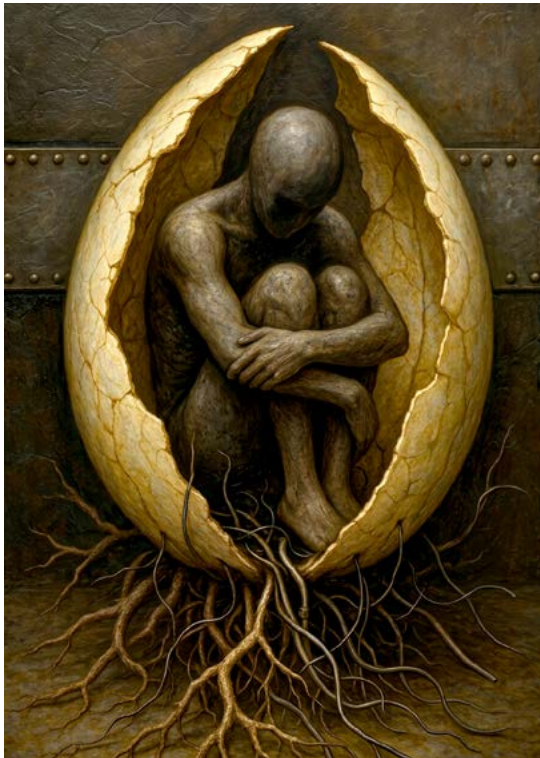


This led me to reflect more deeply on the meaning of empowerment and peace. Sometimes, we celebrate inclusion too quickly without asking whether real power has changed. A woman may be included in a programme, a meeting, or even a political institution, yet still lack voice and influence. True peace cannot exist where dignity and participation remain unequal.

Reimagining gender for peace, therefore, requires more than simply adding women in existing systems. It asks us to rethink the ideas and assumptions that shape our communities from childhood. Many societies still teach boys to lead and girls to follow. Reimagining gender for peace does not mean creating competition between women and men. It means building relationships rooted in dignity, dialogue, shared responsibility, and mutual respect. Peace becomes more possible when communities move away from domination and exclusion toward shared humanity. Leadership is often associated with dominance and authority, while women are expected to remain supportive and accommodating. These ideas quietly shape our homes, churches, workplaces, and politics.

Through my academic studies and community work, I have come to believe that peacebuilding must begin in everyday relationships. It begins in the ways families make decisions, communities value women's voices, and boys and girls are raised to see one another. Peace is built not only in conference rooms or political negotiations. Sometimes it is built in women's groups, in community dialogue forums, in homes where respect begins to replace fear, and through small acts of shared responsibility and care.





do not believe that reimagining gender is only the responsibility of women. Men must also be part of the conversation. **Sustainable peace requires partnerships built on mutual respect rather than dominance. Communities become healthier when women and men participate equally in decision-making and in caring for one another.**



One of the most encouraging developments I have witnessed is how women's groups become spaces of healing, solidarity, and transformation. What may begin as a simple savings group often evolves into something much deeper. Women begin discussing domestic violence, emotional struggles, family pressures, and community challenges. In these spaces, women not only support one another economically, but also rediscover confidence, voice, and dignity.

Despite the challenges, I remain hopeful because I have also witnessed change. I have seen women gain confidence, speak more openly in community forums, support one another through hardship, and slowly challenge beliefs that once seemed unquestionable. I have also seen men participate in conversations about care, responsibility, and shared leadership, contributing to healthier relationships within families and communities.

At the same time, I do not believe that reimagining gender is only the responsibility of women. Men must also be part of the conversation. Sustainable peace requires partnerships built on mutual respect rather than dominance. Communities become healthier when women and men participate equally in decision-making and in caring for one another.

For me, reimagining gender for peace means moving beyond stereotypes and creating societies where leadership, care, responsibility, and dignity belong to everyone. It means recognizing women not only as beneficiaries of peacebuilding but as active agents of change whose experiences and voices matter.

My experiences in Kibra have taught me that lasting peace is deeply connected to justice and inclusion. Peace is not only the silence of conflict. It is the presence of fairness, shared humanity, and the possibility for every person to live with dignity and hope. Reimagining gender, therefore, is not simply about changing roles. It is about creating the conditions for more just, compassionate, and peaceful communities.

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Pax Lumina 7(4)/2026/29-32

A REFUGEE'S PLEA FROM CONGO



Pax Lumina asks how we might reimagine gender for peace. I answer: by centering refugee women who have survived structural violence, cultural stigma, and institutional exclusion and who have nonetheless chosen to build peace, one small act at a time.



I am a refugee woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo. I am a mother of seven children. I am the founder and coordinator of Refugee Women Care, registered in Kenya in 2025. I am currently pursuing a Master's in Peace Studies and International Relations at Hekima University College. I was formerly the Chief of the Division of Gender, Children, and Family in South Kivu province a region ravaged by over thirty years of armed conflict. I fled to Kenya after political corruption enabled my predecessor to reclaim my position illegally. When I pursued legal recourse, my children's lives were endangered. I arrived with nothing. I cleaned apartments for 4,000 Kenyan Shillings per month. Today, I am a para-counsellor, a mediator-in-training, and a peacebuilding practitioner.

This trajectory is not an autobiography. It is data, theory, and evidence. Pax Lumina asks how we might reimagine gender for peace. I answer: by centering refugee women who have survived structural violence, cultural stigma, and institutional exclusion and who have nonetheless chosen to build peace, one small act at a time.

The tripartite framework of violence distinguishes direct, structural, and cultural violence. My journey reveals all three, but also what it misses. Direct violence accompanied my flight from DRC: threats, intimidation, and fear for my children's lives. Structural violence has defined my existence in Kenya. I face labour exclusion despite having a university degree. I have spent years navigating UNHCR processes. I am unable to fund my children's education.

The most recent and ongoing case involves my 13-year-old son. He played football with twelve Kenyan children. A ball accidentally damaged the side mirror of a car belonging to a landlord who owns three apartments in our compound. Despite collective participation, only my son, the sole refugee child, was prosecuted alongside me. We are being taken to court to pay 101,980 Kenyan Shillings for repairs to the broken side mirror. The twelve Kenyan children faced no consequences.

I remain trapped in this legal process. I cannot afford a lawyer. The threat of imprisonment or deportation, or confiscation of the assets of my home, hangs over me. This case is not closed. It consumes my energy, resources, and hope and destabilizes my family. It is a living example of how the Kenyan justice system treats refugees selectively and without compassion.

Another son, unable to continue university, secured a teaching position at a francophone school. Yet the Kenyan government rejected his work permit without a valid reason, contravening Kenya's Refugee Act and the Shirika Plan. Forced into survival mode, my children now work in lower labour: menial, informal, and exploitative jobs, not by choice but by necessity, to sponsor their education and to support our family.

Cultural violence manifests in stigma. When people learn I am a refugee, I become a burden, not a leader; a victim, not a professional. But the tripartite framework does not capture internalized violence—the deep psychological imprint of sustained exclusion. When I arrived in Kenya, I began to believe I was worthless. I doubted my qualifications, my intelligence, my capacity. The external violence became internal.

This internalized violence requires healing. And healing is peacebuilding. Refugee women are disproportionately subjected to internalized violence because patriarchal structures systematically devalue our agency, our voices, and our leadership. Reimagining gender for peace requires naming this reality.

My commitment to reimagining gender for peace was crystallized through my accompaniment of a Somali refugee woman. Her refugee ID had expired. Her ex-husband, a Kenyan citizen, forced her to obtain a Kenyan citizen ID. Her fingerprints were in the Kenyan system. UNHCR flagged “double registration.” For years, she was turned away. She became undocumented, invisible, vulnerable. Desperation turned to rage. Her anger was pathologized because she is a woman, a refugee, without power.



Refugee women are disproportionately subjected to internalized violence because patriarchal structures systematically devalue our agency, our voices, and our leadership. **Reimagining gender for peace requires naming this reality.**



I took her to the Department of Refugee Services and requested a meeting with the Deputy Commissioner. The process began in May 2023. Corruption did not disappear. But I refused to give up. In December 2023, she received her new refugee ID. She calls me “Mama.” She says, “This woman saved me. She did not see me as a problem. She saw me as her daughter.” Peace does not always begin at a negotiation table. Sometimes, peace begins when one wounded person chooses to see another and says, “You are not alone. I will walk with you.” This is reimagining gender for peace. It refuses the patriarchal assumption that refugee women are passive victims. It insists that refugee women are agents, leaders, and knowledge producers.

