



SHE LEADS



Acknowledgement

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She Leads

FUNDACIÓN

Mujer y Futuro

#IMATTER

LOVE ARE WOMEN

OBIS 2100

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SHE LEADS





Introduction

“Peace for me is a state of mind, a physical state. It is the fact of living without worrying all the time.” Diane Perpétue ADOUM, CAR

The women in this book are strong and powerful. They are journalists, environmental defenders, they have formed unions, and brought down governments. They are poets, artists, mothers, sisters, and friends – words alone fail to express how impressive they are, but this book proves that a picture is worth more than a thousand words.

They all share an indomitable spirit – a belief that things can change, and they can lead that change. In too many places around the world, women and girls are facing war and political upheaval. It is women, often the most marginalised, who are often the first to provide help and assistance. It is women who are picking up the pieces and rebuilding communities. And women who are brokering peace and stepping forwards to become leaders to heal their broken countries.

This year, UN Security Council resolution 1325 is 20 years old. This resolution recognises that women should have a seat at the peace table, that they have a role in preventing future conflicts and need to be at the heart of a just recovery.

As we emerge from a pandemic that has utterly changed the world that we live in, let us strive for a world of dignity and equality for all, and stand strong with these brave women. Women who demand, “I Matter”. Let us call on our political leaders to hear and support these women. They Matter.

Central African Republic (CAR)

The current crisis in the Central African Republic (CAR) began in 2013, when armed groups overthrew the government. This period is often described by the women we spoke to as ‘the events.’

A peace accord was signed in February 2019, but there are still high levels violence. People remain in camps, too frightened to return home or plant their fields, which means many families are hungry.

Women have been amongst the hardest hit by the conflict. A woman is victim of sexual and gender-based violence almost every hour in CAR.

Women in CAR are demanding to be heard. They are campaigning for equal representation in the Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation Commission, set up after the peace agreement.

We stand with them.

Flavienne BEDET, 25 - Radio Student

“Since 2013, there has been violence and suffering. Peace means tranquillity and no noise. Women are the pillars of everything. Without women, there is no peace. If there is peace in a country, everything is possible.”



Rosalie Kobo-Beth

33, lawyer





Women are the base. It is very important that women play a role in the institutions and decision-making processes of peace and reconciliation. It is critical that women are involved.”



“I am Secretary General of the Association of Central African Women Lawyers, and spokesperson for a platform for young women called ‘I Londo Awè’, which means ‘We are already standing’ in Sango. I’m a single mother of two children.

“At ‘I Londo Awè’, we fight for women to be at the heart of the peace process in CAR, by seeking parity within the Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation Commission.

“Since coronavirus cases were reported in CAR, we have been campaigning for preventative measures to be put in place by the government. We are campaigning to help vulnerable populations, especially women. It would be great if everyone could have a handwashing kit with soap and clean water at an affordable price!

“Many do not believe that the coronavirus exists in CAR. I believe it. When you arrive at my house, we greet you from a distance and we direct you to wash your hands. When I go to the office, I put on my mask, and when I come home from my workday, my children say to me: “Mom, wash your hands!”. I raise awareness around me.

“Defending the interests of women is important in CAR. Customs and traditions weigh on women, and they cannot speak out. I have been marginalized and underestimated. People think that all I care for is studying and work, and that family life does not interest me.

“What helps me hold on is to stay focused on my goal to become a public figure. I hope that one day this dream will come true, and that I can make big decisions to change the lives of women in my country.”



Marina Moulou-Gnatho

29, journalist



“Peace for me is when someone is not menaced. Women are important in peace building. As those who are most often the victims, they must be incorporated into peace.

“Journalism has always been my passion, but it takes bravery. In 2015, radio was the only way to hear what was happening. As a radio broadcaster, I was able to reach and inform a large audience and get to places that others couldn’t.

“I visited one camp, where people - even children and pregnant women, were sleeping on the ground. Suddenly, there was shooting, and I had no idea what to do. I had just arrived and found myself in the middle of it. I realised it was crucial to do this reporting and I had to just summon up the courage.

“What I saw inspired me to fight for children to have an education, to protect those who are victims of rape and to fight for peace, justice, and parity for women in government.”



Mariam Yaiya

42, Community Leader



“In 1982, when I moved with my family to Bria, it was still peaceful. I was raised a Christian, but when I married a Muslim, I converted to Islam. Intermarriages were common.

“Everything changed with the ‘events. We suffered a lot. I have 11 children and even finding food was hard. Our house was destroyed, the fields were destroyed, and I couldn’t return home.

“This took a toll on me. I was sick. I lost hope. I couldn’t sleep. I gained my strength and I approached the Community Protection Committee as I really liked and respected them and the work they were doing.

“I work with the community on solutions to the problems of the community through the generation of revenues, sewing, soap-making and brick making, while sensitising the community on GBV and social cohesion and peace building.

“Being a leader makes me feel good. Now I have courage. When I see change, I am happy.”



Clementine Beatar

**58, President of the Association of
Women and Youth in the community
of Canaan**

“Women are essential to peace building. It is up to women to counsel their husbands and children, to convince them to put down their weapons, to teach them vengeance is not good, forgiveness is essential. Peace is when it is calm, when there is no brutality, no gunshots — when you aren’t scared, as we always are here now. Without peace, there is no development. Peace is essential.”



