



WORKING WITH GENDER NORMS TO STRENGTHEN YOUNG PEOPLE'S ROLE IN PEACEBUILDING: INSIGHTS FROM THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Practice paper



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Cover photo: A group of youth volunteers discuss the progress they have made in promoting gender equality in their communities in Sibut, Central African Republic as part of a French Embassy funded project run by Conciliations Resources and the Vegas Youth Foundation for Development. © Nick Bennett/Conciliation Resources

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Young people in the Central African Republic (CAR) represent a significant proportion of the country's population and have lived the majority of their lives surrounded by violence, yet remain largely excluded from peacebuilding efforts.

They are also facing what they have described as an identity crisis. They balance multiple – and often competing – expectations from their families, peers, religions, ethnic groups and wider communities. In some cases, young people feel unable to meet traditional expectations – for example, related to starting, and providing for, families – due to widespread insecurity, high rates of unemployment, the COVID-19 pandemic and an associated reduction in social interactions. In a growing number of cases, young people are choosing to explore alternative life paths, in part due to increased exposure to social media, critical examinations on gender and social roles on radio programmes and different models of education.

This tension has contributed to a breakdown in trust and relations between wider communities and young people. This can leave young people increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, which can offer them a greater sense of identity and purpose. Many young people are also excluded from local peacebuilding spaces as their contributions can be devalued by local leaders.

Research objectives

As 2025 marks the 10th anniversary of the Youth Peace and Security agenda, which aims to increase young people's meaningful participation in peacebuilding, there is a timely opportunity to further explore the evolving role of young people in CAR. Analysing gender norms offers a useful starting point for peacebuilding practitioners to understand how young men and women can balance the multiple demands and expectations they face, while identifying opportunities to strengthen their contributions to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This requires a context-sensitive approach, which this paper sets out to further explore.

Conciliation Resources and its partners the Vegas Youth Foundation for Development (FVJD) and Gender Peace and Développement (GEPAD) carried out participatory research in Bangui and Sibut to understand more about what communities value when it comes to gender and social norms, how these have evolved as a result of ongoing conflict, and opportunities to leverage this to facilitate the more meaningful participation of young men and women in peacebuilding. As part of this process, young people have selected specific gender norms to challenge or further harness in order to advance peacebuilding goals in their communities.

Key findings

How do gender norms shape young people's roles in conflict and peacebuilding?

- Expectations for young men to be brave and courageous can be interpreted through a lens of violence
- Against a backdrop of unemployment and insecurity, young men have found creative, alternative ways to demonstrate responsibility
- Perceptions that young women should be empathetic and compassionate contribute to their perceived limitations in conflict resolution mechanisms
- Young women have to meet higher standards to be taken seriously in peacebuilding spaces, such as balancing assertiveness with humility and family duty
- Cultural practices and spiritual beliefs influence the types of roles that young people can, and want, to pursue in their communities

How are gender norms and roles evolving as a result of the conflict?

- Economic constraints are contributing to a shift in women's leadership which could extend to peacebuilding spaces
- Conflict resolution approaches are becoming more holistic and could facilitate greater inclusion of women and young people
- Social networks and new technologies are reframing gender roles but heightening tensions between young people and elders
- Ongoing conflict and forced displacement have contributed to a shift in gender norms and practices among certain ethnic groups
- An increasing return of state security could reduce the incentive and expectation for young men to engage in community-based violence

How can peacebuilders respond? Preliminary lessons

1. Peacebuilders must avoid reinforcing perceptions that gender work is a Western imposition
2. Future work is likely to be most effective if it shifts the lens through which gender norms are interpreted, rather than gender norms themselves
3. There are some tensions between and within certain gender norms, which could provide entry points for further discussion
4. Approaching discussions on gender from a power, rather than victim, lens reduces resistance
5. Promoting alternative models of masculinity could reduce violence and increase women's participation in peacebuilding

1. RESEARCH RATIONALE

Conciliation Resources and its partners the Végas Youth Foundation for Development (FVJD) and Gender Peace and Développement (GEPAD) are currently implementing a project exploring how gender norms can be harnessed to promote nonviolence and greater participation of young women and men in peacebuilding processes, in order to advance a more inclusive and sustainable peace.

It is estimated that fifty per cent of the Central African Republic's (CAR's) population is made up of people under the age of 18, with seventy-eight per cent under the age of 35 (defined by the African Youth Charter and CAR's National Youth Policy as youth).¹

Despite forming a significant part of the country's population and living the majority of their lives surrounded by violence, young people in CAR remain largely excluded from the country's peacebuilding efforts. Young women face particular disadvantages, with CAR ranked 188 out of 191 countries in UNDP's Gender Inequality Index (2023) and 166 out of 170 countries in UNDP's Index of Social Gender Norms (2023), which aims to quantify the undervaluing of women's political, social and economic rights and capabilities globally.