Drawing on my journey, I offer the concept of self-resilience as micro-peacebuilding: the capacity to heal from trauma, maintain dignity, and act constructively despite vulnerability. During COVID-19 lockdowns, despite extreme scarcity, other refugees came to me seeking food. I chose to share whatever little I had. I could have hoarded my resources or responded with bitterness. Instead, I chose generosity. This was a deliberate act of peacebuilding at the micro-level. It refused the logic of scarcity and fear. It created social cohesion. It transformed both my community and me.

I call for action. To scholars: recognize refugees’ voices as theory.

To the Government of Kenya: implement the Refugee Act, end selective prosecution, and issue work permits.

To UNHCR and the international community: establish legal aid for refugee families facing selective prosecution. Create a dedicated work-permit support unit. Fund refugee-led organizations like Refugee Women Care, recognizing micro-peacebuilding as legitimate peace work. Include internalized violence in protection frameworks, requiring psychosocial support. Monitor and publicly report judicial discrimination against refugees. Treat refugee women’s auto-ethnographic knowledge as evidence, not anecdote.

To all people of conscience: see refugee women as leaders, not as victims. I am still a refugee. The side mirror case remains unresolved in court. My children’s university fees remain unpaid. But I am also a para-counsellor, a mediator-in-training, the founder of Refugee Women Care, and a Master’s student in Peace Studies. I am both vulnerable and agentic. That simultaneity is not a contradiction it is the reality of refugee peacebuilding. True peacebuilding begins within. The seed of peace is already present in every refugee woman. Our task is to water it. Peace cannot flourish where dignity is denied. Reimagining gender for peace is an ethical imperative, and it begins by following refugee women like me.

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SACRED RESILIENCE EVIDENCE FROM MEXICO



Faced with the government's inability to locate missing persons or identify anonymous bodies, families have become the primary investigators, developing specialized knowledge through their persistent engagement with bureaucratic institutions and forensic practices. **Today, the Movement for Our Disappeared in Mexico brings together more than 60 collectives from Mexico and Central America.**



Mexico currently faces an unprecedented crisis of disappearances, with official records indicating more than 100,000 missing persons.

Although disappearances occurred during the “Dirty War” period of political repression, the numbers increased dramatically after 2006, when President Felipe Calderón launched the “War on Drugs,” leading to escalating violence, homicides, and disappearances.

Scholars argue that these two historical periods form a continuum in which disappearance evolved from a state instrument into a practice adopted by multiple actors operating with tacit government consent. This complex phenomenon has been characterized as a “disappearing apparatus” (Robledo & Hernández, 2019), in which counterinsurgency logic intersects with extreme violence perpetrated by a range of actors.

Unlike traditional enforced disappearances, which primarily targeted political dissidents, the contemporary crisis affects a far more diverse range of victims, including professionals forced into labor, migrants, Indigenous peoples, women, journalists, activists, and even state agents. The perpetrators are equally diverse, including state security forces, police at different levels, military personnel, and criminal organizations acting either independently or in collaboration. Their motives range from dismantling social movements to sexual exploitation, territorial dispossession, human trafficking, forced labor, revenge, and struggles for power.

Faced with the government's inability to locate missing persons or identify anonymous bodies, families have become the primary investigators, developing specialized knowledge through their persistent engagement with bureaucratic institutions and forensic practices. Today, the Movement for Our Disappeared in Mexico brings together more than 60 collectives from Mexico and Central America.

Various sectors of society support the demands of these collectives, including religious communities from different faith traditions, such as Catholics, Christians, Evangelicals, and, of course, the Jesuits. Their initiatives include providing legal services, participating in truth mechanisms, producing citizen guides, preparing reports on clandestine graves, and monitoring disappearances through university observatories.



It is also worth noting that relatives' search collectives, such as the National Search Brigade, have incorporated a religious dimension into their work, recognizing the emotional and spiritual needs of victims and their families throughout the search process. Since 2023, following the murder of two Jesuit priests in the Sierra Tarahumara of northern Mexico, the Mexican Episcopate has convened the National Dialogues for Peace. This initiative has since evolved into the National Network for Peace, which coordinates local peace-building efforts across the country.

Sister Dolores's Accompaniment of Victims' Relatives

In this context, it is evident that religious practices have been incorporated by searching mothers into their daily individual and collective actions. These practices are often accompanied by religious personnel, especially Catholic nuns. In February 2025, Paulina had the opportunity to interview Sister Dolores, a Carmelite nun of the Sacred Heart in Guadalajara, Jalisco. Sister Dolores directs Casa Luisita, a multifunctional community center that serves as a temporary shelter for families and collectives searching for missing loved ones.

At Casa Luisita, relatives of victims can access psychological therapy and spiritual accompaniment while connecting with other searching mothers and families. These religious practices provide comfort to victims' relatives and foster a communal sense of hope that is often transformed into concrete actions through which they express their claims.

This connection between religious practices and the political activation of victims has not only been observed in practice by Sister Dolores, but has also been studied and documented in Mexico, Colombia, Spain, Argentina, and among immigrant communities. Studies confirm that religious practices help victims shape collective action strategies by creating support networks, forging shared identities, and providing institutional support. For example, in Coahuila (López Pérez, 2023), Catholic ceremonies are adapted to integrate civic demands within a framework of psychological and legal support, while in Spain (Páez et al., 2005), collective rituals following attacks reinforce social ties and reduce feelings of loneliness. In other contexts—such as Argentina (Jara, 2020) and among Mayan immigrants in the United States (Steigenga et al., 2017)—religious practices help articulate individual suffering into a shared identity and a platform for political mobilization.

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Based on this literature, religious and spiritual practices foster collective action through: (a) the creation of social support networks, (b) the formation of collective identity, (c) institutional support for mobilization, (d) the religious framing of grievances, (e) coping with trauma and suffering, and (f) the maintenance of cultural identity. In the following section, we revisit the interview conducted with Sister Dolores Ramírez to identify these six dimensions through her testimony and the accompaniment work she carries out at Casa Luisita.

a) Creation of Social Support Networks

Casa Luisita functions both as a meeting hub for numerous collectives and as a temporary shelter for families during their search journeys. Experienced mothers refer newcomers to the center, creating peer networks that share knowledge of activism and strategies for navigating the justice system. Monthly networking gatherings further strengthen these connections, providing a solid foundation for collective mobilization.

b) Formation of Collective Identity

Through shared spiritual experiences, “searching mothers” develop a collective identity that transcends denominational differences. Whether Catholic, Anglican, Evangelical, or Pentecostal, families are united by their shared suffering and determination.



Prayer practices that incorporate the names of their missing relatives are particularly meaningful, reinforcing their common purpose and collective identity.

c) Institutional Support for Mobilization

The Carmelite religious order provides crucial institutional infrastructure through Casa Luisita, offering comprehensive support that includes group Gestalt psychotherapy sessions and spiritual accompaniment. This



institutional backing creates a stable and safe platform from which families can organize their search efforts and advocacy work.

d) Religious Framing of Grievances

Sister Dolores describes how families initially express anger toward God but gradually transform their understanding of God's presence. This religious framing helps situate their suffering within a broader spiritual narrative, giving meaning to their struggle and motivating them to continue their efforts despite institutional obstacles such as impunity and corruption.

e) Coping with Trauma and Suffering

Prayer, Eucharistic celebrations, and solidarity with the relatives of other victims give new meaning to suffering. Sister Dolores observes that families discover God's presence “especially during periods of deep sorrow, depression, and when authorities ignore their pleas,” enabling them to persevere through trauma and sustain their search efforts.

f) Maintenance of Cultural Identity

Religious rituals provide continuity with cultural traditions, helping families preserve

their identities despite profound disruption. The spiritual dimension becomes “a pillar of strength” that sustains cultural connections while channeling moral outrage and love into peace-building actions. These efforts are driven by indignation over both the disappearances and the criminalization they have experienced at the hands of governmental authorities. This case illustrates how spiritual practices not only provide emotional comfort but also serve as powerful catalysts for sustained collective action in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Conclusions

The evidence from Sister Dolores's accompaniment of searching mothers in Mexico reveals how spiritual practices transcend mere religious expression to become powerful catalysts for collective action in response to the country's disappearance crisis. Through Casa Luisita, religious practices facilitate the transformation of grief into political mobilization and contribute to the emotional support of victims, transforming feelings of anger and sadness into hope.

Religious accompaniment provides an institutional infrastructure through safe spaces that enable sustained networks and collective mobilization.



Within these safe spaces, victims share both emotional support and practical knowledge for navigating complex bureaucratic systems. These shared spiritual experiences also forge a collective identity that transcends denominational differences, uniting diverse families under the common identity of “searching mothers.”