Chanella Fany

32, leader of the Community Protection Committee at PK3 IDP camp in Bria

“Our village was attacked in the ‘events’, everything was destroyed, and our family fled, arriving in Bria with our lives only. Everything we owned, everything we had built, was lost.

“I have really become a leader – a defender of the community and even a bit the chief of the block. People respect me – even my husband now respects me. It has given me a lot of confidence.

“Peace is not peace if we can’t be together. Christians and Muslims together – that is the peace we need. We all need to be able to talk to each other. I believe women have a crucial role to play in peace building.”



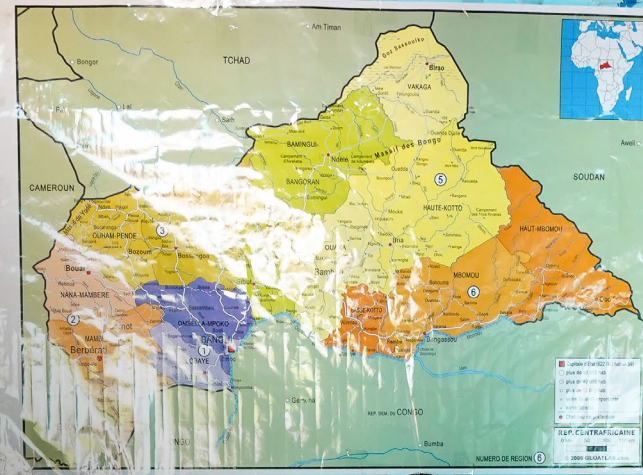
Organisation Musulmane pour l'Innovation en Centrafrique
OMICA
PATRIOTISME - TRAVAIL - PROGRES

Achta Laure Abakar

28, secretary-general of the organisation Femmes Engagées Pour le Développement Socio-Economique (Women working for Socio-Economic development)



PATRIOTISME - TRAVAIL - PROGRES



“In 2013 I was raped. I tried to report the rapist, but it didn’t work. It was difficult to find an organisation to help. It almost crushed me. I stayed home and cried for a whole year before finding this organisation. “While volunteering here, I realized I wasn’t the only victim and that there were victims even worse off than me. Now, I help them. “The women, the mothers, the raped in our community, we can’t speak in front of men. The name of our organisation obscures the fact that women coming here are victims of rape.

“The women who come regularly are only a small percentage of women who have been victims of rape. Most are terrified to tell their husbands, fearing divorce. The women come to me and little by little, they open up.”



Sudan

Sudanese women played a key role in the revolution that ousted the government of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019. They made up more than 70 percent of protestors at certain points; and led rallies to maintain morale and momentum in the face of violence, chanting and reading poetry to rally the crowds.

Despite their leadership during the revolution, it is still far from guaranteed that women's voices and perspectives will continue be heard during the country's transitional period. But in a country beset by conflict and oppression for decades, Sudanese women will keep pushing for change.





“Women are critical in change and peacebuilding. Before the revolution, no one could speak freely, but now women can really push for the realisation of peace.”

Safa Elagib Adam Ayour

50, Activist



“I was born and raised in Darfur in a small village. There was no electricity, few services, little education, and even fewer opportunities for girls.

“You feel like you’re in a box – don’t do this, don’t do that. There were clubs for men but none for women. You were confined to the home – only home.

“I became an activist as soon as I got to university, joining the Darfur Students Association in 1985. The students would go to help in humanitarian crises.

“When displaced people arrived in Khartoum, we said we weren’t going to eat. We’d bring our rations to the displaced. I had been in Darfur — I knew what it was like. I knew people were digging holes to find ants to eat.

“At that time drought had caused a catastrophe in Darfur. I decided I wanted to work in the humanitarian sector.

“I wanted to give people what they needed. I began working with women, recipients of aid and quickly realised it was not enough.

“The women might look like beggars — but they are not. They have dignity. They are producers and farmers. That’s what made me a feminist. That is when I began!

“In 2005, I led the Darfur women in the Darfur peace negotiations. In 2009, I was awarded the prize for Peace and Human Rights in Bern, Switzerland – the first African woman to win the prize.

“Peace to me means that when you go outside, you don’t see street children sleeping outside or a woman begging or dying while giving birth. Peace means human security.

“I head up the coordinating committee of the Commission for Peace. I am fighting for women to be part of the new government.”





Alaa Salah

22, activist



‘Wherever women are, peace is. Women and peace are synonyms.’

At the forefront of Sudan’s revolution, a video of Alaa protesting in her flowing white gown became the worldwide symbol of the Sudanese fight for freedom and the central role women played in it.

“I look at the picture and don’t see myself. I see the strength, bravery, glory, and the sacrifices of Sudanese women. It is not me. I am just one of hundreds of thousands of others. We were all in it together.

“The revolution started on 19 December 2018. I joined the protests that day and never left.

“The government response to the demonstrations was brutal. People were killed; others lost limbs and eyes. I didn’t rule out the possibility I would be killed. But I was never afraid. Never. We all were determined to achieve the freedom of the country.


“Freedom, Peace and Justice was the slogan of the revolution. This has not yet been achieved, so the revolution needs to continue. I think it will continue for a long time.”





Isis El Nur Oman

55, artist



“I hate to see women think of themselves as weak, think negatively about themselves, be fearful. They don’t know their rights. Even me, for a long time, I didn’t know my rights

“I am an artist with an interest in the environment. Six years ago, I set up a workshop where women can learn to make artwork out of recycled materials. The goal was to enable women to make money – and encourage their independence. My workshop is a place where women gain confidence through being productive and creative.

