

Transatlantic Security Dialogue

Diálogo Transatlántico de Seguridad



POLICY BRIEF

Weaving security through community resilience

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Abstract

The policy brief argues that resilience, although widely cited and praised as a core pillar of NATO's deterrence and defense strategy, remains underdeveloped in practice and should be more fully explored in Latin American contexts, particularly Mexico. Community resilience serves as both a deterrence and defense measure and also as an actionable source of local intelligence for security purposes. This brief highlights

the role of women as "community weavers" of communal social fabric, advocating for the need to create actions, networks, and systems that address them specifically. In sum, the paper contends that investing in community resilience is an investment in long-term security, and that lessons from the Mexican context could position the country as both a regional example and a strategic partner, offering NATO insights to better operationalize resilience and the Women, Peace, and Security agenda beyond policy and into practice.

Introduction

Deterrence and defense make up one of the three core tasks for NATO's 360-degree security approach along with *crisis prevention*, *crisis and management*, and cooperative security. This framework implies actions across the land, air, maritime, cyber and space domains, and against all threats and challenges. And although NATO has adopted the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda (WPS) and has intended to reframe their approach to adopt a more preventive strategy, the concepts of deterrence and defense remain heavily militarized, thus lacking the preventive character they aim to achieve. The result is a persistent cycle of mitigation and preparedness rather than a diversified, democratized security strategy that truly integrates prevention.

Within this pillar, *resilience* has emerged as a core element. NATO defines it as the "individual and collective capacity to prepare for, resist, respond to, and quickly recover from shocks and disruptions," framing it as both a national responsibility and a collective com-

mitment among its member states. Resilience has a strategic-communal value, further emphasized by *civilian preparedness*, one of its core components. At its core, this serves three key objectives: 1) continuity of government, 2) continuity of essential services to the population, and 3) civil support to military operations in case of unforeseen crises. An essential yet underdeveloped enabler of NATO's resilience framework is the systematic integration of local intelligence, rooted in a steady, trust-based flow of situational awareness from the ground up. In fragile contexts, this is often generated organically through community networks and informal leaders who maintain daily contact with the population. If institutionalized carefully, local intelligence has the potential to bridge the gap between national security structures and the lived realities of communities, enabling early detection of risks, anticipating the escalation of violence, and directing resources where they are most needed. Communal intelligence is also a mechanism for building institutional trust when paired with reciprocating action. If communities see their information acted upon with

transparency and reciprocity, the legitimacy of the state's presence is strengthened. When resilience efforts are only delivered through top-down approaches and communities do not feel seen, heard, or included as active participants, the results allow for the conditions in which armed groups thrive: information vacuums, institutional mistrust, and the isolation of communities from decision-making processes.

Operationalizing resilience therefore demands that security institutions engage communities as active partners rather than passive beneficiaries. This

means creating safe and reliable reporting channels, training local women and men, and using community spaces as venues to engage communities in security dialogue. If implemented thoroughly, these partnerships improve intelligence through trust and information-sharing, while creating long-term stability through a sense of co-responsibility and strengthened social bonds. Yet, these gains are inherently fragile if not institutionalized domestically. They can erode rapidly if the social networks that underpin them are left vulnerable to intimidation, infiltration, or dismantlement by armed or criminal groups.

Mexican resilience

In 2022, NATO established resilience as a core element of collective defense, calling for an “all-hazards” and “whole-of-society” approach to strengthen societies against disruption and to discourage attacks by making it difficult for adversaries to achieve their objectives (a strategy known as deterrence by denial). Despite this high-level endorsement, implementation remains a challenge to be tackled. Efforts have concentrated on technical guidelines such as NATO's seven baseline resilience requirements rather than on fostering social cohesion or enhancing community-level readiness. This gap is particularly pronounced beyond NATO's immediate sphere, where resilience remains an underdeveloped but highly adaptable tool for other regions. The seven baseline requirements are oriented towards external attacks (inter-state conflict), due to the nature of NATO's mandate, but limits their applicability in contexts like Latin America, where violence is predominantly internal, driven by the dynamics of armed groups and criminal factions, and where consequences such as territorial control, displacement, and civilian targeting are more common. Moreover, resilience has not integrated a WPS approach, despite the asymmetrical experiences faced upon communal destabilization and the recognized role of women in creating community, preserving social stability, and their impact on long-lasting peace.