On the other hand, religious framing helps families recontextualize their suffering within broader spiritual narratives, providing meaning that motivates continued action despite institutional obstacles. Specifically, spiritual practices offer crucial mechanisms for coping with trauma, enabling families to persevere through periods of profound sorrow and official neglect.

This convergence of the sacred and the political creates a form of “sacred resilience” that sustains collective action even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. By transforming private grief into concrete peace-building actions, these spiritual dimensions of resistance offer powerful resources for marginalized communities seeking justice in contexts of extreme violence and institutional failure.

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REAFFIRMING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PEACEBUILDING

Women have historically played a major role in building peace because they are invariably the first responders in the effort to keep families together during times of conflict and chaos, **protecting the most vulnerable—the children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities—from harm and ensuring their survival.**



Peace is more than the absence of war or the cessation of hostilities between belligerent groups. It is a state of harmony among people living together, one that is essential for the rule of law, the delivery of justice, the advancement of progress, and the well-being of communities. Given the central role it plays in human flourishing, the peace we seek must be durable and inclusive, touching and transforming every life.

Women have historically played a major role in building peace because they are invariably the first responders in the effort to keep families together during times of conflict and chaos, protecting the most vulnerable—the children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities—from harm and ensuring their survival. It must also be recognised that women have often borne the gravest consequences of violence and the traumas of war, including sexual violence, because they are perceived as symbols of the communities engaged in conflict. In other words, women have the greatest stake in ensuring that the violence which tears apart the fabric of everyday life is brought to an end.

Examples abound of the exemplary role that women have played in times of conflict—as professionals, as thinkers, and as ordinary people who found themselves called to extraordinary roles. Most of these heroes—we might call them “she-roes”—remain unknown, but a few names have broken through the walls of public amnesia: women such as Clara Barton, known as the “Angel of the Battlefield” during the American Civil War; the renowned Florence Nightingale; and Edith Cavell, who treated soldiers from both sides of the battle lines during the brutal First World War.

Many others shaped public opinion through their writing and activism. There was Bertha von Suttner, the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (1905), whose novel *Lay Down Your Arms!* was inspired by her experiences of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878. There was the community-builder Jane Addams, whose words, “The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life,” continue to resonate across the world. Then there was Eleanor Roosevelt, the first Chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights, which went on to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

The irony is that despite the many contributions of persons such as these, women have long been denied a role at the high table of policy making or recognized internationally as peace-builders. In fact, it was only in the year 2000 that the United Nations Security Council came up with a resolution that recognized these contributions and reaffirmed the important



role women could potentially play in the “prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction”. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 urged member states to perceive women’s “equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security”; mandated the protection of women from gender-based violence; and demanded the equal participation of women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. It also recognized their role in humanitarian initiatives after the conflict.

Women’s movements across the world have argued that militarism and militarisation are inescapably connected to the power-centric structures of society. In stating this principle, they made sure to avoid the trap of essentialising the female as possessing certain inherent characteristics like kindness and domesticity which make them “natural peace-makers”, since women too, if they are invested in a violence-prone, power-driven social order can prove as militaristic and violent as their male counterparts.

In this reading, the key to understanding conflict and the way it plays out is the strong link that exists between power and patriarchy, which can be defined as a social system that accords men the moral and social authority to exercise domination not only within the family but also within the larger political, economic and social universe. It follows, therefore, that if we are to “reimagine gender for peace”, it would necessarily require, at the most fundamental level, the dismantling of patriarchy.

There are other aspects of the peacebuilding project that also need to be flagged. For peacebuilding to be sustainable and firmly anchored, it has to be a multi-layered process involving multiple actors, linking multiple campaigns, and challenging well-entrenched narratives that define “national interest” as a narrow construct constantly sustained by manufactured enmities, whether national or transnational.

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Within India, for instance, we are living through a period in which minorities have been systematically targeted and Othered, and where internal hatreds both feed on and fuel hostilities across the border, which, in turn, can erupt into full-blown war at any moment.

In April 2025, an attack on tourists in Pahalgam, Kashmir, by terror operatives allegedly supported by Pakistan, led to India retaliating by launching Operation Sindoor, a military strike against Pakistan. The ensuing confrontation resulted in a tense 88-hour military conflagration. Within days, feminists in both Pakistan and India were among the first to call for a ceasefire. In a joint statement, they strongly condemned both the terror attack in Pahalgam and India's retaliatory military action. While expressing deep concern over the fatalities in both India and Pakistan,

the statement observed that war has no winners and that its only real beneficiaries are arms dealers, while women, children and marginalised communities bear its heaviest costs.

This is not the first time that women from India and Pakistan have stood up and spoken out when militaristic rhetoric emanating from New Delhi and Rawalpindi, amplified by the mainstream media in both countries, has threatened the stability of a region comprising two nuclear-armed states with a combined population of roughly 1.76 billion.

Before her passing in 2023, one feminist voice that touched hearts and minds in both countries was that of the late Kamla Bhasin. Drawing upon shared cultural traditions, she worked tirelessly to forge friendships among the women of the region while advocating a borderless South Asia. Nothing captured her commitment to peace and solidarity among people more powerfully than a statement widely attributed to her: "I'm not a wall that divides. I'm a crack in that wall."

Reimagining gender for peace is about widening that crack in a wall of hostility.

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Pax Lumina 7(4)/2026/43-47



REIMAGINING WOMEN'S AGENCY IN PEACEBUILDING IN KASHMIR



For decades, the scholarly and media discourse on Kashmir has remained fixated on geopolitical contestation and high political stalemate, leaving little room for the quieter, more transformative story unfolding at the grassroots. Kashmiri women have appeared in these accounts primarily as silent sufferers of conflict, defined by loss, displacement, and dispossession. This framing mostly by academics and creative writers has produced a significant analytical blind spot. It has obscured the reality that Kashmiri women have been, and continue to be, the active architects of peace and stability: building livelihoods, negotiating governance, educating generations and weaving the familial and social fabric that sustains communities through turmoil.

To re-imagine women for peace in Kashmir requires a corrective sociological and feminist framing. Women constitute the substructure of peace in the region, not as passive beneficiaries of top-down reform, but as dynamic agents of grassroots transformation reshaping governance, economy, and socio-political life across urban and rural Kashmir.

Kashmiri women though not a monolith have functioned as de facto peace agents through the sustained performance of what feminist political economists term social reproductive labor: the daily maintenance of households, educational continuity, and community welfare networks that constitute the invisible infrastructure of peace and stability. Operating within and occasionally against patriarchal constraints, Kashmiri mothers and sisters at the domestic front have emerged as quiet peacemakers, using familial bonds to dissuade youth from stone-pelting and other militant and terror activities.

Through emotional appeals, community shaming, and household pressure, they channel grief into restraint thereby transforming domestic spaces into sites of resistance against the cycle of violence, while navigating the complex politics of turmoil situation of decades. They have preserved intergenerational knowledge, managed cross-community kinship ties (Muslim–Pandit biradari) and sustained local economies through artisanal production, agriculture and horticulture and informal trade, thereby creating what might be termed quotidian peace, a normalized social order that persisted despite macro political volatility in the recent past.

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Drawing upon Carol Gilligan's ethics of care and Sara Ruddick's maternal thinking, this peacebuilding is neither passive nor apolitical. It represents a gendered epistemology of conflict resolution rooted in relationality, preservation, and the prioritization of human flourishing.

The dividends of this women-sustained peace are tangible. Households supported by women's income exhibit higher rates of children's school enrollment, particularly for girls, and lower vulnerability to cycles of retaliatory violence. Women's stewardship of educational continuity has produced a generation of literate, vocationally trained youth increasingly seeking livelihoods in entrepreneurship, civil services, and professional sectors. Artisanal and agricultural cooperatives, SHGs etc, maintained by women have preserved Kashmir's cultural heritage, including Pashmina weaving, walnut woodcraft, and saffron cultivation, while integrating these products into national and global markets, generating foreign exchange and reinforcing the region's economic stake in stability.

Furthermore, women's management of cross-community kinship networks has sustained interfaith sociality in local contexts, preventing the hardening of communal boundaries. In health and nutrition domains, women's prioritization of maternal and child welfare (credit goes to local ASHA workers) has contributed to declining infant mortality and improved public health indicators, outcomes that correlate robustly with societies' capacities for nonviolent conflict resolution. The only major concern now is declining fertility in Jammu and Kashmir which again needs women's serious intervention to get back to normal levels.