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE BALANCING MULTIPLE – AND OFTEN COMPETING – EXPECTATIONS FROM THEIR FAMILIES, PEERS, RELIGIONS, ETHNIC GROUPS AND WIDER COMMUNITIES.

Young people are also facing what they have described as an identity crisis. They balance multiple – and often competing – expectations from their families, peers, religions, ethnic groups and wider communities. Some young people feel unable to meet traditional expectations – for example, related to starting, and providing for, families – due to widespread insecurity, high rates of unemployment, the COVID-19 pandemic and an associated reduction in social interactions. A number of young people describe pursuing alternative life paths, in part due to increased exposure to social media and critical examination of gender and social roles on radio programmes and through civic education.

This tension has contributed to a breakdown in trust and relations between young people and their wider communities. Young people who fail to meet traditional expectations report being accused of being lazy or unwilling to listen to the advice of elders and their parents, whereas those who explore alternative pathways can be seen as disrespecting established

family and community structures. This can leave young people increasingly vulnerable to recruitment or re-recruitment by armed groups, which can offer them a greater sense of identity and purpose. Many young people are also excluded from local peacebuilding spaces as their contributions can be devalued by local leaders.

As 2025 marks the 10th anniversary of the Youth Peace and Security agenda, which aims to increase young people's meaningful participation in peacebuilding, there is a timely opportunity to capitalise on the evolving role of young people in CAR. Analysing gender norms offers a useful starting point for peacebuilding practitioners to understand how young men and women can balance the multiple demands and expectations placed on them, while identifying opportunities to strengthen their contributions to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This requires a context-sensitive approach, which this paper sets out to further explore.

1.1 Research objectives

Conciliation Resources, FVJD and GEPAD carried out participatory research in Bangui and Sibut to understand more about what communities value when it comes to gender and social norms, how these have evolved as a result of ongoing conflict, and opportunities to leverage this to facilitate the more meaningful participation of young men and women in peacebuilding. As part of this process, young people then selected specific gender norms to challenge or further harness in order to advance peacebuilding goals in their communities through sub-grants.

The research had the following objectives:

1. Map the most influential gender norms emerging from discussions with community members across different demographics and levels of power
2. Understand how these impact young people's role in both conflict and peacebuilding efforts
3. Highlight preliminary lessons to guide future peacebuilding programming.

1.2 Why should peacebuilders engage with gender norms?

Analysing gender norms can help peacebuilders to better understand the expectations placed on different groups of people, and how this shapes their behaviours and experiences in conflict contexts. It can also help them to understand what a society values, and identify opportunities to promote the greater inclusion and wellbeing of traditionally excluded people in line with this.

Previous research carried out by Conciliation Resources in 2022 and 2023 found that gender norms play an influential role in shaping the expectations placed on young men and women in CAR, their involvement in violence and experiences of trauma, and opportunities for them to heal.²

For example, the research found that gender norms promoting bravery and courage among young men, and their responsibility to defend their families and community, were a key factor in incentivising some young men to become involved in violence during conflicts. Deeply ingrained expectations around masculinity, and the pressure to internalise the impact of violence and trauma, in turn contributed to potentially harmful coping mechanisms among young men and perpetuated cycles of violence. The research also found that gender norms can limit spaces for women's agency in peacebuilding spaces and can contribute to resentment between young people and elders.

While CAR does have some policy commitments on gender equality, these are primarily focused on either achieving gender parity through greater quotas of women in electoral and political offices, appointed positions and economic life,³ or reducing gender-based violence (GBV).⁴

These policies, and the associated actions which have accompanied them, have faced considerable challenges when it comes to implementation – in part because they have failed to engage with gender norms. For example, Conciliation Resources and partners' discussions revealed that the Law on Parity is perceived by some people in CAR to be a Western agenda which seeks to uproot local norms by overturning the roles of men in leadership positions. Similarly, GBV projects have overwhelmingly targeted women and girls (as victims) and men (as perpetrators), rather than engaging with the root gender norms which drive and perpetuate violence in the first place. These approaches have contributed to resistance to gender work, especially among some men who view such efforts as only seeking to support women and girls rather than being mutually beneficial.

WHAT ARE GENDER NORMS?

Gender norms refer to the expectations, qualities and opportunities associated with being a man or a woman, as well as different gender identities. They are specific to particular cultures, relationships and societies, can change over time and can have positive or harmful effects depending on how they are interpreted and enacted.