Exploring community resilience as the first line of defense in Latin America, particularly in Mexico, offers NATO members insights into operating in contested environments where violence is driven by internal factions. In these settings, communities often face weak social ties and low trust in institutions, thus, building resilience requires expanding beyond the traditional scope. Lessons learned from these contexts could strengthen their own domestic preparedness and enhance readiness to respond to crises in complex situations or regions beyond NATO's traditional focus.

Mexico finds itself in a *de facto* internal conflict against organized crime. Cartels and criminal groups wield significant coercive power, especially in certain states that also extend beyond territorial limitations. These groups control territory and seek to expand their sphere of influence resulting in displaced populations, infiltrated institutions, and weaponized fear. In regions where the state's presence is weakened or structures have become complicit, communities face daily pressures that resemble wartime dynamics, including assassinations, gun smuggling, kidnappings, extortion, heightened gender-based violence, forced recruitment, and human trafficking. Although official narratives often frame this crisis as a matter of law enforcement, the lived experience for many resembles low to middle-intensity conflict, with blurred lines between state and non-state actors. As a result, all possibility of trust is eroded.

Historically, this chronic insecurity, combined with limited state presence in many rural and marginalized areas, has given rise to communities developing localized security strategies, so-called *autodefensas*, in an attempt to protect themselves where government institutions have been unable to do so. These groups represent an important example of civilian resistance, but their sustainability relies on fragile social resources that are difficult to maintain under constant threat: trust, cohesion, and reciprocity. The proliferation of *autodefensas* reveals the potential and the risks of community resilience in the absence of institutional engagement. While often born out of necessity, these groups can easily become co-opted by criminal organizations or spiral into parallel forms of violence. Still, this history of bottom-up organization offers insight into foundations of community resilience and resistance that, if purposefully supported and institutionally anchored, could evolve into a model of civilian resis-

tance closer to NATO's framework. Reaching that goal, however, requires rebuilding institutional trust in areas deeply marked by violence and institutional mistrust.

Nonetheless, if Mexico integrates community resilience as a security strategy, it could position itself as a strategic partner to NATO and its allies. Lessons learned from its experience, particularly around social malleability in a context with deeply embedded criminal groups could be instructive for member states facing their own challenges or to prevent similar fragmentations. So far, the potential has remained under-leveraged because there is a disconnect between grassroots efforts and official security institutions. Both the challenge and opportunity lie in the capacity of the government to recognize these efforts as possible pathways to security. By doing so, Mexico can transform pockets of local resilience into a broad strategy of stability and even become a model for the region.

Women, Community and Security

Gender equality in security is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity

-Jens Stoltenberg, former NATO Secretary General (2019)

The absence of a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) perspective in resilience planning remains a critical oversight, but especially so in contexts where the gendered nature of violence is inseparable from the broader decline in security and social order. Resilience has yet to meaningfully integrate a WPS approach, despite the asymmetrical experiences borne by women during communal destabilization and their recognized role in sustaining social cohesion. In fragile environments, women frequently anchor the social and logistical networks that keep communities functioning. These contributions are rarely incorporated into formal security planning, despite evidence that women's participation in local security structures can accelerate trust-building, improve the flow of accu-

rate intelligence, and enhance the durability of peace. By overlooking this dimension, resilience frameworks risk reinforcing a top-down approach that neglects one of the most reliable, adaptive, and context-aware resources in fragile settings.