Kashmiri women have increasingly entered civil administration and entrepreneurship, transforming individual survival strategies into collective success stories. Being in administration they are healing the community in whole lot of ways and have become role models not just for young girls and other women but youth in general. Women-led enterprises in food processing, organic agriculture, digital marketing of handicrafts, and hospitality have proliferated, with many leveraging e-commerce platforms (even instagram and other social media platforms) to access markets beyond the Valley. These entrepreneurs function as agents of positive peace, not merely preventing violence, but actively constructing the social conditions for flourishing. By generating employment for other women, mentoring younger entrepreneurs, and reinvesting profits in community welfare, they have created virtuous cycles of empowerment.

In the security domain, women of the Jammu and Kashmir Police have emerged as visible symbols of institutional integration and community trust, serving in traffic management and community welfare and policing with professionalism that bridges the gap between State authority and civilian life. Their presence has normalized the image of women in public order roles, inspiring younger generations to view State service as an honourable vocation.

Simultaneously, Kashmiri women have taken a leading role in combating the region's escalating drug crisis, organizing community awareness campaigns, establishing de-addiction support groups, and collaborating with health authorities to identify at-risk youth. Through mohalla-level counseling and school-based interventions, they have transformed the private anguish of addiction into a collective public health mission, demonstrating that women's peacebuilding extends beyond the political to encompass the biological and social survival of the community itself.

Perhaps, most significantly, Kashmiri women have entered mainstream politics in an unprecedented manner, fundamentally altering the region's political ecology. Beyond their presence in national and regional party structures, a new generation has emerged as grassroots activists and peace advocates, organizing at the ground level, mobilizing voters around development rather than divisive identity claims, and contesting elections as independent candidates or through community-based platforms. Right from Panchayat elections to DDC chairpersons they have marked their visibility clear. They are playing their roles by heading the ministry of education, important Boards like J&K Khadi and Village Industries Board (JKVIB) and faith institutions like Jammu and Kashmir Wakf Board where they have streamlined the system by checking corruption and mal-function to a considerable level.



These women are not merely token representatives. They are agenda-setters who have shifted local political discourse toward governance delivery, women's safety, and economic opportunity. Women's collectives and civil society forums have become spaces where inter-community dialogue is nurtured, where grievances are channelled into constitutional processes, and where the vocabulary of politics is being gradually recast from secessionist tendencies to developmental aspirations.

Of particular sociological significance is the emergence of Kashmiri millennial women as architects of intergenerational peace. Educated in India's expanding higher education system and connected to global discourses through digital media, this cohort has made the education and ethical formation of their children a deliberate peace building strategy. They prioritize enrollment in quality schools, invest in vocational training, and cultivate in their children peace competencies, namely critical thinking, emotional regulation, and cross-cultural communication skills that inoculate against extremist narratives.

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Through parenting practices that emphasize dialogue over authority and through their own modeling of professional achievement and civic engagement, these mothers are raising a generation for whom conflict is not an inherited destiny, but a rejected option. Their domestic spaces have become sites of habitus transformation, where the dispositions of peace are cultivated through daily practice rather than political manifesto.

Beyond these domains, women-led religious study circles have reinterpreted teachings to emphasize compassion and nonviolent conflict resolution, offering theological counter-narratives to radicalization. Women's agricultural cooperatives have revived sustainable farming practices, creating food sovereignty that reduces vulnerability to external economic shocks. In the cultural sphere, women have preserved Kashmiri Sufi music, folk traditions, and oral histories, practices that reinforce a syncretic regional identity resistant to communal polarization. Women's legal literacy initiatives have empowered rural communities to navigate property rights and welfare entitlements through constitutional channels. Environmental conservation groups led by women have protected the Valley's water bodies and forests, framing ecological stewardship as inseparable from community peace. Finally, women's mental health and trauma counselling collectives have addressed the psychological wounds of prolonged conflict, creating spaces of healing that prevent the intergenerational transmission of grievance.

In this multifaceted transformation, Kashmiri women have not only changed the conflict narrative; they have rewritten it, demonstrating that the most durable peace is built not through grand political settlements alone, but through the accumulated agency of women who refuse to let their communities be defined by anything less than their fullest potential.

The task for policymakers and scholars is therefore twofold. First, they must render this gendered labor visible within conventional peace metrics, which systematically discount reproductive and informal economic work. Second, they must amplify it through institutional investment in women's education, political training, credit access, and market linkages. Peace, re-imagined through a gendered lens, is not the absence of armed confrontation. It is the presence of women's agency in every domain of social life: governance, economy, education, administration and justice. In Kashmir, that presence is not a future aspiration. It is an already existing reality, awaiting only the recognition it deserves.

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Pax Lumina 7(4)/2026/48-52

THE **OVERT** AND **COVERT PATTERNS** IN **MARITAL CONFLICTS** OF A **PATRIARCHAL** **SOCIETY**



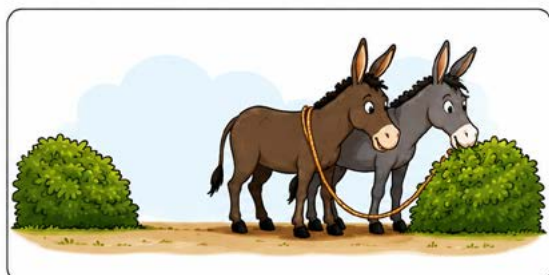
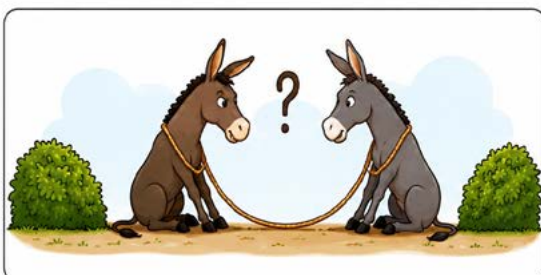
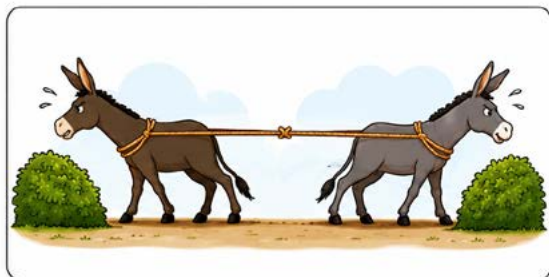
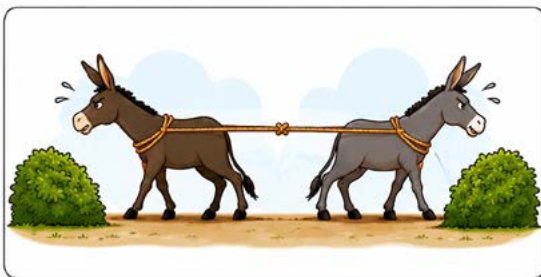
The lesson is simple: conflict is not a war to be won, but a problem to be solved together through creativity and cooperation. This, however, requires a willingness to listen respectfully to one another and to engage in genuine dialogue—a process that is possible only in an equal relationship, or, in exceptional cases, when the more powerful partner is genuinely virtuous or the less powerful partner is sufficiently assertive. Justice and peace, however, cannot depend on the chance that individuals will be virtuous or assertive.

Conflicts are an inherent aspect of human interaction, arising from the uniqueness of individuals—each with distinct values, beliefs, attitudes, opinions, interests, needs, and wants. Conflict occurs when these differences meet. Within marriage, the likelihood of conflict is heightened, as these differences surface repeatedly in decisionmaking and daily life. Conflicts are often perceived as unpleasant and unwelcome; yet they are not inherently detrimental. When approached constructively, conflict can foster deeper understanding and strengthen relationships.

HR trainers often recount the story of two goats whose heads are tied together with a rope. A heap of grass is placed on each side. Each goat pulls toward the heap of grass on its own side, straining its neck and causing pain to both. Eventually, they pause, communicate, walk together to one side, eat the grass there, and then proceed together to the other heap.

In a patriarchal society, inequality is embedded in the spousal relationship. Patrilocal residence, patrilineal inheritance, the dowry system, and low female workforce participation strip women of property rights and jeopardize their financial autonomy. Structural and cultural factors attribute, promote, and reinforce gender-specific characteristics and behaviours—aggressiveness in men and submissiveness in women. Both women and men internalize these values. Male domination and female submissiveness are normalized and justified through institutions such as the family, media, art, religion, government, and law. Men often resort to violence as a shortcut to maintain power and control over their wives. Such marriages are defined more by power dynamics than by genuine love. In such situations, peace remains elusive unless there is structural and systemic change.