Gender norms are embedded and reproduced within spaces like schools, religious institutions, media channels, households and the military.

'Masculinities' refers to the qualities, behaviours and attitudes associated with or deemed appropriate for 'men', and 'femininities' for characteristics linked with 'women'.

Gender norms should be analysed in an intersectional way (for example, by considering the multiple expectations placed on a man in terms of his masculinity, age and ethnic group).

During conflict, gender norms can become heightened (for example, hyper-masculine narratives may be used to provoke violence among men and boys), instrumentalised (justifying violence in terms of protecting traditional gender and family norms or 'vulnerable women' deemed at risk) or rewritten (for example, women might start to take on responsibilities that used to be led by men).



1.3 Listening exercise methodology

Research was carried out using an active listening approach, which gathers a wide range of perspectives through open-ended questions and aims to build a rapport with participants to ensure their ownership and legitimacy of findings.

The process began with a five-day workshop for assistant researchers, made up of three Central African women and two men, focused on gender-sensitive conflict analysis tools⁵ designed to identify prominent expectations placed on men and women.

Listening exercises were then carried out in Bangui and the Kémo region of Sibut. These were selected because Conciliation Resources' previous research suggested a tension between how gender roles are conceived in CAR's capital and more rural areas.⁶ 81 women and 66 men participated in discussions across three age groups (25 to 30, 35 to 50 and over 50).

Target groups were mostly composed of young men and women in the informal sector, who are particularly vulnerable to armed group recruitment, and people who play an influential role in the transmission, protection and potential shifting of gender norms in relation to these groups, including young people's parents, local authorities and traditional leaders.

The listening exercise adopted a gender responsive and trauma-informed approach. Gender-separate interviews were carried out in the majority of settings to ensure participants felt able to share their views openly and safely, with all identifying data anonymised. Information on the research was provided in French and Sango to enable informed consent. Central African researchers input into the development of guiding questions to ensure cultural sensitivity, and led on carrying out all listening exercises. In both settings, two psychosocial support officers accompanied researchers to debrief after each interview, signpost participants to relevant services or provide psychological assistance in case required. Interviews were arranged in line with community working hours and childcare responsibilities.

Key findings will inform the design of youth-led peacebuilding initiatives implemented in participating communities.

2. KEY FINDINGS

2.1 How do gender norms shape young people's roles in conflict and peacebuilding?

The following section describes gender norms identified by communities in Bangui and Sibut as being the most influential and highly valued. The findings aim to illustrate that, in some cases, the way in which these norms are interpreted and enacted can contribute to conflict or exclusion among young people, whereas in other cases they bring about positive solutions to conflict, and can be further harnessed in order to strengthen young people's role in peacebuilding.

■ Expectations for young men to be brave and courageous can be interpreted through a lens of violence

Participants explained that during *baba* initiation rituals, young men commonly learn gendered responsibilities such as the importance of demonstrating bravery and courage, and protecting their communities from external danger. While bravery and courage can be enacted in support of conflict resolution – for example, through the facilitation of dialogue across conflict divides and championing of bold solutions – these gender norms are often interpreted through a lens of physical strength and violence which emphasises the importance of participating in conflict if a village is deemed to be at threat.

The consequences for failing to deliver on this gender norm can be severe: an ex-combatant in Sibut referred to an example of his male friend whose house was burnt down and looted because he resisted joining an armed group to defend his village from perceived aggressors. Some participants highlighted that men who are seen as not demonstrating bravery and courage can be called *cholago* (Banda for *useless or not hardworking*) and can experience stigmatisation from their communities.

To uphold symbols of bravery and courage, young men can also face considerable pressure to suppress their emotions which can further contribute to violence. For example, previous Conciliation Resources research (2023) found that elders sometimes discourage young men from showing emotions in public, noting that this disrespects the principle of enduring pain which is instilled in rituals.⁷ Some young men who have been involved in conflict have managed their associated trauma through potentially harmful coping mechanisms, such as isolating, looting or self-medicating. Others reported struggling with a perceived loss of masculinity on their return from armed groups, feeling they had failed to adequately protect their communities as was expected of them.

How young people plan to factor this gender norm into their peacebuilding projects

Young people in Sibut have chosen to raise awareness about the risks of the use of terms such as *cholago* and *kpassakara* through developing radio programme content, debates and education initiatives. In doing so, they aim to stimulate public conversation and demonstrate alternative ways that young men can demonstrate bravery and courage through acts which are nonviolent but are still regarded as acceptable and useful by communities.

■ Against a backdrop of unemployment and insecurity, young men have found creative, alternative ways to demonstrate responsibility

A masculine man was seen by the majority of research participants as someone who is hard-working, self-reliant and able to ensure financial stability for his family. These expectations also extend to a man's wider community and can create considerable pressures: for example, men are often expected to financially provide for their neighbours if needed.