Women in both rural and urban communities act as community weavers, sustaining the social fabric and creating informal networks that remain largely invisible to formal security structures. These roles, often disregarded for their gendered and social nature, are in fact the backbone of community resilience. Incorporating women into security requires a shift in perception. Women must be recognized as active agents in the construction of security, prevailing over the reductive view of women as passive victims or outsiders to public affairs. While strides have been made in this direction, the increased recognition of women's specific experiences has not helped advance their political participation, communal validity, nor academic integration of these issues as society-wide but rather as matters that happen to women and are only addressed by women.

Within NATO, the WPS Agenda remains far from fully mainstreamed. Women's security concerns are frequently treated as peripheral to "real" strategic priorities. In this sense, even if more visible, the lack of redefinition has pushed women's marginalization into a tight spot: their issues are seen and discussed but never thoroughly addressed nor regarded as the missing piece in wider security and crisis strategies. Transcending the belief that integrating women into security is a matter of social equality or imposed through agendas is needed to understand that it is, factually, a matter of operational effectiveness.

Across Mexico, particularly in high-conflict zones, women's social roles as "community weavers" generate extensive informal networks through care work, social and religious life, and other gendered responsibilities. These networks function as early warning systems and untapped intelligence networks, often the first to detect subtle shifts in local dynamics (like arms circulation) while keeping track of the evolution of local actors and their links. NATO's Special Representative for WPS has stressed that women are uniquely positioned to identify early signs of radicalization or escalating tensions, making their integration into counterterrorism and early warning mechanisms essential. Understanding gendered social dynamics is key to tapping into structural roots of violence that allow for the penetration of vying criminal groups and factions. As put by authors Stern and Wibbern (2015) "attention to context offers the possibility for alternative security thinking."

This is best exemplified by the all-female Cultural Support Team deployed in 2010 by the United States Army in Afghanistan to reach these untapped networks that remained off-limits to men. The initiative led to successful intelligence gathering through rapport with women across various communities that resulted key to dismantling factions and preventing, as well as deescalating attacks. However, community resilience was not prioritized nor leveraged and resulted in weakened communities and putting informants at risk.

Embedded in trusted, everyday exchanges, women gather intelligence unavailable through formal channels. In practical terms, a mother might notice her son being recruited by a gang or might be alerted by her neighbors of unusual behavior. These ties, rooted in mutual support, form reservoirs of resilience that armed actors cannot easily dismantle unless forced displacement takes place.

However, these networks are often constrained by the very political and institutional conditions that surround them. The ways in which political and institutional systems interact with these networks and capabilities vary. Two examples from the Mexican context illustrate the challenges that emerge given the structural conditions at play:

1.- Politicization of communal leadership.

Lideresas de manzana (local women leaders) and *Jefas de Barrio* (women neighborhood leaders) are women who, in both rural and urban neighborhoods, act as community leaders and trusted problem-solvers. They are often the first point of contact between residents and local authorities; these women manage day to day life by mediating conflicts, contacting authorities, and organizing collective responses for various perceived threats. Their legitimacy stems from visible results, institutional power, and the extent of their informal networks of trust, commonly built among women. In many cases, they also function as informal intelligence nodes, gathering and channeling information that would rarely surface through formal mechanisms. Yet these networks are routinely penetrated and supported by political parties, which rely on *lideresas* to mobilize electoral support through short-term incentives and clientelist arrangements. This dynamic further demonstrates the strength of women's social capital, but it also entrenches short-term, transactional relationships that erode trust and divert communal capacity toward electoral cycles rather than harvesting long-term resilience. Security concerns are instrumentalized during campaigns to deepen "us vs. them" narratives, undermining efforts to address complex local dynamics beyond the hori-

zon of the next election. In this sense, important communal leaders might actually have incentives against long-term security strategies; viewing community resilience as a threat to their direct benefits.

2.- Public mistrust fueled by institutional hostility.

