

# THE WOMEN'S TRUTH

Victims of the Armed Conflict in Colombia  
Summary





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iba siento  
familiar humanos  
testimonio pasado  
posibilidad social hijo vivir  
siempre persona familia  
acá papá relaciones sépareja aquí  
vez relación derechos armado formas  
**vida** pues dolor decir  
dice conflicto  
bien Chocó después  
día víctimas usted  
hija hombre nunca hijas vidas  
años tiempo supone  
madres caso hecho cosas  
entrevistadas pueden va veces mayor  
cabeza misma violencia madre medio  
mismo sino casos da Si  
cosa muerte voy impacto ser apoyo  
testimonios días solo contexto hacer ser proceso  
familiares impactos hechos sentido  
allá gente cada desplazamiento trabajo  
digo sexual hombres Santander duelo  
casa pérdida experiencia amenazas control  
así decía muchas forma  
hacia lugar Antioquia cuerpo cómo todas  
san consecuencias si miedo sentimiento propia  
situación dos  
podía duro  
rabia  
dijo falta ver salir  
temor  
Bolívar ahí frente hijos  
situaciones ahora  
momento parte hace  
responsabilidad tener salud  
daba armados  
nadie mamá



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## Introduction



## Women's Truth

*Women's Truth* constitutes a collective effort to assemble a report of victims of the armed conflict, and a truth that seeks to create pathways in this country between political discourses, academic analyses and legal approaches surrounding human rights violations. This effort is part of the search for political resolutions of the conflict and the transformation of the living conditions of the civil population affected by the war.

The report accounts for an experience. As an investigation within the field of human rights that emphasizes the experience of the victims, it is a systematization that describes a process carried out by more than 1,000 women and coordinated by the group Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres. In the context of other Truth Commissions throughout the world, the report provides an experience formed from the grassroots and of which the women victims are the main protagonists. It places their voices at the center of the process of building a collective truth narrated by them and that forms part of the recent history of Colombia. The value of this collective memory is not the verification of the horror, but rather that the words wrapped in this horror can find meaning and be shared with the society to which they are directed.

This Truth is not unique, nor is it one more version of history. The experience that emerges from the interviews traverses the women's lives from the acts of violence that ruptured their lives to their present moment as survivors. It is important to emphasize that this report works with words of experience because apart from recording the facts, its focus is on how the women have lived through these incidents, the consequences they brought for the women, how the women confronted those consequences, how they have remade or not their life's path, and how they view the future. The report thus gathers together accounts produced by feminine subjectivities as sources of knowledge about the reality of the armed conflict in Colombia.

This first person perspective told from one woman to another woman who accepts and accompanies her, acquires the meaning of bringing forth a woman's truth never told until now. Never told because many of the women interviewed had never spoken about their experiences with violence. Never told because the female experience of war had not been examined with such scope.

The report has two parts. The first volume includes an analysis of the experience of the victims based on conceptual frameworks that were discussed with them and that derive from an emancipatory feminism. The experience of the victims and survivors is told from the voices of more than a thousand *mestizas*, afro-descendents and indigenous women who have suffered the horrors of war and have stored these broken memories for years or decades in their bodies and hearts. For the women, the consequences of this violence are not collateral damage of an armed conflict. They are effects that need to be heard and that demand acknowledgement; they are fragmented memories that pass through the bodies and lives of these women; they are part of the collective history, of a social truth that wants to be shared.

The consequences in these women's lives pass through the intentional effects of terror and grief. The life of the victim remains tied to a past of traumatic experiences that interrupt the sense of continuity in her life. Fear. Wanting to leave behind the pain and not being able to forget. Memory tries to find a path between remembrance of the pain and the dignity of those who are no longer. Terror impacts a population persecuted for its participation in social organizations or simply for being located in the territory of a war waged by trying to gain control over the social fabric, and with it the lives of women. There is grief for the loss of feeling, of land, and of the life that was. In the case of disappeared persons, that loss manifests itself in their loved ones as a permanent wound in the uncertainty of their life or death. These consequences are dealt with through the emotions that assault the victims, the rage and the injustice, or the blame and senselessness. Damage is done to life projects that were small but that were everything: the house, the animals, the organizing, the dreams of a profession or a job that allowed one to move forward. These impacts on health and psycho-social well-being are consequences profoundly notable in the stories of the women.