The research found that this collective group of responsibilities can contribute to conflict in a number of ways. Firstly, if a man is perceived to be behaving irresponsibly, he can quickly lose the respect of his family and community (being referred to as *owi yere*) and related decision-making power. If a man's children or wife is seen to be behaving incorrectly, participants noted it can be interpreted by communities as a reflection of him not educating them properly. They referred to instances where men have engaged in domestic violence to reaffirm their control.

Secondly, participants referred to growing conflict between younger generations and elders when it comes to delivering on these responsibilities. They explained that in both Bangui and Sibut, early marriage is often encouraged by older men as a way of protecting core values among younger generations.⁸ For young women, this can mean dropping out of school early, becoming increasingly reliant on their husband's income and being more vulnerable to shocks including conflict, displacement and GBV. For young men, the pressures of becoming fathers and family providers before they have completed school and built a sufficient income – and while lacking many of the necessary emotional tools to manage this – can contribute to harmful coping mechanisms such as substance abuse and domestic violence.



Members of the Comité des Sages (Council of Elders) gather to discuss gender action plans developed by young people in the commune of Galafondo, Central African Republic. © Nick Bennett/Conciliation Resources

YOUNG PEOPLE NOTED THAT WHEN THEY HAVE FAILED TO MEET EXPECTATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH MARRIAGE AND STARTING FAMILIES, ELDERLY HAVE REFERRED TO THEM AS IDLE OR LACKING THE WORK ETHIC OF PREVIOUS GENERATIONS.

Nevertheless, participants in Sibut shared several examples of young men finding alternative and creative ways of demonstrating a sense of responsibility through actively contributing to their communities. This includes economic redistribution (whereby young men with a stable job will typically redistribute their income to their families and wider neighbours, contributing positively to community development), leading clubs and local organisations (young men have been establishing clubs to support rehabilitation, development and sanitation projects in their communities, which is viewed positively as a way of contributing to local peace), and pursuing entrepreneurship (young men in rural areas and cities who engage in small businesses and commerce tend to be well-respected for generating stable livelihoods for their wider communities).

■ Perceptions that young women should be empathetic and compassionate contribute to their perceived limitations in conflict resolution mechanisms

Participants noted that initiation rituals typically teach young women the importance of being empathetic and compassionate to others. While these qualities can be leveraged to demonstrate women's unique value in conflict resolution (especially when it comes to building trust with conflict parties and facilitating challenging conversations), they can also contribute to unhelpful stereotypes that women are 'natural peacebuilders', and fail to recognise the active role they can play in conflict.

While some women did report using skills associated with empathy and compassion in conflict resolution efforts, this tends to be restricted to forms of violence deemed 'private' and less of a priority in wider community conflict resolution mechanisms, such as GBV. Participants noted that if a woman was to bring these concerns to community mechanisms for resolving local conflict, such as the *Comité des sages*, she could be seen as betraying her family by airing private matters in public.

BECAUSE WOMEN ARE NOT EXPECTED TO DIRECTLY ENGAGE IN VIOLENCE, THEY ARE SUBSEQUENTLY EXCLUDED FROM PEACEBUILDING INITIATIVES BECAUSE THEY ARE PERCEIVED TO NOT UNDERSTAND CONFLICT ISSUES SUFFICIENTLY.

A number of participants felt that more 'gentle' methods associated with women can be viewed by conflict parties less credibly due to a 'hyper-masculine' approach to conflict resolution in CAR. They stated that serving in the military or armed groups requires a level of physical strength more typically associated with men, and could place women in positions of authority (for example, giving orders) which would contradict gender norms related to being gentle and compassionate. In both Bangui and Sibut, participants felt that, because women are not expected to directly engage in violence, they are subsequently excluded from peacebuilding initiatives because they are perceived to not understand conflict issues sufficiently.

Women in many ways face a 'lose lose' situation: while their 'gentle' methods can be deemed too soft by conflict parties, those who have engaged in violence face intense exclusion. For example, participants in Sibut felt if a woman did engage in violence this could exclude her

from being eligible for marriage, while Conciliation Resources' previous research (2020) highlighted that some young women who joined the Anti-balaka and Séléka experienced stigmatisation on their reintegration into communities due to perceptions that their behaviour was combative and went against traditional qualities associated with femininity.⁹

How young people plan to factor this gender norm into their peacebuilding projects

Young people in Bangui have chosen to explore how expectations around being humble and virtuous can contribute to self-censorship when women do gain access to civic spaces. Their activities will focus on platforming women's role as advisors in the household, and demonstrating how restricting their role in wider public spaces can have negative implications for community safety and wellbeing.