While self-defense groups (*autodefensas*) emerge as examples of civil resistance efforts, women-led collectives such as the *buscadoras* are rarely recognized as *de facto* security actors. Across Mexico, groups of *madres buscadoras* (searching mothers) have taken on investigative roles abandoned by authorities: they conduct interviews, map clandestine graves, and even deploy drones. Their role as mothers and the lack of institutional response forged them as local security experts exemplifying community resilience and the organization capabilities stemming from women-led networks. Through their daily searching tasks, they generate hyper-local intelligence on criminal activity. Instead of receiving institutional support, they have

often faced harassment from authorities, especially after uncovering mass graves, further eroding trust in authorities. Unless addressed through public restitution and proactive cooperation measures that signal reciprocity, this mistrust will remain a major barrier to integrating these already functional resilient networks into broader security strategies.

These cases expose a consistent contradiction where women's roles in sustaining community life are increasingly acknowledged, but the networks they lead are undermined. These systems of trust and information, built over time through care and cooperation, are co-opted when politically useful and dismissed when autonomous. Instead of strengthening existing capacities on the ground, institutional actors tend to erode them either intentionally or through neglect. This approach weakens precisely the kind of locally rooted resilience that could reinforce long-term security and reduce reliance on costly reactive interventions.

Conclusion and recommendations

The National Security Secretariat's recent shift toward intelligence based operations has opened a strategic window for Mexico's security architecture. Cooperation across federal, state and municipal levels has yielded promising results, yet many regions where violence mirrors active conflict remain out of reach. In many of those areas, communities – and especially women – have already forged the infrastructure of resilience and intelligence that the state now seeks. Failing to integrate or even consider women's existing security capacities into formal strategy stands as a structural vulnerability. Mexico's security architecture continues to treat half of its intelligence and resilience infrastructure as peripheral, thereby ceding strategic advantage to criminal and armed actors who already exploit these networks for their own ends or dismantle them to weaken resistance.

This moment calls for a fundamental rethinking of Mexico's security strategy, which should place community resilience at the heart of both its defense posture and its deterrence model. Contexts within Mexico experiencing fragmented authority and embedded threats represent the precise terrain where NATO's resilience frameworks are hardest to apply and most urgently needed, but most importantly where they have not been tested yet. What NATO has defined in theory can be demonstrated in practice by the country while also spearheading substantive Women, Peace and Security efforts in deterrence and defense. In this sense, continuously sharing lessons learned in its application would make Mexico a strategic ally and profile it as a desired global partner of the alliance. By recognizing, scaling and embedding community-led systems the country could unlock forms of strategic cooperation usually reserved for more stable settings.

Opting for this strategic shift requires a long-term sustained strategy based on four pillars: 1) proximity, 2) res-

titution, 3) reciprocity and 4) accountability and transparency. Through these pillars, Mexico will be able to fully develop a double defense and deterrence strategy: both bottom-up and top-down. The recommendations presented below part from that understanding.

Short to medium-term recommendations (must continue to be sustained in the long-term)

1. Proximity

The objective is to rebuild the connective tissue between state and community through sustained state presence that goes beyond the deployment of security forces. Proximity must be institutionalized through local dependencies and shielded by federal oversight. In this sense, local deployment of both social and financial services that create a dialogue between the community and authorities represent a feasible first step. Personnel in charge must be trained to build *rapport* and trust with local residents and to act as a bridge between state agencies and community actors. These local nodes should be designed to remain in place over time, fostering familiarity and co-responsibility, and offering a visible alternative to the presence of organized criminal groups. Proximity should be seen as the entry point for broader resilience-building efforts.

2. Restitution

Many communities have developed informal systems of resistance precisely because of institutional failure. Restitution involves acknowledging this abandonment and taking proactive steps to restore institutional legitimacy. This can only be achieved by addressing past harms, both through formal recognition and through material or symbolic acts that validate community efforts. A key element is to recognize women-led collectives not only as victims or moral figures, but as legitimate security actors. In-

clusion in decision-making spaces, holding meetings with authorities, consultations and prioritizing their concerns signal a meaningful shift in the institutional relationship. At the same time, the state must act on the risks these collectives face. Protective measures and resource allocation to support the continuation of their work must be implemented.