Patriarchal power in marriage manifests through both overt and covert patterns of behaviour that shape the dynamics of conflict. Overt patterns



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are visible and explicit, such as domestic violence, financial control, restrictions on mobility and social interaction, and direct verbal and physical dominance. In contrast, covert patterns operate subtly and are often normalized and justified within cultural expectations. These include the unequal division of household labour, emotional manipulation, and the silencing of dissent under the guise of tradition.

Max Weber defined power as the ability to impose one's will despite resistance. Patriarchy institutionalizes this by granting husbands culturally legitimized authority over their wives. Consequently, the outcomes of conflict are shaped not by fairness but by fear: husbands fear the loss of authority, while wives fear domination.

The animal metaphor conflict styles popularized by David W. Johnson are: shark (dominating), teddy bear (accommodating), tortoise (withdrawing), fox (compromising), and owl (collaborating). Given the patriarchal socialization they receive, men have a tendency to resort to the shark style during marital conflicts, while women tend to adopt the tortoise style (provided both exhibit the respective aggressive and submissive behaviours dictated by patriarchy). The teddy bear style also becomes a viable option for wives. The shark suppresses. The tortoise represses. The teddy bear manipulates. The two combinations—shark–tortoise and shark–teddy bear—prevent win-win solutions, leaving little scope for a healthy relationship to develop. Dissent is silenced. Wives, deprived of equal power, often respond with passive



aggression—the only outlet available to them. Both approaches corrode the health of the family. Resentment builds up, amounting to a ticking timebomb waiting to explode when triggered.

The combination of an aggressive wife and a submissive husband is an exception, in which case the behaviours adopted during conflict may be reversed. In many societies, however, these “gender-inappropriate” behaviours tend to be steered back into typically patriarchal patterns through criticism and ridicule. This explains why dictionaries contain expressions such as “hen-pecked husband” but no corresponding expression such as “cock-pecked wife.” In some instances, to avoid such ridicule, hen-pecked husbands disguise their submissiveness through displays of despotic domination.

In a diluted patriarchal setting, couples often adopt the fox style of conflict management, which allows for negotiation but results in partial gains and losses for both partners. Achieving a genuine win-win outcome, however, requires the owl style, characterized by mutual respect and constructive dialogue. In the parable of the two goats, such an owl approach was possible because both engaged in respectful conversation and cooperation. Within patriarchy, by contrast, this pattern of conflict resolution is

largely unattainable. At best, a third party may intervene with a ceasefire formula or temporary adjustments. Under patriarchal constraints, conflict transformation—where differences are openly acknowledged and transparently addressed, ultimately leading to a relationship grounded in love and mutual respect—remains impossible.

Men, too, are victims of patriarchy. It burdens husbands with the performance of masculinity, compelling them to demonstrate dominance in order to preserve dignity and social standing. This performance is exhausting and corrosive.

Rare exceptions exist—modern husbands who embrace equality and couples whose personalities defy patriarchal dictates. In such cases, conflicts can be resolved collaboratively, fostering win-win outcomes. But these remain exceptions within a system that rewards conformity. It is nevertheless encouraging to observe a growing shift among Gen Z towards greater equality.

Kamala Bhasin’s insight is crucial: the opposite of patriarchy is not matriarchy, but equality. Gender equality is a state in which individuals of all genders interact on the basis of equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities, free from domination, discrimination, and exploitation.

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Without structural and cultural change, family counselling and legal interventions remain superficial, offering ceasefires and analgesic-type solutions rather than genuine transformation. Domestic violence laws may provide temporary relief, but they do not dismantle patriarchy, which in turn lies at the root of preventing marital conflicts to get transformed into a relationship marked by trust and understanding.

True peace, as Johan Galtung emphasized, requires equality, justice, and liberty. Patriarchy denies these essential conditions, making genuine marital peace impossible. Conflict transformation—that is, transforming conflict into a positive relationship, rather than merely managing or resolving it—must be the goal.

This requires democratizing the social ecosystem. Institutions that once propagated patriarchy—religion, media, education, and law—must now become champions of equality. What is needed is the development of critical consciousness, strong convictions about equality, and sustained collective effort. Men must recognize the cruelty of patriarchy, embrace alternatives to violence, and cultivate peaceful homes. Counselling must incorporate principles of equality, guiding couples toward democratic approaches to conflict transformation. Needless to say, those who populate these institutions

must themselves possess the attitudes necessary for such transformation. The representation of women in positions of power within institutions is crucial. Yet it is not enough merely to have persons with female bodies occupying these positions; what is essential is that they possess an egalitarian mindset.

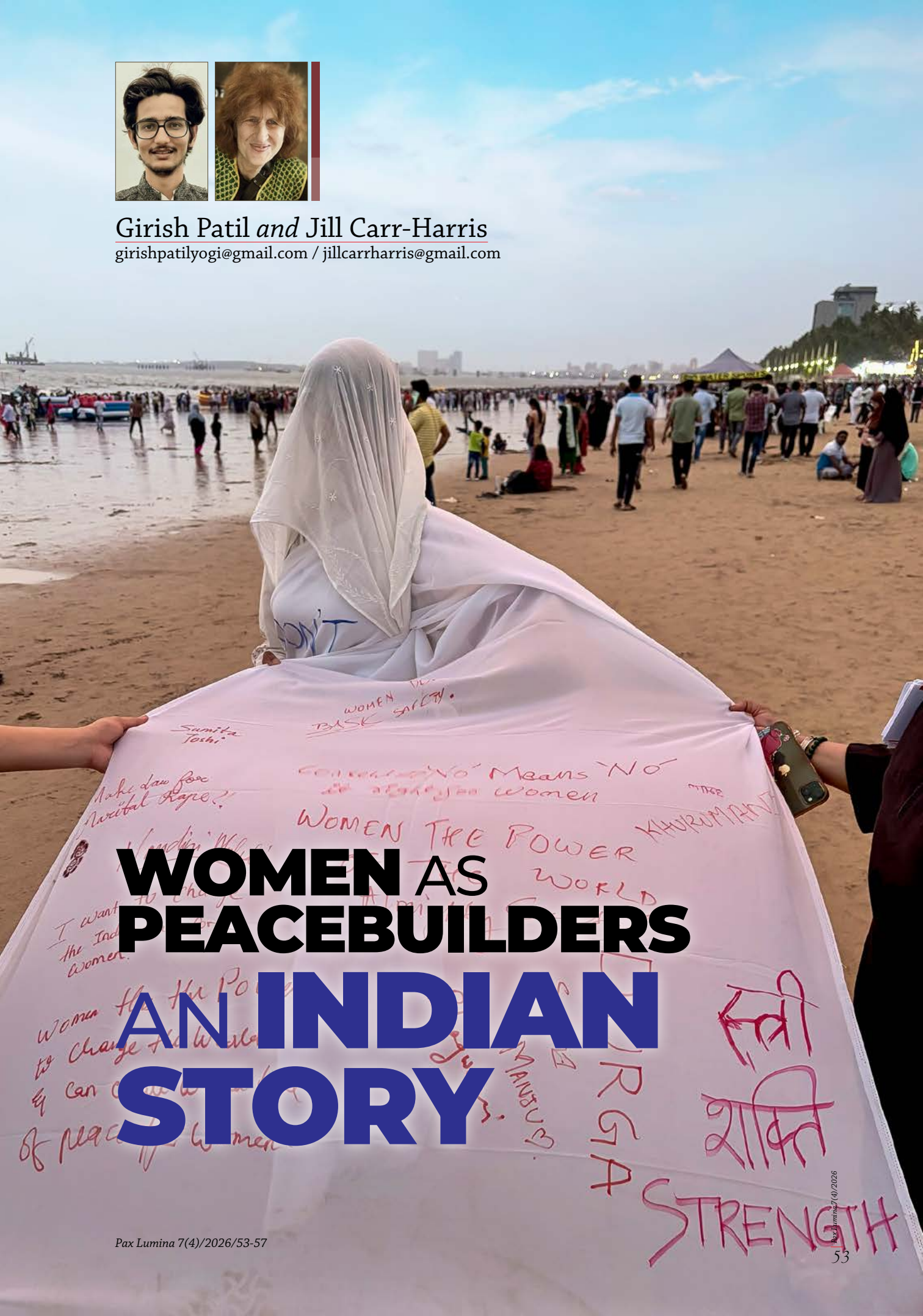
The way forward lies in dismantling patriarchal structures and fostering equality. Only in democratized homes and societies can conflicts be transformed into opportunities for deeper relationships and authentic peace. Patriarchy is not merely a curse to women—it is a curse to men, families, and society at large. Equality alone offers the antidote.