■ Young women have to meet higher standards to be taken seriously in peacebuilding spaces, such as balancing assertiveness with humility and family duty

Young women are widely considered to be good listeners, capable of advising their families on a range of issues. While some communities resist the idea of women in formal leadership roles, participants in Sibut acknowledged that men and women can share responsibilities when it comes to resolving conflict, as long as women balance traits such as listening, advising and being assertive with a sense of humility. They highlighted that it would be acceptable for a woman to be a *chef de quartier*, but that she would be burdened with demonstrating an 'appropriate' combination of technical skills as well as behaving in a 'feminine' way. Several references were also made by male and female participants to former President Catherine Samba Panza as a positive example of women's leadership, with an outspoken young woman sometimes compared positively to her.

In other cases, participants highlighted that if a woman utilises her advisory skills in public-facing roles, this can be perceived as a distraction from her duties in the household. In Bangui and Sibut, participants explained that women are expected to maintain their homes and be respectful and caring to their husbands, parents and in-laws. In Muslim communities in CAR, the term *Ashia*¹⁰ can be used to describe the virtue of a woman who is prepared to defend her husband's honour at all costs. In Ngoumbele and Galafondo communes in Sibut, this sense of duty appeared to be widely valued in a man's choice of a wife, with the term *djogoloma* used to negatively describe a woman who does not have the skills necessary to attain this.

WHILE SOME WOMEN FELT THE LAW ON PARITY OFFERS THE POTENTIAL TO REBALANCE POWER DYNAMICS IN THEIR HOUSEHOLDS AND COMMUNITIES, SOME MALE PARTICIPANTS PERCEIVED THE LAW AND ASSOCIATED NGO TRAININGS TO UNDERMINE THEIR POWER AND ENCOURAGE THEIR WIVES TO REBEL AGAINST TRADITIONAL DUTIES

This tension between leadership and duty is also illustrated in relation to CAR's Law on Gender Parity: while some women in Bangui view the law as an opportunity to radically challenge the patriarchal system (referring favourably to its '50/50' slogan), and while some women in Sibut felt it encourages their economic autonomy and offers the potential to rebalance power dynamics in their households and communities, some male participants perceived the law and associated NGO trainings to undermine their power and encourage their wives to 'rebel' against their traditional duties.

■ Cultural practices and spiritual beliefs influence the types of roles that young people can, and want, to pursue in their communities

Participants in both Bangui and Sibut noted that adherence to cultural practices, including respecting religious teachings, is an important part of being both a young person and a man. Women are also traditionally seen as pious figures, faithful to their religion and traditions, participating in religious activities and respecting cultural prohibitions (for example, around the preparation of food). Respect to elders is also a foundational value, with participants noting this often manifests through a belief that young people should not voice their opinions in public settings. Young people felt that their participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding is generally most effective if it demonstrates complementarity to these teachings and values.

Participants in Bangui and Sibut also noted that certain spiritual beliefs can affect the roles that young men and women are willing to pursue. For example, the position of neighbourhood chief or mayor is often associated with witchcraft which discourages many young people from wanting to run for elections or become village chiefs.¹¹

How young people plan to factor this social norm into their peacebuilding projects

Young people in Sibut have chosen to organise debates to demystify perceptions that local leadership positions involve witchcraft and encourage more young people to become involved in peacebuilding dialogue and decision-making with the support of their wider communities.



A youth volunteer presents their findings as part of a French Embassy funded project promoting gender equality in their communities in Sibut, Central African Republic. © Nick Bennett/Conciliation Resources

2.2 How are gender norms and roles evolving as a result of the conflict?

This section outlines examples of gender norms and roles which are evolving due to the wider conflict context in CAR, providing both challenges and potential entry points for strengthening young men and women's role in peacebuilding.

■ Economic constraints are contributing to a shift in women's leadership which could extend to peacebuilding spaces

Participants in Bangui reflected that financial constraints have started to gradually shift patriarchal power hierarchies. While financial responsibilities for families used to rest solely on men, there are growing numbers of women participating in the workforce (including trade, business, *tiri ngangurs* and traditionally male-dominated fields such as masonry) and making economic decisions which affect the household. While it is important to recognise that this is often out of necessity (for example, if husbands have passed away or disappeared for long periods of time), young female participants all cited financial independence as a key aspiration.

IN SIBUT, WOMEN BUSINESS OWNERS SHARED EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY LEADERS GRANTING THEM ACCESS AND ROLES IN DECISION-MAKING SPACES SUCH AS THE *COMITÉ DES SAGES* AS A RESULT OF INCREASED CREDIBILITY.