3. Reciprocity

Reciprocity entails that communities see tangible returns for their participation. This includes timely and transparent responses to the risks they flag and the knowledge they share. This pillar must go hand in hand with restitution which is why the first step is to prioritize crimes with active reports in the community and to communicate follow-up actions to the local networks who shared the information. This creates a virtuous cycle of trust, reinforcing the logic that cooperation is mutually beneficial rather than extractive. Reciprocity also means that community efforts, especially those led by women, are not sidelined once formal institutions arrive. Ultimately, reciprocity strengthens the social fabric by ensuring that collective action is met with institutional support, not silence.

4. Accountability and Transparency

Without clear standards, tracking, and consequences, resilience efforts risk being co-opted, manipulated, or forgotten. Transparency must go both ways and can be implemented as a transversal strategy in all deployed efforts. Authorities must determine what information they can and will share and what they require from communities in return. Through regular local meetings or public forums, authorities and community leaders can jointly report progress, challenges, and changes. These spaces should be facilitated by a

third actor (neither state nor community) to serve as a neutral accountability partner and ensure balanced dialogue. However, transparency must be accompanied by the communication of concrete results in other pillars: what was done with the information shared, what protection was extended, what services were delivered. Accountability mechanisms must also be internalized within institutions, ensuring that failure to act or breaches of trust have consequences. Without this, transparency becomes another performative gesture instead of a pathway to legitimacy.

Women-led networks are already functioning as intelligence hubs and sources of community resilience. The foundational steps outlined above serve as entry points to integrate these actors into intelligence-gathering and reporting structures in ways that benefit the state and are safe and mutually reinforcing. Doing so expands the state's reach while strengthening the very networks that sustain daily life in fragile contexts.

Given the gendered roles women often occupy, their expectations of reciprocity frequently extend beyond immediate security concerns to include support for household needs (*canasta básica*), access to education, healthcare, childcare, and improved social infrastructure. While these priorities may seem peripheral through a traditional security lens, responding to them is essential for building trust and sustaining cooperation. Doing so signals that the state understands and recognizes their role as community weavers, and that their safety concerns are embedded in broader social conditions. Fulfilling these demands contributes to the legitimacy of security efforts while failure to do so through dismissal undermines trust and reinforces the perception that women's contributions to security are secondary or deferrable. Furthermore, guarding the social fabric is essential to yield long-term sustainable results that give way to truly resilient communities.

Medium-term high-level recommendations

As stated throughout this document, Mexico can position itself as a laboratory of applied lessons for complex, non-traditional security environments, and thus become a key partner for NATO. To achieve this, the following is recommended:

1. Maintain a strategic dialogue with NATO and member states on broadening the conceptual and operational scope of resilience to include contexts of inter-

nal violence, blurred actor lines, and contested state legitimacy. This includes participating in relevant NATO forums and working groups to share methodological innovations and field-based insights.

2. Institutionalize the WPS agenda across all levels of communal engagement, ensuring that women's experiences are embedded as operational intelligence. Mexico must systematize the documentation of women-led community strategies, integrate this perspective into bilateral cooperation, and present findings as lessons learned that enhance NATO's own implementation of WPS beyond policy rhetoric.

Expected outcomes in the short-term

If Mexico applies the above mentioned recommendations, some of the expected outcomes are:

- **Increase in case reporting:** A rise in community reporting; especially from women and informal actors. Although counterintuitive, this increase will indicate improved institutional trust and

greater confidence in authorities thus being an early success indicator.

- **Higher number of strategic detentions:** With stronger local intelligence and targeted follow-up, institutions will be able to prioritize key actors and networks over mass arrests, increasing operational precision.
- **Increase in convictions:** The combination of better intelligence, community cooperation, and prosecutorial follow-through will lead to a higher number of successful sentences. If communal re-

ports and strategic detentions increase but convictions do not, it signals a wider concern in the justice system that must be addressed.

- **Emergence of organic early warning systems:** As communities regain trust and feel safer engaging with institutions, women-led networks and other informal actors will begin to share risk signals earlier and more consistently. Their emergence signals that resilience has been harnessed allowing for preparation, deterrence, and context-aware responses.

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