“Sudanese women are strong. Even if they are constrained, they always have the inner strength to make decisions. Nothing is going to stop Sudanese women from reaching their goals.”

“Women are key to peacebuilding processes. When peace and justice are achieved, women will feel the benefits most as they have been the ones suffering. Women have been gatekeepers for peace from the start.”

OBIS زبوت

Awadiah Mahmoud Kuku

57, tea lady



“I was born in the Nuba Mountains. We came to Khartoum for economic reasons. My father died and things got tough, so I decided to sell tea.

“It was difficult selling tea. There was a negative opinion of the women selling tea and the government was brutal towards us. They would come and confiscate all our materials. Despite all the difficulties, I never stopped: I had to provide for my four children.

“I thought we needed a law to protect our rights. So, we investigated cooperative law – and registered as an association of women tea and food sellers, the first in the country.

“The ‘kasha’ (police raids on unlicensed businesses) stopped after we started the association. But every time there was a new commissioner, he would come with a new policy towards us.

“But with the revolution, we are much more relaxed. There are no more raids. We can stay here for hours and not get harassed.

“As the leader of the association, I was in the delegation that greeted the Prime Minister when he returned from Ethiopia. I went to meet him and talked about the difficulties. I am now nick-named Hamdok - the PM’s name!

“I took part in the revolution. I was there when the sit in started and never left. I was responsible for the central kitchen of the sit-in.

“We are pushing hard now to have seats for the tea sellers in the legislature. I am leading the push. Two months we were at the sit-in, feeding everyone. We have earned seats in the legislature.”





Fatima Algaddal

85, Sudanese Women's Union, Poet,
Author, Activist

“I was born in Sudan, but I spent my childhood in Hadramout, Yemen. I loved learning from a young age. By 10, I was devouring books of literature and politics.

“My father sent me back to Sudan when I was 11 to attend school. The situation for women in Sudan at the time was not as severe as Yemen. Nonetheless, it was very restrictive. I could see in society that there was no equality nor justice for girls.

“While my father was enlightened and encouraged my studies. My mother and family would make fun of me, calling me abnormal.

“I felt a lot of pain when I saw women being oppressed and made to feel inferior here and in Yemen. Seeing the inhumane ways, they were being treated motivated me to want to create change.

“In 1952, the Sudanese Women’s Union was formed – I was 21 and joined that same year. In 1965, I became part of the executive committee, connected with international women’s organizations and spoke abroad.”

“I was delighted to see so many women at the forefront of the recent revolution. I knew women were oppressed and there was no equality, but I was astonished at how many women went out to protest.”

“Sudanese women are a revolutionary force. They are fierce fighters. I was so happy to see women leading the revolution. Now the revolution needs to be steered to help women and to carry on.”



South Sudan

South Sudanese women have long been demanding their meaningful participation in peace processes.

The country's transitional government currently has one woman as Vice President and nine women ministers. This level of representation was hard-won, an outcome of women lobbying vigorously to be involved.

This still does not meet the agreed UN quota for women's representation in peace processes but is a first step forwards for South Sudanese women to claim their rightful place at the peace table.



A close-up portrait of Riya William Yuyuda, a young Black woman with a vibrant, multi-colored patterned headwrap. She is smiling warmly, showing her teeth, and has a small gold nose ring. Her hand is visible near her chin, holding a small, light-colored object. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.

Riya William Yuyuda

**29, Peace Activist & Woman Human
Rights Defender**

“Women are power - that’s why I am a human rights activist!

“I founded Crown the Woman with six other young, passionate South Sudanese sisters to make the women of South Sudan feel powerful; crowning them the queens they deserve to be.

“I was born in South Sudan when the country’s political tensions were high. When I was only a few weeks old, my Ugandan mother took my sister and I to Uganda to seek safety while my father stayed behind in Juba. The war in South Sudan separated my family. One of the reasons I started Crown the Woman was to work towards building peace – the peace that I never enjoyed as a child.

“Crown the Woman provides a lot of trauma healing along with gender-based violence protection and awareness. We also advocate for women to thrive economically by providing training to help women start businesses, allowing them to take care of themselves. I believe a woman who has economic power has the power to protect herself from many forms of violence.

“We are part of the South Sudan Women’s Coalition for Peace, which advocates for including women in decision making for our country’s peace process. Women are the foundation of South Sudan, making up 60 percent of the population and therefore the majority voters. If our voices aren’t part of decision making, then South Sudan won’t thrive to its fullest potential.”

A woman with a colorful headwrap and a black t-shirt that says "WOMEN ARE POWER" is looking directly at the camera. She has a serious expression and is holding a small branch with green leaves in her right hand. The background is a plain, light-colored wall with some greenery visible on the left and right sides.

**WOMEN
ARE
POWER**

Minagano Lydia

RUN, Poem

When the bullet was shot,
They shouted run
Instead, I stood still
And watched
As gunpowder filled the lonely air
I wondered; what is it that I have to run from?
Death?
Why would I run from death?
When I have died countless times already
See, this body is a tomb
A walking dead
A ghost
I have buried enough pieces of me
To form a cemetery
I die every time a bullet cuts a branch off my family tree
Don't you sometimes wonder why I buy myself flowers?
These martyrs that rest in me
I crown them,
Water their roots
Hoping they will re-live in me,
I want to be here when they breathe again.

Cease fire,

What ceasefire?

When gunshots are popping
Like fireworks in the night sky?

