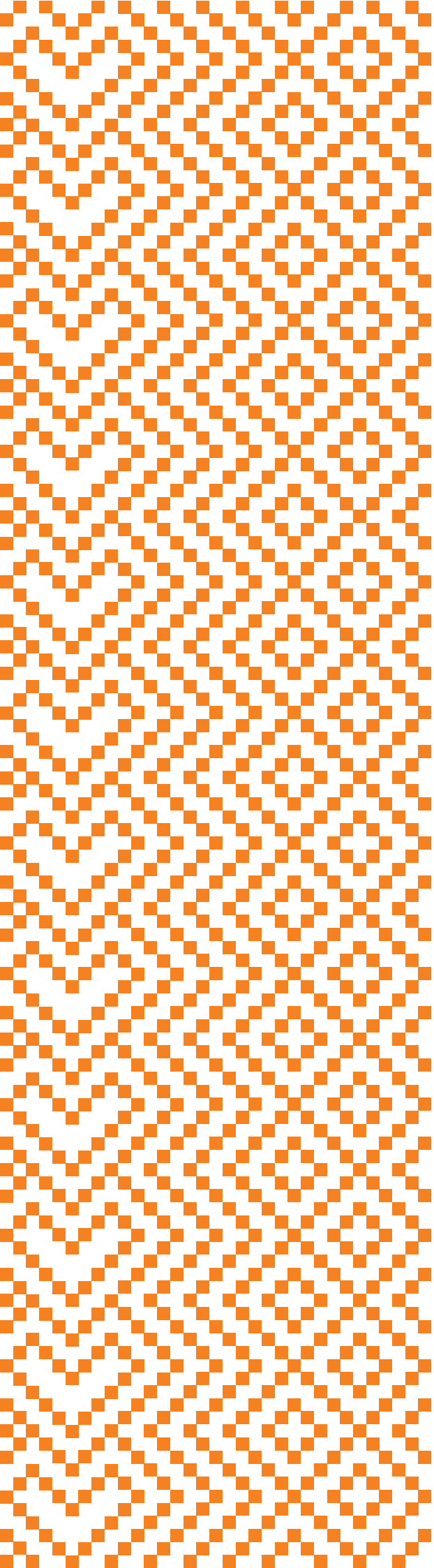


Case study: Cauce

Venezuela



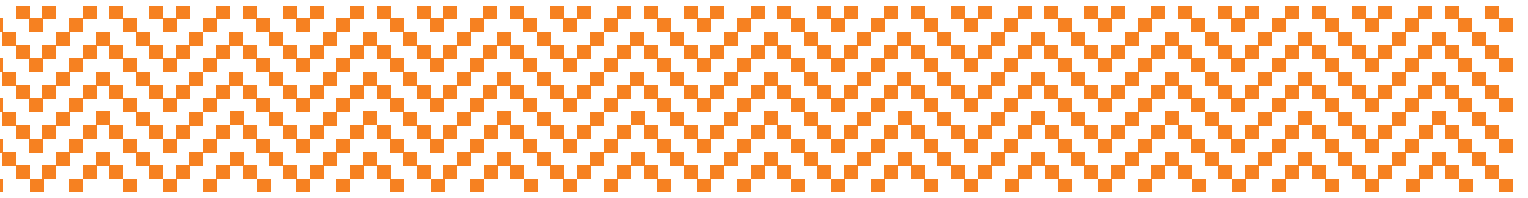
During the last two decades, Venezuela has experienced a high climate of polarization and tension among sectors of society that support the Bolivarian and socialist national government, and sectors of society that took distance from it and grouped in independence or in opposition schemes. This situation has led to a profound political, economic and humanitarian crisis that has produced the migration of more than 7 million persons.¹ According to political parties and movements that criticize the government, migration happens as a result of the complex humanitarian emergency, while the national government attributes it to the economic impact of unilateral coercive measures.²

Several dialogue attempts have taken place between government representatives and the opposition to resolve this conflict, under the auspices of international governments and agencies and by political and social actors in Venezuela. The most recent dialogue process is the negotiation working group carried out in Mexico with the support of Norway, installed for the first time in August 2021, restarted in November 2022 and stopped again at the beginning of 2023. Unfortunately, none of these efforts have had a happy ending, which has worsened the climate of uncertainty, mistrust and lack of credibility among the parties.