The consequences are also approached from their specific impact on women and on the relationships they sustain with their families and communities. The women speak of a *ground zero* in their lives. As one of them stated: *we carry the reins of suffering*. The effects on the body and on sexuality itself demonstrate a unique language of suffering. The scars of their experiences are made visible on the body when many times the women have not been able to express them in words: the mutilations, sexual violence, forced pregnancies, the consequences on maternity, and the effects on the relationships between men and women from the violence suffered that is committed by *men*. All these effects are frequently made invisible or remain in the back room of each woman's pain, but they nevertheless put into question a system, an ideology and a dominant culture that considers women objects of control, violence or contempt.

Next, the report addresses sexual violence and the painful and stigmatizing experiences that it predicates, and which have been shared in confidence. Sexual violence is probably one of the most written about types of violence against women and yet it continues to be made invisible. It is a violence that assumes an attack on intimacy and crudely demonstrates control over the body as an objective of power. It takes shape not only in the context of the armed conflict but also in the private sphere that happens to have a political dimension and that feminism has indicated as a *continuum of violence* against women. The report addresses the consequences of this violence and the distinct *modus operandi* of perpetrators who, however, almost never admit to their actions. This violence marks the lives of victims in a silence that seeks the right words, and that is reconstructed in both the things mentioned and the stories left incomplete, in topics that come up again and again, or in the necessity of stopping the tape recorder during the interview.

But women have not only suffered in human rights violations and their consequences. They have also resisted. And this resistance is based on the recognition of themselves as equals with other women, in solidarity, mutual support and organizing. In silence and

self-preservation. In search of support for their families, and especially their sons and daughters who are their ultimate concern and a source of meaning to continue their lives. Their resistance also takes the form of putting into question their socially established roles by becoming public leaders and organizing themselves as women; reclaiming their role in the defense of life and in changing relationships of subordination maintained by a patriarchal culture. Denouncing and reclaiming their rights involves not only learning the laws and their rights but above all exercising persistence and re-conceptualizing themselves as subjects with rights and not as objects in need of help or pity.

The second volume of this report collects women's stories about acts of violence. Extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances have affected the majority of the women interviewed. Forced displacement has involved a massive violation that includes other violations like the right to land, work and culture. Torture in Colombia has carried a collective dimension; it has been part of the terror, exemplified by generating paralysis or displacement, and physical torture against women has also been a frequent occurrence in detentions and kidnappings. These forms of direct violence appear alongside threats and harassment as forms of control over territory, life and the organizing initiatives of women. Other violations include confinement, arbitrary detention, hostage taking, and forced recruitment, that although less reported, have significantly impacted women and their children. Material losses have been associated with different violations and have produced serious economic and psychosocial impacts that continue to be part of their lives.

The second part of this volume analyzes nine collective cases in which violence against women manifested in different ways, sometimes on the part of a community or neighborhood that suffered massacres and displacement. Sometimes experiences of violence united women in a collective destiny, as in cases of kidnapping or arbitrary detentions. In other cases, the defense of life and territory have led to collective experiences of women who have confronted violence by reconstituting their relationships and protecting their families and communities with nonviolent responses.

The reflections of the women over the subject of reparation include the awareness that in fact, the suffering experienced, the lost lives and the truncated life projects are irreparable. However, this awareness of irreparability is mobilizing precisely for that reason. It advocates the importance of truth and recognition as part of a culture of human rights on which the reconstruction of the social fabric should be based.

The women maintain a structural conception of reparation as a combination of measures that would change their conditions and offer opportunities to reconstruct their lives. Reparations are seen as part of a change in the relationship of the State to the victims, ceasing to view them as stigmatized to instead give them recognition, and to consider their necessities not as aid but as an exercise of their rights. Educational initiatives, health, and psycho-social attention suppose a combination of measures oriented toward resuming their lives with new tools for humanistic advancement and recuperation from the impacts suffered. Home and work are part of the social and economic rights given new meaning

from a reparations perspective, as favorable contexts in which the women themselves can resume their active role in society and in their families.