Does fire put out fire?
Does a stray bullet know where it belongs?

What is ceasefire?

When fear in the air
Sticks to our bodies like a wet blanket
When babies know to hold their cry,

What is ceasefire?

After rape has robbed women
Of their ribbons,
And flies? rise
With the stench of rotting flesh

What is Ceasefire?

When children keep vigil
Over dead bodies brewing oil for future drill

What is ceasefire?

When a camouflaged figure
Sends shivers to the bone
When nights are dreaded
Because dusk
Leaves behind, untold tales,
Of pain and sorrow

What is ceasefire?

When unquenched blood thirst
Drinks from the innocent
When over and over
The ceasing of fire is only a tale?

What is Ceasefire?

When scars imprinted
Cannot be erased
When darkness stains
Pure cotton memory

What is Ceasefire?

Without fire ceasing?

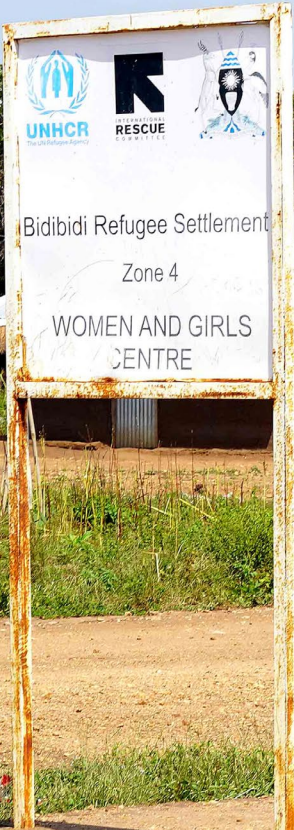
Lulu Kiden

Pure Cotton, Poem

South Sudanese refugees in Uganda



Due to war in South Sudan, Uganda has welcomed over a million South Sudanese refugees, sympathetic to their plight after experiencing many years of war itself. The refugees have fled horrific violence with many families getting separated in their journey to safety. Female refugees and local women are active in delivering help and support in the refugee camps.





Ferida Marmin

21, youth activist



“I want equality in the community. I want to bring peace back to South Sudan. “I arrived in Bidi Bidi refugee camp alone in October 2016. My family and I got separated when we fled fighting in South Sudan. I still do not know where they are. “People always say the conditions here are hard and you have to be strong. My will is to help bring the community together. “It is important to reduce tensions and reduce violence in the community to promote peace. Here, we come from different places in South Sudan, but here we need to be unified.”

Sylvia Maneno

24, community worker





“In March 2017, I got a phone call from my mother while in school, she told me that the war had come to our village and to rush home.

“There were so many people - all were fleeing in different directions. I had no idea where my mother was. When I came here, I was all alone.”

This is my poem.

War war war

The great enemy in South Sudan

Our houses, properties destroyed

Our mothers killed

Mothers and sisters raped.

We know war is not the solution


Let's sit down and talk to leaders

And bring peace to our nation, South Sudan.

A close-up portrait of Ritah Nansereko, a woman with dark skin and short black braided hair with red and white threads. She is smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a dark blue floral patterned top and a pearl earring. The background is a lush green plant with prominent yellow veins on its leaves.

Ritah Nansereko

36, humanitarian worker



“I never knew my father. He died before I was born in the conflict in Uganda. When I was six years old, my mother realised she could not look after all seven of her children. She took me, the last born, to live with nuns, a family of women.

“The nuns trained me to take care of people -poor people, the elderly and the vulnerable. This turned me into a strong woman with leadership skills. It shaped my upbringing and showed me that a woman can do it all in whatever circumstances.

“I have been a humanitarian worker for seven years. I want to see a strong women’s movement that will mainstream gender issues into humanitarian responses.

“The way I see the #IMatter campaign is as a reminder, a way to show people that women matter because we have always contributed. Our achievements are visible, so they must mind us. They have to give us the space, we have to be listened to.”

A group of approximately ten women are gathered under the shade of a large, thick tree trunk in a dry, arid landscape. They are wearing colorful headscarves and dresses in shades of red, yellow, blue, and black. Some are sitting on the ground, while one woman in a red and purple headscarf stands and looks towards the camera. The background shows sparse, dry vegetation and a clear sky. The overall scene conveys a sense of community and resilience in a challenging environment.

Somalia/ Somaliland

Somalia has been mired in conflict for decades, with climate change now exacerbating drought and tensions between insurgent groups. Millions of people have been displaced from their homes and millions have been left hungry.

Ibaado Mohamed

50 years, camp manager

Ibaado has been nominated by the government to be the representative of people who are internally displaced in Somaliland.

“When the drought hit Somalia in 2015, my family lost their herds of goats and camels. I went to search for a new way to provide for them.

“After a while, I settled in a camp for displaced people. I started to become active in the camp. I worked with groups of women and vulnerable people. I became the chair of various committees within the camp and now three camps are under my management. “I am doing this work because I was once in this position and affected by drought and other disasters. I know what it feels like to lose everything. It is important to get support.

“I established teams to ensure the protection and safety of vulnerable people, mostly women without their husbands. These teams go from house to house to give information to women about how to protect themselves from illnesses and from other dangers.

“There were many men who expressed their dissatisfaction about the work that I do. But I believe that women are smart and often work harder than men. They just need to get an opportunity.”