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**WOMEN AS
PEACEBUILDERS
AN INDIAN
STORY**

The Women Against Violence campaign was, in practice, a response to this tension, **an attempt to place women not at the margins of peace processes as consultees but at the centre as architects.**



On 19 April 2026, a woman walked slowly along Juhu Beach in Mumbai in a white saree, her face veiled, a single question written across the veil: Why are you looking away?

The pallu was covered in words, words that women carry and words expressing what has not yet been achieved, some slashed out in red. Strangers were invited to add their own word. By sunset, the saree carried the words of strangers, particularly women, who were drawn to write.

This was one moment from a fifteen-day national campaign—Women Against Violence, Yudh Nahi, Shanti (Not War, Peace)—organised by Peacebuilders Forum across India from 17 April to 1 May 2026. It is perhaps the most precise image of what reimagining gender for peace looks like when it leaves the seminar room and into the world. The question on the veil was addressed equally to bystanders on a beach and to institutions of global governance that have spent twenty-six years looking away from the evidence before them.

The Normative Promise and Its Persistent Gap

In October 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, the first resolution to recognise women not only as victims in conflict but also as essential participants in conflict resolution, calling for women's participation at every level of peace processes.

Twenty-six years later, the gap between this promise and institutional reality remains vast. In their 2024 study *Governing the Feminist Peace*, Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd argue that the WPS agenda has been both vital and failing: vital because it created a normative space that did not exist before and failing because it has been incorporated into institutions without challenging the patriarchal structures that produce conflict in the first place. Women enter the room but do not change what the room decides.

The Women Against Violence campaign was, in practice, a response to this tension, an attempt to place women not at the margins of peace processes as consultees, but at the centre as architects.

An Older Tradition

The framework of 1325 is recent. The tradition that it attempts to formalise in India is not. Women were not mobilised by Gandhi into the freedom struggle as a gesture of inclusion; they were already satyagrahis in their own right, facing imprisonment as a matter of course. In 1973, the women of Chamoli wrapped their arms around trees to resist commercial felling, with the Chipko movement demonstrating that those most dependent on natural resources were also most capable of defending them nonviolently. In 1992, rural women in Nellore, Andhra Pradesh, shut down liquor shops through collective action, forcing a State ban on arrack within months, using nothing more than collective moral presence.



These movements share a structural logic: women act from their proximity to the consequences of conflict and dispossession, through nonviolent presence rather than force, achieving what formal institutions frequently cannot.

Jai Jagat and A Living Lineage

In 2019, P.V. Rajagopal and Jill Carr-Harris of Ekta Parishad led the Jai Jagat 2020 global walk for a just world from Delhi to Geneva.

Among its steadfast participants were women, farmers, Adivasi leaders, and domestic workers. They did not join the march. They carried it. It is from this lineage that the Peacebuilders Forum emerged, and Women Against Violence continues this legacy.

The Campaign: Praxis on the Ground

The Peacebuilders Forum was founded in 2024. At its fifth gathering in Jalgaon in March 2026, it launched the Women Against Violence campaign, beginning at Rajghat, Gandhi's samadhi, and concluding in Mumbai on International Workers' Day.

The campaign advanced four demands: an immediate ceasefire in West Asia; women's full participation at every peace table, not merely as observers; an end to daily structural violence against women; and a personal recommitment to nonviolence. These map directly onto the WPS framework: the campaign did not ask for women's inclusion in existing processes; it insisted the processes themselves be reimagined.

Underlying these was a further conviction: that peace cannot be separated from economic dignity. This campaign treated the peace economy, livelihoods, and fair wages as conditions of



The campaign advanced four demands: an immediate ceasefire in West Asia; **women's full participation at every peace table, not merely as observers**; an end to daily structural violence against women; and a personal recommitment to nonviolence.



nonviolence itself, and as a site of action. A gathering of women entrepreneurs on peace economy in Madurai, or a listening circle with domestic workers on the price of cooking gas in Delhi, made the argument concrete: where wages collapse, the conditions for violence multiply; where women have economic agency, they gain the standing to act as peacebuilders rather than merely as conflict's subjects.

The Forum did not prescribe action; it gave the message and trusted the method. In Delhi, twelve domestic workers sat in a listening circle, named their group 'Awaaz' before beginning, and connected wars far away to the cost of their cooking gas, exactly what Resolution 1325 calls for, and rarely gets: working women's voices at the centre of a conversation about global conflict. Across twelve states and twenty organisations, not one day of the campaign passed without something happening somewhere.

"Peace cannot be built at the level of states alone. It has to be built at the level of the people who live closest to conflict and pay the highest price for its absence." — Jill Carr-Harris

Toward an Indian Model

The campaign's decentralised form was not a logistical compromise but a principled choice: the conviction that the means are as important as the ends. A peace movement replicating hierarchical structures in its own organising is not reimagining gender; it is reproducing it.

There was a further purpose: to build the agency and leadership of the women who organised each event—not as a by-product of participation but as its central aim. A campaign run by external facilitators would have taught women to participate in a programme. Trusting local organisations to design their own responses taught women that they could shape the terms of their own peacebuilding. The domestic workers in Delhi were not translated by an outside expert; they named their own group and set their own questions. This is the difference between mobilisation and movement-building. Mobilisation asks people to show up. Movement-building asks them to lead.



India's tradition, from the freedom struggle to Chipko to the anti-arrack movement to Jai Jagat, is not one of women awaiting institutional permission. It is a tradition of acting from proximity and moral authority, grounded in the conviction that peace is a condition communities build rather than a gift power bestows a civilisational resource the WPS framework does not yet know how to measure. What is needed now is not more resolutions but more trust.

The woman on the beach is still walking. The saree still fills with words. But twenty-six years after Resolution 1325, we are closer to the answer. Not because institutions have changed enough, but because women—from Juhu to Awaaz, from Chipko to Jai Jagat—have never stopped building it.

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Pax Lumina 7(4)/2026/58-62

TOWARDS GENDER JUSTICE

LESSONS FROM CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY



We surveyed 42 participants and found that straight students reported a greater sense of belonging than students of other sexual orientations; cisgender students reported a stronger sense of belonging than genderqueer or questioning students; White students, the majority racial group on campus, reported a greater sense of belonging than BIPOC students; and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported a lower sense of belonging than their peers.



A core Jesuit philosophy at Boston College is “Men and Women for Others,” which challenges students to use their talents in service of marginalized communities and the common good. This service-oriented ethos, highlighted for prospective students, is what drew me to apply: local volunteer opportunities, the PULSE Programme—a course that integrates theology and philosophy with eight to ten hours of weekly community service—and the Arrupe International Immersion Programme, which combines service and justice education through experiences coordinated by Campus Ministry. These service-centered programmes cultivate perspective, empathy, and inclusion.

Boston College inspired me with its commitment to serving all people; yet its own language and institutional practices contradict that promise by leaving little room for genderqueer students. A recurring pattern I have observed, whether in educational institutions or in politics and law, is that when gender justice is not embedded as an institutional priority, the responsibility is shifted onto informal networks and individuals, creating a gap in trust, accountability, and meaningful inclusion.

Gender intersects with other identities, including class, race, and sexuality, to shape distinct experiences of oppression and privilege. This matters because the trust and accountability gap is not experienced uniformly; rather, it is compounded for students who occupy multiple marginalized identities. In the Lynch School of Education and Human Development’s Experience, Reflection, and Action (ERA) Programme, all first-year students complete a research project.

My group examined the sense of belonging among marginalized student populations, recognizing that a lack of belonging carries significant risks, including social isolation and mental health challenges. We surveyed 42 participants and found that straight students reported a greater sense of belonging than students of other sexual orientations; cisgender students reported a stronger sense of belonging than genderqueer or questioning students; White students, the majority racial group on campus, reported a greater sense of belonging than BIPOC students; and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported a lower sense of belonging than their peers.

These findings reveal more than a data gap—they expose a support gap. Boston College provides support for LGBTQ+ students primarily through the Thea Bowman AHANA and Intercultural Center (BAIC), yet much of this work remains



student-led through initiatives such as the Pride Peers Mentorship Programme and the Queer Leadership Council (QLC). The QLC, the student government body representing queer student interests, submitted a comprehensive proposal for an on-campus LGBTQ+ Resource Center. The university rejected the proposal, citing Jesuit values and limited campus space. Consequently, students are left advocating for a place at the table that they were never fully invited to occupy.