There are also promising links between economic autonomy and greater agency in decision-making spaces. For example, in Sibut, women business owners shared examples of community leaders granting them access and roles in decision-making spaces such as the *Comité des sages*¹² as a result of increased credibility. While some participants did caveat that more financially active women can be labelled as rebellious and must ensure this does not affect their husband's reputation negatively, there is an opportunity to showcase the skills women are displaying in the economic sector within wider peacebuilding spaces.

■ Conflict resolution approaches are becoming more holistic and could facilitate greater inclusion of women and young people

Some participants have observed a gradual shift in conflict resolution methods which previously emphasised direct confrontation, to more of a focus on dialogue, reflecting on and accepting individual responsibility, behaviour and choices, and mediation by formal authorities such as neighbourhood chiefs and mayors, who sometimes engage with prefectural youth councils. Qualities and strengths typically associated with being a woman, including being a good listener and demonstrating empathy, could be leveraged to demonstrate complementarity to this shift in approach. Young people are also uniquely placed to broaden awareness about individual responsibility and behaviour (for example, through mobilising their social networks).

■ Social networks and new technologies are reframing gender roles but heightening tensions between young people and elders

In recent years, radio programmes¹³ dealing with issues of social inequality have contributed to a critical examination of gender roles and expectations in CAR. While the majority of young participants felt this had highlighted a wider-ranging potential for women (for example, in terms of studying, taking on new career paths and assuming public leadership roles), these aspirations conflict with the attitudes of some elders and community leaders. For example, one elder commented that it is 'not normal' that they are now expected to collaborate with young people in civic spaces, citing their lack of respect for authority and cultural values. As some young people have increased access to different means of livelihoods and education, and some young women take on more active roles as providers, this risks disrupting the role of elders when it comes to community resources and decision-making.

THE LISTENING EXERCISE IDENTIFIED A DESIRE FROM BOTH YOUNG PEOPLE AND ELDERS FOR IMPROVED COMMUNICATION AND UNDERSTANDING.

Nevertheless, the listening exercise identified a desire from both young people and elders for improved communication and understanding, and a recognition from elders that unemployed young people require opportunities to help them reach their full potential. There is an opportunity for peacebuilders to build inter-generational trust and collaboration by promoting the skills that young people can bring and how these can be beneficial for local leaders (such as new perspectives on conflict and problem-solving approaches) while creating spaces for young people to learn from the wealth of experience that elders bring.

■ Ongoing conflict and forced displacement have contributed to a shift in gender norms and practices among certain ethnic groups

Young women from the Fulani community in Sibut noted that the ongoing conflict and subsequent reduction in livestock has resulted in many young men being less able to take care of their households. In turn, some young women have become less willing to accept their husbands having second or third wives as they feel this places unnecessary additional pressure on men to provide for multiple households. This cultural shift has potentially contributed to wider shifts in the roles and relations of men and women; for example, among the Foulbé Fulani, gender norms previously required couples to live in separate houses whereas some young people are now living together and reporting increased mutual respect for one another as a result.

Participants also highlighted examples of women being increasingly valued for demonstrating typically masculine traits such as strength and bravery. For example, while some men fled in the wake of the conflict, women had fewer chances to do this. Those who stayed and took on more responsibilities in community affairs were seen as strong and, in some cases, experienced greater confidence and credibility in local decision-making spaces. This 'flip' in gender norms could be leveraged in a similar way to challenge harmful attitudes around men and masculinity (as men who are perceived to demonstrate typically feminine behaviours – such as expressing their emotions as a result of trauma experienced during conflict – are commonly referred to as *wali* – 'female' or 'robber').

■ An increasing return of state security could reduce the incentive and expectations for young men to engage in community-based violence

Participants noted that gender norms around bravery and courage were traditionally promoted in order to protect communities from perceived threats by outside communities. Over time, however, this narrative has been used by community-based armed groups such as the ex-anti-balaka, UPC and 3R, who have recruited young men under the guise of community protection (sometimes also supported by traditional chiefs as a means of protecting clans and preserving ancestral knowledge and practices), when in reality their work has harmed local populations. Previous research from Conciliation Resources (2023)¹⁴ highlighted that young people have increasingly struggled to relate to the purpose of ongoing violence, experiencing high rates of depression and increasing resentment to leaders who they felt had sanctioned fighting in the first place.

Participants in Sibut, however, highlight a turning point, noting that the presence of the FACA has increased a sense of security and protection in some communities, thereby reducing expectations on young men to be protectors. Although it is important to recognise that state security is largely absent in rural areas, where a significant number of young men are engaged in herder-farmer violence, this shift provides a potential opportunity to redefine expectations around bravery and strength and how young men can demonstrate these in nonviolent ways.