Colombia

In Colombia, the Peace Agreement signed in 2016 created hope for lasting peace after more than half a century of war. Women's rights organisations and other marginalised groups were at the centre of the negotiations and it has often been referred to as the first "feminist peace process". However, new types of violence have emerged as criminal gangs and paramilitaries seek to control the country's lucrative drug and mining industries and the military target human rights defenders with impunity.

Women defenders of land and environment are particularly at risk. Women are attacked not only because they are standing up for their rights, but because they are women exercising leadership. The country is also now home to 1.6 million Venezuelan refugees, who have fled not only repression and human rights violations, but also hunger and disease.





Clara Ines Hoyos Arboleda

55, human rights defender



“Women have an essential role to play in peace building. We are the ones looking for balance for our children. There are very few mothers who want to see their children carrying a machine gun, so we need to do everything possible to stop that from happening.

“I had a farm up in the mountains, but I was by myself. And because of that, I had a lot of problems. Men would cut my fence, or take my cows, or try to take things from my home. I had to leave with my son.

“I can’t be inactive. I called the mayor at the time, a woman, and I said, “let’s fight, let’s fight for women’s rights and for our wellbeing.” So, we started calling women, and we created a group of about 120 women.

“When women cannot control their economic situation, they have to submit. And so, we’re looking for economic empowerment. That was in 2015 and we’ve been growing since then. Now, we have different productive units, different fields, and we’re growing herbal plants in the rural areas, and we have women who are also committed in town.

“It has visibly empowered women; women who were being beaten, being abused, or even being raped by their husbands. These women have separated from their husbands. They’ve realised that they are important, they have value, that they are beings who are equal to the man.

“The fact the security situation here has deteriorated has made it more difficult for us because we look out for the crops. The illegal groups have been telling us that they’re going to start planting coca again.

“It’s wrong to be involved in the illicit economy. I tell the women, “look at your children. You have kids that are growing up. Do you want to see your kids in jail, or do you want to see them with a gun over their shoulder running through the mountains?””

A woman with dark hair, wearing a maroon top, is sitting on a balcony. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. In the background, there is a wide river with several small boats. The buildings along the riverbank are colorful, with blue and green walls. The sky is overcast.

Marina Cuenca

48, environmentalist and land defender



“I came here when I was three years old. Everything was natural. And there were very few people around. Everything was the Amazon jungle. My heart and soul are here.

“Then the 80s arrived, and that’s when the coca came in as well as a lot of people from other areas. They started cutting down the forests to plant coca plants to have a better income for their families.

“Then came the airplanes, which fumigated the plants with glyphosate. And because the airplanes were fumigating from above, they also fumigated our pasture lands, our food crops. The plantain, the yucca, everything died.

“After the fumigations, we were supposed to start working with cattle and livestock on our land. But the switch to livestock completely transformed the landscape. What we saw was that more clear cutting, more deforestation was taking place to make room for the animals.

“So, with the help of the foundation - the Platform of Women in the Department of Caqueta - we said we wanted to start reforestation efforts. And maybe provide more resources so people don’t have to do the clear cutting.

“I really love nature. And for years now, I’ve seen that the trees are disappearing, because they’re cut down, and seeds are disappearing. And so,

I go to the areas where the trees are disappearing, and I collect the seeds. “My daughter helps me. She helps me with the plants that we’re preserving. She helps me water the plants and already knows the names of many of the plants.”



Elisabeth Morales Tascon

29, Embera leader



“I survived a landmine. I tried to take my life twice because I thought my life didn’t have any value. I thought everything had ended. But I survived for a reason.

“I created an organisation five years ago for indigenous women victims of the conflict. We work with women to keep alive different arts and craft practices. The drawings and the eyebrow artwork that I have on my face, that’s part of our ancestral practices.

“The women use different colours and different designs to tell their stories. They express different emotions through their crafts; it might be joy; it might be sadness.

“I want to have recognition of our community here, to be recognised by the minister of interior, because these are women who are victims of the armed conflict.”

A woman with dark hair, wearing a black patterned top and a necklace, stands in a lush green forest. In the background, a stream flows over rocks. The text 'Magali Belalcazar' is overlaid in large white font on the left side of the image.

Magali Belalcazar

46, defender of the Amazon



“I’m a daughter of a rural indigenous woman, she has a lot to do with what I do and who I am. She’s a woman who has a lot of spiritual power and a lot of power that’s come from the land. She has a lot of strength, a lot of wisdom. I haven’t met a wiser woman than my mother.

“The situation here for women is not good. It’s brutal violence. It’s just brutal.

There is lot of sexual violence and femicides. You see everything.

“One of the first actions carried out against women by an armed actor, or a husband, or society, is the rape of women. It is a way to silence them. It is a way to break them. I have been raped twice.

“Within these patriarchal and misogynistic structures, we also see the impact on the Amazon, concentration of land and livestock. The man goes out with his machete or with his chainsaw to cut down the forests. They use the same tools to threaten the women when they object to the cutting down of the forest.

“So, first what we do for the abused women is to hold them up, to strengthen them, to accompany them, to hug them. Then we make that connection between the women and the Amazon. The Amazon has been deforested, it’s been burned and abused just like the women. So, we need to heal the women. We need to heal the land; we need to heal the Amazon.

“I’m a territorial peace counsellor. I sit down at a round table with the ranchers and the civil society that I represent. After all this time, I sit down, and I can tell them face-to-face what I see and think.

“The peace agreement is marvellous, but the problem is that the state is not implementing it. It’s not fulfilling the agreement. They didn’t make roads or develop education or healthcare or guarantee farmer’s rights. They allowed a vacuum.