The course Peaceful Ethics: Social Action Leadership Methods further exposed me to the consequences of institutional inaction. When institutions fail to respond, exclusion fosters isolation and oppression, and in extreme cases, as with femicide in Mexico, it can contribute to loss of life. I do not equate Boston College's exclusion of genderqueer students with the severity of femicide; rather, I draw attention to a shared institutional mechanism of exclusion. Both reveal patterns regarding who is excluded from decision-making, albeit on vastly different scales.

This became especially evident during my final project on femicide in Mexico—the gender-motivated killing of women, often perpetrated by intimate partners or family members. The problem is particularly acute in cartel-controlled regions such as Jalisco and Guerrero, where underreporting is widespread because of weak judicial systems. Many affected areas are also border regions characterized by low-income factory employment, where violence is used as a tool of intimidation and control. Although urban areas tend to report more cases because they possess greater institutional resources, rural communities often experience severe underreporting due to limited resources and stronger cartel influence.

Excluding those closest to the problem—grassroots organizers and survivors—inevitably weakens policy implementation. Mexico has developed numerous strategies to address femicide, yet violence persists. The Wilson Center's 2022 National Forum on Femicide launched the initiative Endangering Safety: Addressing Femicide in Mexico to bring together key stakeholders to discuss solutions. However, noticeably absent from the forum were grassroots organizers and survivors, whose lived experiences provide the deepest knowledge and strongest community trust necessary for effective policy and advocacy.



While femicide is a complex and multifaceted problem, one underlying challenge is the growing lack of public trust in governmental promises that are not matched by sustained action, resources, or accountability. **This erosion of trust also discourages reporting, placing even greater pressure on already under-resourced grassroots organizations.**



A similar pattern exists at Boston College. The students who report the lowest sense of belonging—genderqueer and questioning students—continue to rely primarily on student-led initiatives, such as the Queer Leadership Council, rather than sustained institutional support. In both contexts, those most affected are often those least included in institutional decision-making.

This exclusion generates a profound lack of trust. When grassroots organizers and survivors are excluded, policies remain largely symbolic, offering little real protection beyond statements of concern. Likewise, Boston College has been criticized by students and faculty for failing to uphold its Jesuit commitment to Cura

Personalis—care for the whole person—in matters affecting gender and LGBTQ+ communities. The university has faced particular criticism for restrictive housing policies affecting transgender students, denying accommodations requested by transgender students and their advocates on the grounds of Jesuit and Catholic values. An institution that promises to care for the whole person ultimately undermines that commitment when its policies exclude those most in need of support.

A comparable contradiction exists in Mexico's implementation of the Gender Violence Alert Mechanism, a legal framework designed to coordinate emergency actions aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women in designated regions. Although the mechanism represents an important legal commitment, implementation has been



inconsistent. Compliance remains uneven because the policy is interpreted differently across jurisdictions and is frequently undermined by inadequate funding and institutional capacity. While femicide is a complex and multifaceted problem, one underlying challenge is the growing lack of public trust in governmental promises that are not matched by sustained action, resources, or accountability. This erosion of trust also discourages reporting, placing even greater pressure on already under-resourced grassroots organizations.

Reading *As We Have Always Done* by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson reshaped my understanding of institutional responsibility. Addressing femicide—and more broadly, reimagining gender justice—requires moving beyond political awareness and symbolic gestures. Individual action matters alongside governmental responsibility.

A similar insight emerges from a different tradition. In Pope Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, he argues that recognizing the inherent dignity of every person is not sufficient when marginalized communities remain unable to defend their rights effectively. Genuine

justice requires concrete decisions—in law, public policy, and social practice—that ensure women's voices are heard, respected, and valued.

This emphasis reflects a broader principle of interconnectedness: what affects one member of society ultimately affects us all. Reimagining gender justice therefore requires unlearning inherited assumptions and engaging in meaningful dialogue that recognizes the experiences of others. Most importantly, decision-making power must be shared with those closest to the problem—including members of the Queer Leadership Council, grassroots organizers, and survivors—whose knowledge and lived experience are indispensable for developing policies that are both just and effective.

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GENDER REFLECTIONS FROM THE CONGOLESE CULTURAL CONTEXT



Some people understand peace as the total absence of war, the total silence of weapons, but it extends far beyond that. Genuine peace flourishes where human dignity is observed and justice promoted. Discussions on gender have emerged as a very important dimension of peacebuilding over the past few decades, highlighting the roles and contributions of both men and women.

In the Congolese cultural context, traditional gender norms have profoundly shaped social relationships for generations. While these traditions have contributed to preserving cultural identity, some have also reinforced inequality.

Reimagining Gender for Peace does not mean rejecting culture or creating conflict between men and women; rather, it invites us to critically examine how men and women relate to one another and how their relationships can contribute to a more peaceful society. This theme is an opportunity for deep discernment on human dignity, cooperation, justice, respect, mutual responsibility, and mutual understanding.

In my culture, women were once largely invisible in public life. Their place was strictly defined by traditions that limited their participation in society. A woman could not sit among men during important discussions. Education was considered unnecessary for girls because it was believed that their destiny was confined to marriage

In my culture, women were once largely invisible in public life. Their place was strictly defined by traditions that limited their participation in society. **A woman could not sit among men during important discussions. Education was considered unnecessary for girls because it was believed that their destiny was confined to marriage and motherhood.**



and motherhood. They faced restrictions that today seem astonishing: they were forbidden from eating certain foods such as eggs and chicken, and in some communities, they could not even drink milk. Their future was often decided by others, including the choice of whom they would marry. Their voices, talents, and aspirations were rarely taken into account.



In families, parents, by different means, communicated to their daughters that they were inferior to their brothers, that they should show respect, obey and serve them. Boys were treated and behaved like small gods in their parents' homes and this is the behaviour they grew up with and later brought into their own households.

Many domestic tasks could not be done by boys. They would watch their sisters carry out the tasks and give them orders, while sitting back with one leg crossed over the other. Girls were often regarded as not fully human.

Over time, however, society began to change. The recognition of equal human dignity opened doors that had long been closed. Today, girls attend school alongside boys. In our classrooms, young women participate in scientific experiments, academic competitions, and leadership activities. Often, they perform as well as, or even better than, their male counterparts. Where women were once discouraged or not permitted to speak publicly, it has been

observed that they often surpass men in eloquence. Even scientific and intellectual debates no longer select participants according to sex. The focus is now on talent and effort. More than ever before, society is beginning to understand that human worth does not depend on whether one is male or female.

These changes have brought undeniable progress. Countless women have become teachers, doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs, researchers, and leaders. Families and communities have benefited from their contributions. When men and women combine their talents and energies, remarkable achievements become possible. Indeed, when two hands work for the same cause, success becomes more attainable.

Yet the journey toward genuine gender equality remains incomplete. While women have gained access to education and professional opportunities, many continue to carry a disproportionate burden within the family. Many men continue to believe that when they marry, they bring home a housekeeper.



In many homes, traditional expectations have remained largely unchanged. A woman is expected to excel at work while simultaneously assuming almost total responsibility for household duties. In numerous households, men still believe that domestic work is exclusively a woman's responsibility. Even unemployed husbands may feel uncomfortable helping with cooking, washing dishes, cleaning the house, or doing laundry because they think it would be beneath their status.

Consequently, many women face what scholars call the “double burden”: the challenge of balancing professional obligations with the overwhelming majority of domestic responsibilities. The situation is further complicated by economic changes. Some men, seeing that their wives earn salaries, withdraw from their traditional responsibilities instead of embracing a partnership model. At the same time, some women, reacting to years of inequality, interpret equality as competition rather than collaboration. In such circumstances, relationships can become arenas of rivalry instead of spaces of mutual support.

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Another challenge concerns the wellbeing of children. Gender equality has encouraged both parents to work, but has not sufficiently considered the needs of children. Children were often not taken into account during the promotion of gender equality. Employment may force couples to relocate far from their homes or communities. As a result, children are frequently entrusted to domestic workers or caregivers whose primary concern is understandably earning a living. While some caregivers are dedicated, others have limited time and emotional availability. Consequently, some children are shaped more by the street, social media, or peers than from their own parents. Parents then find themselves reacting to problems rather than actively shaping their children's education and character. For this reason, reimagining gender for peace requires more than granting equal opportunities. It requires redefining responsibilities.

True equality is not achieved when women simply add professional responsibilities to their existing domestic obligations. Nor is it achieved when men and women compete to prove who is stronger or more independent. Genuine equality emerges when both partners share responsibilities, support one

another, and recognize that the wellbeing of the family depends on cooperation. A peaceful society cannot be built upon exhausted mothers, absent fathers, or neglected children. Men and women are not rivals; they are partners. Reimagining gender for peace means creating a culture where opportunities, responsibilities, and dignity are shared. This means moving beyond both exclusion and competition toward collaboration.