This political crisis has had different repercussions over the life of Venezuelan women and girls. Feminization of poverty, access barriers to sexual and reproductive health, obstacles to gain access to justice and receive support in cases of gender violence, and the lack of assurance for political participation³, show how, women, regardless of their political orientation, are equally affected by the Venezuelan conflict. Additionally, female participation in negotiations has been limited and has faced multiple barriers for effective inclusion since, according to a feminist woman: *“The male logic that men make decisions and reach agreements continues to prevail.”*⁴ About this, a political leader said: *“We experience the same realities in political parties with different ideologies but with very similar realities; we are waging the same permanent battle to belong to and participate.”*⁵ This lack of representation prevents approaching the specific needs of women in negotiation processes, which directly affects peacebuilding and democracy in Venezuela. Despite these challenges, the group called “Women for Dialogue and Peace in Venezuela” makes very valuable contributions to democracy expansion in the country. This group was consolidated in the framework of the initiative named “Building women’s leadership in Venezuelan negotiation processes”, promoted by the

Cauce Association thanks to the support of the Rapid Response Window (RRW). The group is made up of more than 20 Venezuelan feminist women who belong to various female organizations from different political tendencies and ideologies. Together, they were able to reach consensus on more than 20 recitals and 37 commitments stated in the agenda: “From partners in conflict to partners in peace: together to defend the rights of women in Venezuela”. Its objective is to make life conditions visible and to transform them considering ethnic, racial, sexual orientation and gender identity approaches, and addressing economic, political and economic aspects from the social, legislative and political perspectives.⁶ With the agenda, this group calls on the government and on Venezuelan society to accomplish its inclusion in discussion groups and, thus, accomplish advancement in fulfilling the rights of women. This short text presents its accomplishments, best practices and opportunities for the future.

Major accomplishments



The group of “Women for Dialogue and Peace in Venezuela” **established an innovative and sustainable precedent in Venezuelan politics**, especially considering the multiple failed attempts at negotiation. First off, their approach was innovative in **demonstrating that it is possible to build trust, reach agreements and generate empathy in a context of high political polarization**, even within the women’s movement, when dialogue is used as a democratic principle and a specific political objective is outlined where appropriate to guarantee the rights of women and promote peace in the country. *“We have a political system that we do not all share, but we do share some common problems in the context of the crisis. We managed to understand that we must set aside our own personal interests, even our ideologies, and work with what unites us all as the central point,” shared a feminist woman from the “opposition”.*⁷ In this way, this group of women managed to overcome their ideological differences by understanding that polarization and conflict generate problems that affect them all, and that to solve them they need to act collectively. This successful

example becomes a benchmark for the rest of the country, as stated by a feminist woman close to the government: *“I am convinced that the small contribution that we provide helps us show that seed that allows us to advance in the complex processes that our country experiences. With experiences like those we have lived through, we are able to demonstrate that women or, in general, people who have a common objective, can sit down to have a transparent discussion to reach agreements that allow maintaining democracy and peace.”*⁸

On the other hand, it is sustainable because although there have been some feminist concerted efforts in the country, these have been sectoral, short-term and ineffective, limited to holding meetings without concrete advocacy actions. This is what the Cauce coordinator stated: *“Other initiatives have taken place, for example, by women politicians or young people, but those remain mere meetings, they do not advance to make an impact together.”*¹⁰ On the contrary, the group of “Women for Dialogue and

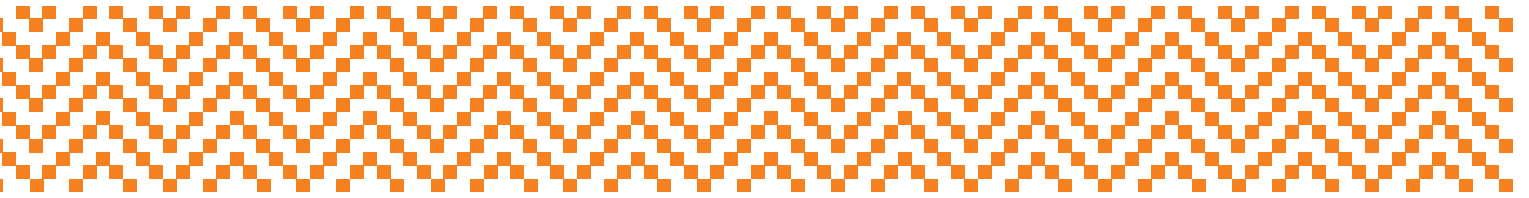
Demonstrating that it is possible to build trust, reach agreements and generate empathy in a context of high political polarization.

Peace in Venezuela” **not only managed to build agreements, but also agreed on concrete collective advocacy actions** embodied in a fight/action plan, which to date is implemented both with the national government as well as with the “opposition” movement represented in various sectors and political parties.

This step towards collective political advocacy is of vital importance, especially considering that the women’s movement in Venezuela *“has been affected by the crisis itself, and this has caused it to lose strength.”*¹¹ In fact, the women from “Women for Dialogue and Peace in Venezuela” who were interviewed stated that the big challenge they have after having built the agenda is to make and maintain joint advocacy.¹² As a result of this agenda, women who are members of the group will avoid dispersing efforts in individual advocacy actions but rather will row together towards a common objective and take advantage of their respective areas of influence: women in official groups are closer to Venezuelan institutional frameworks, and women who

criticize the government are closer to political parties and movements in the opposition. Consequently, Cauce’s initiative can re-build a weakened bond that allows for more effective impact and greater capacity for influence and visibility in the different political and social spheres of the country.