“The poor are being recruited – the sons of the poorest rural women in our country – by all the armed actors, fighting for control of the resources.

“We are alone as women. We need more power. I look at my daughter and my fight is for her.”



Sory Vivian Acero Castilla

44, Santander, refugee support worker



“I’m working with women who are in a foreign country. They think they don’t have rights, but they do. We tell them what rights they have and where to go to claim these rights, which organisations will help them. “The Venezuelans come here without having any information - they don’t know the risks. Most are depressed, but with this project they see a light of hope. Most think they have to walk to where they are going, so we help with transport. “The work affects me a lot. It is difficult to see them in this condition and I ask God why they are suffering like this, but I do think this project helps them. It releases a bit of the stress and anxiety.”



Johanna Duran Gomez

39, activist



FUNDACIÓN

Mujer

“I believe that our culture is a challenge for women. I always wanted to be part of the change. I always wanted to be in these traditionally male spaces.

“Women have to fight all the time and be better than men. The empowerment of women demands that society sees the women as equal and that they take the time to listen to women. This is the basic fight for women in a society where women are valued less than men.

“We do training and capacity building for women so they can access all arenas – and overcome the cycle of violence and inequality.”



Mali

In Mali, armed groups have devastated villages and driven people from their homes. Women have found themselves in extremely difficult situations, struggling for their own survival and the survival of their children. In recent months, coronavirus has compounded their sense of uncertainty and insecurity.

A portrait of Tedy Barry, a woman with a nose ring, wearing a yellow and orange patterned top and a matching headwrap. She is standing outdoors in a community setting with buildings and trees in the background.

Tedy Barry

40, community leader, Bamako

“Before the conflict, I was selling milk and I was also a hairdresser. I took care of my family and even managed to save money. But one day, as the violence became more serious, we were forced to flee, to leave our house with my children, taking only my phone and the clothes I was wearing.

“I was appointed president of the displaced women because I speak the national Bambara language, so I can easily speak to the authorities. It was a big responsibility. I talked a lot with the other women, and we decided to develop activities to earn a living. We trained in making soaps and dyes, as well as traditional henna and hairdressing.

“In Bamako, there are really a lot of weddings and we had the opportunity to put into practice what we had learned with our first clients. Unfortunately, with coronavirus, our activities have stopped. We hope this disease will pass quickly so that we can take control of our lives again.”

Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)

In the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) – the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip – nearly a quarter of the people live below the poverty line. Their prospects for work, and a safe, healthy life remain severely limited by the Israeli occupation. Some fifty percent of youth are unemployed, the highest rate in the world.





Amani Aruri,
Women and Youth Peace Activist, West
Bank



Being a woman born and raised in Palestine made me the person I am today. Every day, I go through military checkpoints, and I feel intimidated not only for being a Palestinian, but for being a woman. I watch in frustrated silence as my sons get frightened by Israeli soldiers as they go to school.

“But it was not just the occupation. Growing up in a conservative society with limited opportunities for women, especially young women, I deeply know the experience of social restrictions, discriminatory laws, and political and social violence. My own society stigmatises me for being independent and choosing the life I want to live.

“I have spent the last ten years defending the rights of Palestinian women, starting with my own right to choose a life free from violence and to have equal opportunities to men. I have now chosen to inspire other women in my society to break their silence and speak out. I want people all over the world to know about the everyday brutalities of the Israeli occupation. I want them to realise what it means to live in Palestine, where you can live in your own land but with no control over any resource and no enjoyment of your basic human rights, including rights to life and freedom of movement.

“But no one woman can change Palestinian women’s reality alone. This is why I joined the #IMatter campaign — a campaign that highlights the stories of women who have the courage to fight for their rights.”



Bissan Oudah

Community leader and basketballer, Gaza



“Gaza is exhausted because of the many challenges and problems caused by the occupation. Poverty runs high and young people are escaping the country.

“I know a lot of young people like me with tremendous energy and talent, so I started publishing their stories on social media.

“One day I was walking by a market when I heard a little girl asking her mom to buy her clothes for the feast, and her mom said: “this market is not for us”. Her words kept ringing in my ears. Should I write a story about this or should I start a market for this little girl and for the people that can’t afford to go to the market?

“We started reaching out to people online and received funds from everywhere in the Strip. After only one month, we managed to help 430 families. In the winter, we reached more than 8,000 people, providing blankets, hats, gloves and a package of clothes.”

“I am often challenged because our group includes women. Once I was speaking in a Facebook video about our campaign, and around five comments were asking me to cover my hair before going online. A group of men wouldn’t face the same interruptions.

“I believe in what I am doing and what I am doing is right. Either I agree to be excluded or keep going and become a valuable member of society. It is a fight I am taking on behalf of myself and the rest of the women in my community. Once I carve this space, other women will carve it too.”

Myanmar

Amidst decades of civil war and violence, women living in areas of conflict across Myanmar are displaying remarkable courage. They are taking on leadership roles in camps for displaced people in Kachin, Rakhine and northern Shan.

As these women leaders seek to meet basic needs and improve the lives of their families and communities, they are also shifting gender norms, enabling the possibility of broader transformations of women's rights amidst the ongoing crisis.



A portrait of Sayama Zawng Naw, a woman with dark hair, wearing a blue lace top. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is dark with a grid of small, glowing lights.