Reparations can be considered a form of countering the effects of the very invisibility of violence against women, questioning the gender stereotypes and discriminatory conditions women face generated by a patriarchal culture.

The first right that women reclaim is the right to live without fear. And despite their distrust, the women demand that the State take a role in preventing violence, indicating its responsibilities, whether by action or by omission, in Colombia's political violence. Reparations could be associated with prevention, disarmament, and the resolution of the armed conflict toward a peace process and political solution that places the conditions of people's lives on a new path. This is what we want: a new path towards life.

The conclusions and recommendations summarize the central ideas of the report and the demands on the State, society and the international community. This Women's Truth has come to stay and to drive forward the agenda of change in Colombia, where the enormous suffering and the great aptitude of women should be taken into account for the necessary social transformation of the country.





## Women Victims and Survivors of the Colombian Armed Conflict



*I feel a weight has been lifted because I've just spoken, I've told these things that happened to me. I feel satisfied, like I could finally rest after being able to bring up all this pain I felt inside. Knowing that someone was listening, without judging, because what's happened isn't only the violence from all these groups, you see there's also been domestic violence and everything. I've taken all this on, endured it, and held it here inside suppressed. It's not every day one talks about what we talked about today. I spoke out before but I only talked about the deaths and all that, never about my life, they never asked me about my life.* Primavera, Arauca, 2007, p. 693.

This chapter addresses the general experience of women victims. This commission's report does not begin with the facts but with the victims. The women affected by the armed conflict, the violence and the effects this has had on their lives are the central points for reconstructing a collective history. The first sections outline conceptual frameworks for truth and memory from a feminist perspective, and the way in which this Women's Truth and Memory Commission has conceived its work, centered in the listening to and the systematization of the narrations of the women victims' experiences. After this, the report deals with the experience of violence against women, the losses suffered and the control over their lives and their bodies, including an active view of the women victims and their forms of resistance.

## **I. The Experience of Women in the Context of the Colombian Armed Conflict**

This report is based on the experience of more than 1,000 women interviewed in the Commission for Truth and Memory of Colombian Women project.<sup>1</sup> This is the experience of Colombian women victims of human rights violations in the context of the internal armed conflict that has taken place in this country for five decades. The project hoped to amass the women's subjectivity to create a space for narrating and listening, for release and accompaniment in which no judgments were made and the center of the narrative was the women's lives.

The report consists of experiences narrated in the first person by a very diverse group of women from different regions of the country, who are part of the civil population and who have been victims of grave human rights violations and have survived in an historical context of internal war.

Verbalizing the memory of this experience has a double intention: to tell "what happened" by bringing to light "what happened to me." That is, it is not only to give testimony about

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1 933 testimonies were collected from women victims, and nine focus groups were conducted with the participation of between 8 and 12 women for each group to study collective cases.

the occurrences but also to tell about the lived experience of those occurrences in the unique and unrepeatable experience of each woman interviewed, to bring together the consequences in their lives, their visions of the violence, their demands and their proposals. The women victims not only speak about their suffering but also about their hopes and ideas to make possible another Colombia. This is a truth and memory that accounts for what the women have lived and also orients itself to the transformation of their lives and of society.

What information emerges from the interviews carried out in the Commission for Truth and Memory of Colombian Women? The first thing that emerges from the experience collected in the testimonies is the diversity of women in age and ethnicity (see table): women located territorially in diverse regions of the country, although principally rural women and those that live in the rural municipal seats working women; women who take care of their house, property and family. Some of them are community or social leaders; very few of them reveal their political affiliation.<sup>2</sup>

### **Women Victims Interviewed**

Half of the women identified themselves as mestiza (46.8%; n=438); one in four are Afro-Colombians (26.3%; n=246). A minority (5.7%; n=53) identified as indigenous, while the remaining 21.2% considered themselves as other ethnic identities.