3. HOW CAN PEACEBUILDERS RESPOND? PRELIMINARY LESSONS

This section presents initial suggestions for how Conciliation Resources, partners and wider civil society groups in CAR can begin to work with gender norms to promote young people's role in peacebuilding. Some of these lessons will be further tested by young people as part of their peacebuilding projects, and presented in a Toolkit to be developed at the end of the project.

1. Peacebuilders must avoid reinforcing perceptions that gender work is a Western imposition

The listening exercise challenged our previous research findings and preconceptions that norms are more conducive towards gender equality in CAR's capital city, Bangui, instead uncovering a number of examples of women taking more active roles in rural communities in Sibut.

Nevertheless, in both areas, men and women face significant risks if they are perceived to digress from established gender norms: participants noted that women can be labelled *pindougou* (a bad woman or danger to the wider community, open to accusations of immorality and punishable by village councils), while men can be called *tiolago* (lazy) or *yèrè* (worthless). Learning from CAR's Law on Parity has also shown that discussions around gender can quickly become polarising if they are perceived to be disrupting established roles and relations.

'Blanket' approaches to engaging with gender norms (for example, relying on standardised definitions, numerical quotas or indicators of success) will therefore fail to grapple with the complexities of how gender norms are valued, interpreted and enacted in different communities.

WORK ON GENDER NORMS IS LIKELY TO BE MOST EFFECTIVE IF IT TAKES A HIGHLY CONTEXTUALISED, STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH, RATHER THAN IMMEDIATELY HONING IN ON NORMS WHICH CAN HAVE NEGATIVE EFFECTS.

Work on gender norms is likely to be most effective if it takes a highly contextualised, strengths-based approach (focused on harnessing and nurturing norms which are conducive to nonviolence and inclusion – such as being active community contributors – rather than immediately honing in on norms which can have negative effects). Under this project, supporting young people to analyse and choose gender norms to focus on which they think are fuelling conflict and preventing the full participation of their peers enables us to adjust approaches to local specificities and test the effectiveness of interventions towards different issues.

2. Future work is likely to be most effective if it shifts the lens through which gender norms are interpreted, rather than gender norms themselves

Building on the point above, the key challenge is not gender norms in and of themselves, but rather how these are interpreted due to the conditions of conflict. The research found that, while some norms are interpreted in violent ways (for example, bravery and courage), others can bring positive solutions and entry points for peace. Rather than imposing external values systems, approaches should support communities to rebuild harmony which was disrupted as a result of ongoing conflict while acknowledging and adapting to the changing roles of young people and women.

Showcasing alternative examples of young men fulfilling gender norms in nonviolent ways (for example, through active community contributions) can also be an effective tool, especially when endorsed by so-called 'socio-cultural guardians' – male and female elders and community leaders with significant influence over how gender norms are interpreted and applied. Several participants highlighted that some elders are willing, for example, to discourage violence among young men even if it means they are personally criticised for being weak. In other instances, pastors and religious leaders are helping to shift certain attitudes through their sermons and teachings.



3. There are some tensions between and within certain gender norms, which could provide entry points for further discussion

For example, participants in Sibut felt that demonstrating moral and ethical character is critical for men. They shared that this involves abstaining from dishonest behaviour (such as violence and substance abuse), respecting their wives and avoiding controlling behaviours. At the same time, violence is intrinsic to dominant interpretations of bravery and courage, representing a contradiction across gender norms. The research also identified examples of women being accused of betrayal for pursuing leadership opportunities, and in other cases being compared positively to President Catherine Samba Panza. Despite men's clear roles as providers, participants in both Bangui and Sibut shared that a woman should work hard (whether in the field in Sibut or through small commerce in Bangui), and in certain circumstances she may be expected to increase her economic responsibilities (such as if her husband becomes unemployed or she becomes widowed).

DISCUSSIONS ON GENDER NORMS OFFER A USEFUL ENTRY POINT FOR IDENTIFYING COMPLEMENTARITY ACROSS OTHER FORMS OF IDENTITY, AND HOW TO BALANCE AND FULFIL MULTIPLE EXPECTATIONS.

These examples – and acknowledgement of the complex and varying expectations that men and women face – provide an entry point for further discussion around how gender roles are evolving in line with social, cultural and economic conditions. Discussions on gender norms also offer a useful entry point for identifying complementarity across other forms of identity, and how to balance and fulfil multiple expectations (for example, what it means to be a young person, a man and part of the Fulbe ethnic group).