Sayama Zawng Naw


**29, Community Leader, Myitkyina
Janmaikawng KBC Camp**

“Women taking leadership roles is important. All my life, leaders in administrative roles in the village were men and men and men. Women can do this too. As women, we should build our capacity more and be leaders, I support this very strongly.”

“Being a leader doesn’t mean it’s only you all the time, you have to help others to lead too. After me, two other women became leaders in the camp community. One of them was very shy, not confident, she always said, “no, I can’t do it.” I always supported her and told her, “it is not that difficult, if you have difficulty, we can help you, we can support you.”


Good women should support each other, lift each other up, help each other. Those are, for me, good women.”



A woman is seated at a wooden table, leaning her right arm on the surface. She is wearing a bright orange, short-sleeved top with a buttoned placket and a dark skirt with a colorful floral pattern. She is also wearing a gold chain necklace and a gold bangle. The background is slightly blurred, showing a blue plastic chair and a white cloth hanging on the wall.

Nu Nu Thar

(pseudonym)



“Since the violence in 2012, I have been confined to a camp for displaced Rohingya and Kaman communities. We face a lot of challenges as women in the camps. Women are restricted by their husbands from going outside to do community work, and many of them, as a result, don’t know they can be leaders too.

“I try my best to help women and act whenever I can. Underage marriage has happened here. I helped mediate with the parents of the children and provide training to the parents about the rights of children and women.”


“I didn’t know about CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women) but it has really encouraged me to keep going because now I know there are international movements like this. I have so much more confidence after learning about it.

“I didn’t know I had the power within me. Now my mission is to encourage other women to have the confidence to be leaders. I’m one of the camp management committee leaders. I want to try and create space for women to be elected.”

A close-up portrait of a young woman with dark hair, looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The lighting is soft, highlighting her facial features against a dark, blurred background.

Bawk Nu Awng

**22, studying mathematics at university and
an internally displaced person.**



“When I calculate maths, when I get the answer, the feeling of being able to solve this is a good feeling. Maths is everywhere, everything is maths. When you go to the market and buy things, that is maths. And sometimes even when you are looking at the wind!

“At school, I felt like people looked down on me, because I was displaced. There was a test in physics, where I got 24/25. Many of the students failed, but I got this high mark. After that, the way people treated me changed.

“I am not the same as others, I am displaced. I have to try two or three times harder than anyone else.”



Azad Mohammed

A Rohingya Refugee Visits the Zoo, POEM.

I.
Once,
I went to the zoo—
The animals were overcrowded, and it was full.
It took a full day to see it all.
I was young,
It was like an early epiphany.

The zoo was also full of people wandering,
Some with families, some with friends,
Some with girlfriends, some with boyfriends,
And some alone, as I was.

There was a tiger in its pen,
Stripes matted with dirt
Who paced around,
As if to change his view of the world
Outside the cage.

Glee among the crowds,
Small children crying.
Some were angry, others were in awe.
Some imagined the caged beast as living free.

The life of the tiger,
Sold each day
For your joy.

Imagine a monster in the wild,
The men who bought its freedom
Grow richer.

Imagine those who let the cage crumble.
Maybe they still thought the animals would be
Sheltered and well fed
That their life could be good
Without looking out onto the world.

I visited the beast, with everyone else
But was met by heartache and sorrow.
My humble suggestion to the world:
Let the animals free.

II.

Once,
Awake in the night, unable to sleep,
I thought of my people trapped inside gates.
Checkpoints, guards, soldiers and guns
Monitoring the movements of old men
Longyis caked with dirt.

In this dream, we pace from Camp A to Camp B,
Imagining a world outside of the cage.

Journalists arrive, ask us to re-live the trauma.
They screen us for TV, win awards.
Charities take photos of crying children,
To place them on brochures, asking for donations.
Diplomats speak to us in our most formal tents
They assure us they hear us,
Then never come back.

Should the cage crumble,
They might think,
At least we were well fed
With sheets over our heads.

Yemen

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue headscarf, is shown from the chest up. She is holding a lit candle in her right hand, which is raised. The candle is lit, and its flame is bright yellow. The woman's face is partially illuminated by the light of the candle. In the background, there is a yellow building with multiple windows and balconies, set against a dark night sky with stars. The overall scene is dramatic and evocative.

Over the past five years, war in Yemen has killed thousands of civilians, devastated communities and infrastructure and brought untold suffering. A staggering 80 percent of the population need humanitarian aid.

Women and girls have been disproportionately affected because of negative gender norms. Families have adopted drastic coping strategies just to survive.

For instance, cases of early marriage have been reported in families who say they have no other recourse for keeping their daughters safe or supporting them.

But despite this, women are speaking up, and demanding an end to war and a place at the peace table.



Lamia Yahia Aleryani, She

Poem

She,
 No one else
 Of Arabic composition and identity
 With Yemeni features and hopes
 Storming Winds bow before her
 And those bleeding wounds wipe the ends of her
 fingertips
 On the forehead of the universe
 So, the springs of life flow
 She refuses to break up between the palms of a man
 For the remnants of her colourful wings will fly again
 Soaring away from his fist
 She is still standing there
 On the rainy pavement
 Pondering over what his hands did raindrops wet her
 And trickle on her memory to not forget
 Tired is the memory when it wakes up from its compulsory
 slumber Forcing her to look back at the rubble heap
 At the darkness of the forgotten war

The remains of the departed and the remains of her
 homeland that once was She packs the fear and anxiety
 bundle
 And throws them in the sidewalks
 Waiting for tomorrow to come
 She screams in the mirrors of her dreams
 It seeps and falls from her promised joy
 This war must end
 And her morning must shine Life for her.
 Light for her
 Just as they are for him
 As a cloud she is
 Raining giving tender non-stop so that
 Flowers germinate at the edges of closed windows
 And her heart flourishes green and his heart
 The woman of peace she is ... and he
 A man of peace must be
 So that the sun of life shines
 And her beautiful life starts.