The age of women interviewed varies between 17 and 83 years old, with an average age of 45.86 years (DT=12.96) for this sample. Regarding marital status, one out of two women interviewed has stable partner, 31.9 % (n=245) in cohabitation and 17.6% (n=135) married, while 22.9% (n=179) are single, 16.9% (n=130) are widowed and 10.7% (n=82) are separated. Three out of four women interviewed (75.2%) have children, with a median of three children (median = 3.03 and DT = 2.64).

The violence experienced by these women has been of multiple types. The average number of violations referred to by each woman is between four and five, and more than 25% of the women suffered more than six distinct types of violence. The women interviewed also made reference to between one and two other victims in their immediate environment in each testimony.

Slightly more than half of the women interviewed (53.8%) participate in some organization from civil society, principally in the Ruta Pacífica, although in other organizations as well. These groups come in the form of networks of women, victims and displaced persons, peasants, religious groups, NGOs, community organizations, cooperatives, environmentalists, savings cooperatives, of older adults or municipalities or departments, among others.<sup>2</sup>

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2 The testimonies were collected in 11 departments and more than 80 municipalities where the Ruta has organizations. The women relate incidents from other departments as well since many of them were displaced.

The women experience profound suffering and enormous losses. Pain and resignation is the common discourse in all the stories revealed in these interviews. In this history, masculine control over the bodies, projects and lives of the women appears as a recurring theme.

Another constant that passes through their accounts is the perplexity, incomprehension, and alienation of the women with respect to the conflict. In the women's narrations, only in rare cases did one observe a clear identification of the armed actors who perpetrated the violence. Confusion is extremely common in the accounts. When the interviewers inquired further about the identity of who it was that came to the plantation, the town or the house and committed every type of abuse against the population and against the women themselves, the response, almost always, exhibited doubts, insecurity, and contradictions that express as much the fear in the face of the perpetrators as the multiform violence they were targets of.

Do the women want to protect themselves? It's possible. The conflict still actively continues in many regions of the country; there is not yet sufficient security to be able to tell everything. Many women feel the need to protect their families, and they prefer to keep quiet about details that might turn out dangerous for them. But the analysis of multiple responses makes evident that although they live the armed conflict daily, what they cannot manage to explain to themselves is the absurdity and degradation that it entails. They do not understand the reasons of the actors because they do not seem justifiable when filtered through their own experiences.

*It was a very painful day, very horrible for me; that February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1984, many armed men came to my house, something I had never seen before. They aimed their weapons at us, they threw us to the ground, they tied us up without giving any idea of their motives or their reason for doing such things. Vereda Bellavista, Antioquia, 2004, p. 76.*

In many cases, one gets the impression that this “collective madness” of death and suffering that the Colombian geography sowed – again – in recent years, emerges from nowhere. “They came from the river...”, “they appeared at night...”, “they were going about...” The descriptions of the moments before the events demonstrate the subtle character of a violence that identifies the perpetrators by their ability to produce terror.

The women find themselves trapped in a web of collusions. Many of the accounts clearly reveal the irrationality of these incidents. While violence responds to the rationality that seeks to control the civil population and territory as part of the war, said logic is foreign to the experience of the majority of the women who do not understand what is happening to them or what is being said to them. Thus, they find themselves wrapped in an incomprehensible conflict, one in which they themselves are accused of being complicit.

- *But, why are we leaving?*
- *Because you are accomplices.*
- *Accomplices... in what?*

There is no answer. Only an order: "*I've told you already that you have to clear out!*" In this case, they were given 24 hours to evacuate the hamlet of Casa Blanca, in La Jagua de Ibirico, Cesar, 1998, p. 711.