Peace does not lie in determining whether one sex is superior to the other, but in recognizing that humanity flourishes best when men and women work together, each contributing their unique strengths to the common good.

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POETRY
& PEACE

AVVA

REIMAGINING
DALIT MOTHERHOOD
AS A **PATHWAY TO PEACE**

It is a short poem, but a demanding one, and it works as a grassroots critique of intersectional marginalisation precisely because it refuses to be gentle about it. **In pulling apart the idealised, passive myth of motherhood, Subhadra does something quietly radical: she grounds gender justice not in policy language, but in subaltern dignity itself.**



Peace is something we build, and we cannot build it while structural violence and patriarchal institutions remain standing. That much is easy to agree with in the abstract.

What is harder is seeing exactly where that violence lives — in whose kitchen, in whose field, in whose silence. Contemporary discourse has moved past treating gender as a simple binary and started reading it as a lived political, social and economic reality, and it is here that literature becomes genuinely useful. It does not just illustrate an argument; it can take us somewhere theory alone cannot.

Joopaka Subhadra's Telugu poem *Avva* (translated into English by K. Purushotham) is one such place. It is a short poem, but a demanding one, and it works as a grassroots critique of intersectional marginalisation precisely because it refuses to be gentle about it. In pulling apart the idealised, passive myth of motherhood, Subhadra does something quietly radical: she grounds gender justice not in policy language, but in subaltern dignity itself. Her *Avva* is not offered to us as a victim we are meant to feel sorry for. She is a transformative force — someone who makes peace and reconciliation possible, not someone who waits for them to arrive.

Beyond the Wick-lamp

Start with the image most of us already carry in our heads: the mother as a wick-lamp, kept “safe in wall's ledge,” steady and undemanding, burning quietly so that everyone else can see by her light. It is a comforting image, and that is exactly the problem with it. It asks nothing of the world and gives everything of her. Subhadra will not let this stand. She recasts *Avva* as something far less containable — cosmic in scale, yet still unmistakably exploited:

“she's the sun went / astray in the rug of the sky, / she's a famine in / the stretched out pallu / of the mother-earth.”

That is a considerable distance to travel in five lines — from a domestic wick-lamp to a runaway sun, from quiet virtue to outright famine. The move is deliberate. *Avva* does not get to retreat into a peaceful domestic sphere at the end of the day, because no such sphere exists for her. Her life is one of ceaseless, largely unrecognised labour, and the cruel irony that runs through the whole poem is this: she feeds everyone around her while her own stomach stays empty.



Where Domestic and Agrarian Violence Meet

If we are serious about gender justice, we have to look at how domestic life, economic structures and social hierarchy reinforce one another rather than treating them as separate problems with separate solutions. Avva is, in a very real sense, the economic engine of both her household and her village — and yet this is precisely what keeps her trapped, because that labour is never converted into standing, security or say. At home, she absorbs the immediate, physical weight of patriarchal anger:

“Avva quite often / falls in the furnace
of / ayya, father’s anger / because of
bad meals... / or to grab her wages for
drinking.”

Step outside the home and the exploitation simply changes shape rather than lessening. In the fields, she is caught within an agrarian, feudal economy that treats her body as a resource to be used up. She works “knee-deep paddy fields / ceaselessly working / even after dusk,” and the poem does not flinch from naming what this amounts to: she becomes, in effect, the leather — the cheppulu — that others walk on without a second thought. And after all that, having fed the very land she has no claim to, “the lords kept her at a distance from the yield.” She grows the harvest and is kept from it.

This is worth sitting with, because it is exactly the kind of double bind that peacebuilding scholarship keeps returning to: structural violence rarely operates on a single front. You cannot address it through political reform alone, or economic reform alone, or domestic reform alone. Avva’s life shows all three failing her at once, and any account of reconciliation that ignores one of them is, frankly, incomplete.

The Sickle as a Question

Here is what makes this poem more than a catalogue of suffering, and why it stays with you after a first read: it refuses to leave Avva as a victim, full stop. Real peacebuilding was never going to be passive. It requires dialogue, it requires justice, and — this is the harder part — it requires the courage to confront power that has been inherited and normalised for generations. In its closing lines, the poem gives Avva exactly that kind of agency, and it does so without ceremony:

“tightening the pallu / round her waist, /
my avva is a / question, / flashing a sickle
in her hand.”

The sickle completes the image. It was, moments earlier in the poem, simply a tool of exploited agricultural labour. **Now it flashes as a symbol of resistance — proof that the same instrument used to extract her labour can just as easily become the instrument of her defiance.**



Notice what has happened to the maternal figure by this point. She is no longer decorative, no longer passive, no longer waiting to be rescued or pitied. She stands as an active historical agent, her posture confrontational rather than submissive. Subhadra calls her “a question” — and it is worth pausing on that word, because a question is not a complaint or a plea. It is something put directly to landlordism, to caste exclusion, to patriarchal domination, and it demands an answer. The sickle completes the image. It was, moments earlier in the poem, simply a tool of exploited agricultural labour. Now it flashes as a symbol of resistance — proof that the same instrument used to extract her labour can just as easily become the instrument of her defiance.

Reimagining Gender for A Sustainable Peace

What Avva exposes, in the end, is how much conventional academic and literary language has failed to “access the brinks where my avva wandered.” That is not a small accusation — it is a challenge aimed squarely at frameworks that claim to speak for the marginalised while rarely listening to them. For a publication like Pax Lumina, which is trying to imagine an ethical vision that goes beyond domination and fear, this poem is not a nice illustrative example. It is closer to a test case: can our peacebuilding language actually hold a figure like Avva, or does it fall apart around her?



Joopaka Subhadra

If we are serious about reimagining gender for the sake of peace, the starting point has to be listening — properly listening — to grassroots' voices that have been talked over for far too long. Lasting peace simply cannot be built on the back of uncompensated, silenced labour; that much should be obvious, and yet it keeps needing to be said. Subhadra gives us a way to say it. By putting the subaltern woman at the centre of the story — not as a passive figure caught in a “struggle without dawn,” but as someone actively challenging the structures that confine her — we get a little closer to a peace worth having. One built on dignity, not on someone else’s silence.

Dr Dominic Joseph P. is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, St. Xavier’s College, Thumba.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pax Lumina 7(4)/2026/72



Dear Editor,
Congratulations on such a wonderful and timely issue! I look forward to using this in my Challenge of Peace course in the Fall.

Joshua Snyder
Boston College, USA

Dear Editor,
Thank you so much for sharing with us this insightful magazine on an actual topic.

Kind regards,

Tony Antoine Mwelwa
Educate Magis

Dear Editor,
The latest issue of Pax Lumina is a timely gift to the world - you have taken a leap ahead of the Vatican. Usually, the Church is way behind scientific/medical advancements to respond to the ethical moral issues we face with progress unlimited.

Teresa Kotturan SCN
Kentucky, USA

Dear Editor,
Congratulations for the May 2026 issue of Pax Lumina -
It's a wonderful volume. The issue elaborately deals with the human and ethical aspects of AI. These will be of little concern for multinational corporations.

Joseph Mathew
Pala

Dear Editor,
Thank you so much for the issue of Pax Lumina on AI, which is very relevant at the time of the new encyclical by Pope Leo.

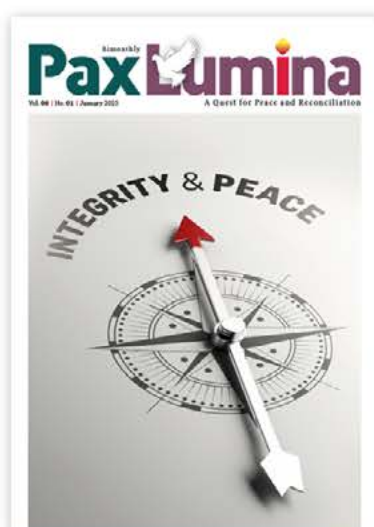
Bishop Jose Puthenveetil
Delhi

Dear Editor,
Congratulations for coming out with such an issue with contemporary relevance. There is a galaxy of writers.

Neena Joseph
Kochi

Dear Editor,
Thank you for the issue of Pax Lumina on Artificial Intelligence.
This is a very timely issue, a timely topic.

Barbara Reynolds
USA



**There is no limit
to what we,
as women,
can accomplish.**

- Michelle Obama



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