Umhani

...ي

نيوكتلا ةيبرع.. اهرى غل يه
ةيوهل او

لامال او.. حمل المل ةي نمي
حيرل تاي تاع اهمام اي نحت
حورجل تافزانو
اهل مانا فارطأب حسمت
نوكتل اني بج ىلع
ةايحل اعيباني قفدتتف

لجر يتجار نيب تتفتت نأ ضفرت
ناريطل ادواعتس ةنولمل اتحنجأ اياقبف
مدي ةضبق نع اديعب ةقلحم

هنع اديعب.. لكانه فقنت تلزام
رطامل فيصرل ىلع
هادي تلحف اذام لمأتت
رطمل تارطق اهللبت
ىسنت ال يك اتركاذ رقت
ةركاذل ايه ةبعتم

يرابجال اهتابس نم قيقت نيح
ءارول ىلإ تافتلال ىلع اهربجت
ضاقنال ةموك ىلإ

ةيسنمل برحل ةمتع ىلإ
نالك يذلا اهنطو ءالش او نيلحارل اياقبو
قلقل او فوخل ةقاب مزحت
ةفصرأ يف امهب يقلتو
يتال دغلل اراظتنا

اهمال حا ايارم يف خرصت
دوعومل احررف نم ءيش اهنم طقاستيو برسستتف
يهتنت نأ بجي برحل هذه
قرشي نأ بجي يه احابصو

رونل اهل.. ةايحل اهل
مل امه املثم
فقوت نود ءاطع رطمت.. يه ةباحسك
ةقلغملا ذفاونل فاوح يف رامزأل تبنتف
مبلقو ابلق رضخيو
.. يه مالسلأ ءأرم

وهو
.. نوكتي نأ بجي مالسلأ لجر
ةايحل سمش قرشتل
ليمجل اهرمع ءدتببيو

يناي رغل اىحي ءايمل



Afghanistan

On February 29, 2020, the US and the Taliban signed an agreement that could pave the way for peace in Afghanistan. The agreement means the Taliban must commence peace talks with the Afghan government.

Many Afghan women fear that freedoms gained in the 20 years since the fall of the Taliban will be sacrificed in the talks.

Women's rights should not be a casualty of this process. Now more than ever, it is crucial that we listen to Afghan women and ensure their voices are at the heart of peace negotiations.

Freshta Yaqobi

women's rights and peace activist, Herat

"I am part of the peace committee in the Afghan Women's Network and lead the peace committee in Western zone of Afghanistan which is supported by UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

"I experienced Taliban times as a child, and then I witnessed the devastating and toxic effect of conflict and war. My generation suffered lots of trauma and suffering due constant and persistent conflict.

"Afghanistan is a traditional society and women have been marginalised and deprived of their rights. In the two decades after the Taliban, women have fought for their rights and their gains should not be wasted or bargained for peace.

"In a peace treaty all the rights that national and international law gives to women, should be included. I think the Taliban is still against women rights. Therefore, in peace negotiations with such groups, great care and attention should be given to women's rights and women's inclusion."





Masuma Jami

peace activist in Herat

“We are tired of war and conflict. I want a peaceful future for my children.

“My district is partly controlled by the Taliban and I have contributed to bringing peace and reducing the conflict in my community and district. I have been relatively successful in bringing peace through negotiation, public engagement, conflict resolution and ethnic or family disputes, through Shura and Jirga.

“The traditions, norms and prejudices in my society do not allow women to do activism. To do so, we must be very brave and overcome the challenges and obstacles that society puts in front of us. One of the biggest challenges is the insecurity from the Taliban and other armed groups. I have received several death threats and warnings.

“Women’s gains and achievements should be acknowledged and guaranteed in the peace treaty. I think the government should focus on both national and local peace, as most of the conflicts arise at the local level. Political peace is important, but the government can also focus on creating a culture of peace and engage women and marginalised groups, through local peace committees and Shuras.”



She Leads is a visual journey of the leadership roles women play in their communities in crisis and post crisis contexts. From post war rebuilding of Afghanistan to the ongoing crisis in Central Africa Republic to defending the Amazon in Colombia, this is an intimate, first person perspective of the work they do; their challenges and triumphs. These are expressed through pictures, stories and poetry. She Leads also has uses an interactive platform that brings to life the stories through animation and first-person narration of some of the stories and poems.

“Meeting and working with these women was an immense privilege. Their courage, determination and sheer tenacity fighting against unimaginable challenges, violence and even assassination attempts, was astounding -words alone fail to express how impressive they are. I have come away with infinite respect and admiration for them. Against all odds, they are, step by step, succeeding in their battles. These are true Portraits of Courage.”

Susan Schulman, an award-winning freelance photo/print/video journalist.

#IMatter is an intersectional worldwide solidarity campaign working with women and girls in crisis and post crisis contexts, recognising the universality of the struggle and women’s experience. It seeks to build bridges between networks and to strengthen the women’s movement. Their struggle is our struggle and vice versa.

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