Best practices



Cauce achieves these results thanks to two main reasons. Firstly, due to **the attention given to and the criteria established to select participating women**. The call for women to participate was a long process that represented several challenges and difficulties for Cauce due to the context of polarization, because many of the women could feel “*threatened by being in the same space with other colleagues with a different ideological or political position.*”¹³ In addition, the process required considerable investment of time because they had to remain in isolation for 2 full weeks. With these considerations, Cauce’s choice was based on a specific criterion: feminist activist women truly committed to resolving the conflict in their country. They then focused on a call focused on quality over quantity.

Women who were invited had a “*high activism profile*”¹⁴, as they have been working for many years in feminist initiatives from different political, institutional, private and academic perspectives. This profile is critical to ensure collective advocacy and visibility

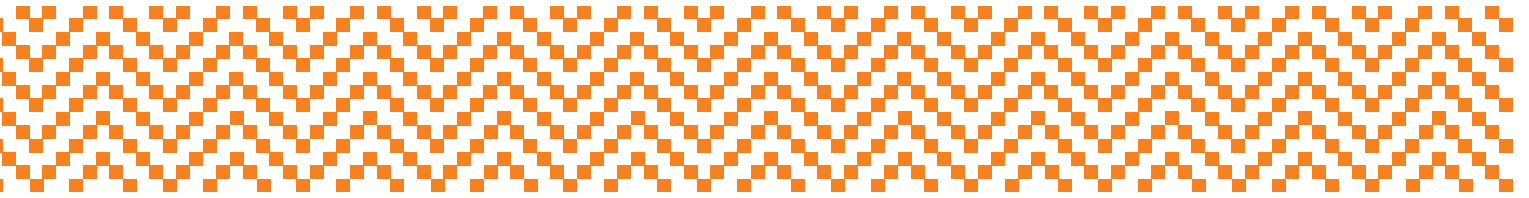
of the agenda but is viable only if women are truly committed and acquire ownership of the importance of the process. To Cauce, This commitment was one of the most important ingredients to reach dialogue and consensus, as reported by its coordinator: “*Those who participated did so with the conviction that it is necessary to have a women’s agenda in the negotiations, and they really want there to be advancement in women’s rights with the voices of all.*”¹⁵ A woman close to the government also shared: “*The spirit and commitment to a common cause that goes beyond the individual causes of those of us who were there encouraged us to sit with our colleagues with different political ideologies and practices.*”¹⁶ Fortunately, they found this shared conviction in different women, since “*beyond the opposition/pro-government dichotomy, the group includes women journalists, from the LGBT community, Afro-descendants, elected women, and women who work in various communities*”¹⁷ of the country, which expands the representation and reach of the group.

The success of the initiative is also attributed to the ability to involve experts in negotiation and conflict resolution, ensuring an effective methodology of the highest technical level.



On the other hand, the success of the initiative is also attributed to the **ability to involve experts in negotiation and conflict resolution**, ensuring an effective methodology¹⁸ of the highest technical level. The individual part was addressed first, which allowed participants to rid themselves of biases about the parties in conflict, giving rise to building emotional ties and mutual recognition between them. After taking this first step, training on negotiation skills and peaceful conflict resolution began, which in practice translated into the group's cohesion and the agreements reached. The selection of said methodology was the right decision by Cauce, since *“a precise methodology and strategy is required for the method not to destroy the intention.”*¹⁹ Likewise, participating women highlighted the care and respect with which Cauce carried out the process, involving experts on the subject and impeccably executing logistical issues so that they always felt comfortable.

Opportunities for the future



The contribution by Cauce to building peace in Venezuela is evident. Now, its next challenge is to continue consolidating the bonds of trust created in the group of women. Although a collective agenda has been built, there are still great expectations and possible challenges that could put these bonds of trust at risk. Therefore, it is essential that all parties involved in this process commit to not letting the progress achieved be lost over time, and to collectively overcome any difficulties that may arise in the future. However, it is encouraging to note that there is general willingness to maintain and strengthen the consolidated group and its peace commitments. This is what a woman from the group shared: *“If this process does not have a common thread, progress may stop. But there is a lot of willingness to keep that common thread going.”*²⁰

Furthermore, it is crucial to **add more women to this initiative**. While Cauce has played a fundamental role in organizing and facilitating this process, it would be very beneficial to make it an effort driven by all Venezuelan

women. Cauce is already taking its efforts in this direction, with an agenda dissemination exercise so that more women join it. As its coordinator stated: *“Cauce organized the process, but the next step is for this initiative to become a “channel” of multiple and diverse Venezuelan women committed to dialogue and peace, driven by Cauce, but for all women. We want Chavistas and opposition members, who are certainly not homogeneous groups, to identify what brings us together: the fight for equality and respect for the human rights of women within a democratic context.”*²¹ The upcoming presidential election in 2024, already marked by strong polarization²², presents a great opportunity to highlight the efforts and contributions of “Women for Dialogue and Peace in Venezuela,” both on a national and international scale.

Finally, it is worth noting that these opportunities will only be possible if Cauce **continues to build support ties with the international community**, as it is very likely that they will not find the technical and financial support to continue promoting



women's participation in the negotiation process in the country. It is essential that they continue to open paths with the different international audience and with private organizations.

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