4. Approaching discussions on gender from a power, rather than victim, lens reduces resistance

Approaching gender through a focus on women (as victims) and men (as perpetrators) can be perceived by communities as accusatory, contributing to defensiveness and shutting down space for meaningful engagement. It also risks reinforcing unhelpful stereotypes that women are subjects to be protected, undermining the expertise and agency they can bring to peacebuilding spaces, and failing to respond to the gender-specific risks that men experience in conflict.

APPROACHING GENDER THROUGH A VICTIM LENS RISKS REINFORCING UNHELPFUL STEREOTYPES THAT WOMEN ARE SUBJECTS TO BE PROTECTED, UNDERMINING THE EXPERTISE AND AGENCY THEY CAN BRING TO PEACEBUILDING SPACES, AND FAILING TO RESPOND TO THE GENDER-SPECIFIC RISKS THAT MEN EXPERIENCE IN CONFLICT.

Approaches are likely to be more successful if they help to demonstrate the mutual benefits of young men and women's increased agency, emphasising that objectives are not to overturn men's power but rather bring others to an equal level. Inviting male leaders to join gender-specific workshops can help to demonstrate how such initiatives can benefit their own work (for example, through exposure to different experiences and perspectives), while increasing a sense of mutual ownership.

Discussions around gender can be most effective when they relate to people's everyday lives. For example, CAR-based gender practitioners noted that facilitating discussions with men and women on power sharing in the household (through listing responsibilities men and women do in a day) can help to highlight inequalities and open up discussions on shifting roles in broader community activities. An evaluation of Conciliation Resources' work in West Africa also found that supporting men to think about different levels of power among themselves can be an effective starting point for thinking about wider power dynamics in their communities. For example, engaging men with very little power (such as men with disabilities and unemployed youth) to men with certain degrees of power (former vigilantes and armed youth) and comparatively more power (traditional and religious leaders, police, and security officials) enabled facilitators to subtly highlight unequal power relations, connect men across perceived hierarchies, and highlight the importance of engaging different perspectives in community conflict resolution and peacebuilding.¹⁵

5. Promoting alternative models of masculinity could reduce violence and increase women's participation in peacebuilding

The research highlighted that dominant norms associated with masculinity (such as bravery, courage and responsibility) are often interpreted through a lens of violence. These expectations can be reinforced by men, authorities, and in some cases women, and maintain patriarchal power systems. They can have negative effects on men's own safety and wellbeing as well as women's inclusion in peacebuilding processes (for example, by restricting their agency or positioning women leaders as rebellious). Interventions are likely to be most effective if they tackle these root gender norms.

Approaches which promote positive masculinity are likely to meet less resistance while also challenging common perceptions in CAR that gender work only seeks to benefit women and girls. These approaches primarily focus on engaging men as champions of gender equality, transforming links between masculinity and violence and addressing the gendered insecurities that men themselves face.¹⁶

MOSAIC MASCULINITIES IS A SPECIFIC EXERCISE THAT CAN SUPPORT YOUNG MEN TO CREATE POSITIVE IDEALS FOR THEMSELVES BASED ON WHAT THEY VALUE, WHAT THEY CAN ATTAIN, WHO THEY WANT TO BE AND HOW THEY WANT OTHERS TO VIEW THEM.

Mosaic masculinities is a specific exercise that can support young men to create positive ideals for themselves based on what they value, what they can attain, who they want to be and how they want others to view them, helping to guide subsequent behaviour and decision-making.¹⁷ Discussions around caring masculinities can also help to explore nonviolent alternatives to fulfilling existing gender norms. In other contexts, this has helped men to redefine gender norms such as competence (as ability to care over 'mastery' over one's family), respect (as love rather than fear of the patriarch's authority), and pride (as taking care of a child rather than being 'too proud' to do care work).¹⁸ Linking reflections on masculinity to cultural and interpersonal values can also be effective. For example, research in Ghana found that drawing on cultural beliefs that men and women are considered to be incomplete subjects encouraged male heads of household to accommodate the views of their wives as equal partners in decision-making.¹⁹

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8. For example, whereas in Sibut this can be seen as a symbol of honour for a young woman and pride for a young man, in Bangui it is more commonly pursued to counter economic hardship.
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10. Ashia: a term used to describe to remind a married lady to keep silence and not denounce her husband
11. For example, *Fondation Végas pour le Développement* referred to an example of a young woman who demonstrated leadership potential but was hesitant to pursue this out of fear she would be cast as a witch. After awareness raising with partners and the local chief under a previous project, she shifted her perception and decided to run in the upcoming municipal elections.
12. *The Comité des sages (Committee of the Wise) is an advisory body with more influence than the mayor on local decision making processes*
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