The nonsensical experience of suffering threats and forced displacement, upon being accused of "collaborating" simply because they live in a certain area, comes together in the testimony of a woman displaced from Florencia to the city of Neiva, whose husband abandoned her because "I didn't want to keep fleeing after her." The woman testifying expresses her perplexity with respect to the armed conflict: "*Why did this happen to me? This is what we all ask ourselves: why did this happen to us when we didn't harm anybody?*" She herself recites a response that shows an awareness of the affectation, and at the same time the indifference of the greater part of society: "*Such is life. Such is the violence in Colombia. Someone suffers, someone lives terrified, someone is living all of this, and the people who aren't living it lead normal lives because for them it's as if it weren't happening.*" Suffering, loneliness and senselessness span the experiences of these women trapped in the crossfire of the perpetrators. Their voices speak of an everyday life invaded by the presence of armed actors whose explanations and arguments for their violent actions are very seldom known by the women victims. At least in this sense, there are no clear references. Only women from regions with a history of relevant social and political struggle identify distinguishable characteristics in the invasion of armed actors. Piamonte, Antioquia, 1998, p. 219.

What does it mean to be a woman victim and survivor of the armed conflict?

*To endure first hand the suffering left behind by violence. The heartache, the pain. I am a victim because in the first place they displaced me from my city, where I was living, where I had all my things, where I had made a life with my husband and my five children. That was the beginning of my suffering, my pain, my terrible ordeal.*  
San Onofre, Bolívar, 1999, p. 192.

In this war there have been innumerable victims, women and men. All have suffered and have experienced enormous traumatic impacts and irreparable losses. Without a doubt, many more men than women have lost their most important asset: their own life. But when we approach the rationale of war, we find significant differences in the concrete forms of how women have been affected. In their case, the relentless logic of patriarchy generates and legitimizes the subordination of women. The logic of war, where patriarchal culture finds its most violent expression in militarism, only deepens its control and domination over the lives and bodies of women, restricting their freedom and autonomy, not only within the setting of the armed conflict itself but also in any space where women live, have relationships and mobilize.

Nevertheless, even in these settings where the violence shuts off spaces of free expression and movement, the women, even at the cost of great suffering, succeed in opening up cracks of resistance and trace new paths of being and of re-creating the links that configure the social fabric.

*Well, as I say, through the suffering one has to support oneself. Take the fact of being displaced, as I say to my companions, just because we were displaced doesn't mean we are going to sit there all the time, displaced. No, let's always look for ways out, and I tell them to stop saying they are displaced and instead look for the ways out and to keep moving on. Many people find themselves stuck in that fear. Let's say no to that. We women can cope with it and we have the courage and if we have to confront it then let's confront it without fear, because it's the dread that keeps one stuck and doesn't let them do anything or keep moving on. Sucre, Cauca, 2002, p. 390.*

*Yes, I've felt strong, because sometimes I lose heart. And I think, how long will this be necessary, how long until this ends. But at the same time I react and remind myself, I have to continue on for the sake of my children. I have my children, I still have my son of eight years. I have to finish educating my son. And sometimes I reprimand myself and give myself strength, and like this I pray to God. Pivijay, Magdalena, p. 259.*

It is important to express in words the experience of women victims to differentiate it from that of men's experience of war and in order to denounce the specific incidents of violence against women. Also important is the reception, in their own words, of the strategies, transformations and learning experiences of women who have survived these violent acts, because their experience provides perspectives, perceptions and knowledge that differs from men survivors.

*Because at first I needed it, I focused too much on my work, but this helped me to dispel the pain and clear away everything that was happening. I never got sick, I never got sick, I don't even know what it's like to go to a hospital. Because I've been strong; I would cry for a bit and that'd be it, done, moving on, and I would dry my tears and say get up, because life goes on, that was my motto. So then when I had to cry, I cried, and when I had to laugh, I laughed, and I tried to make a happy life for my children. I mean that I didn't let myself be defeated by the pain or by anything. Primavera, Arauca, 2007, p. 693.*

In the memories of the interviewed women we discovered indictable acts, painful and extreme experiences, and personal devastation as well as ways to confront the violence and the affliction derived from it. They narrate the strategies of reconstruction of life itself and of the socio-emotional fabric that sustains it. They relate experiences of solidarity, organization, resistance and denunciation. We did not only find memory in the interviews; there is also the projection of the future rooted in that memory, demands that surface as a form of repairing the harm and assuring that such events will not happen again.

*The plans I have today are, I guess, to continue on with life with my children since God has given us the opportunity. Although it came with struggle and difficulties, but thank God we are here alive and getting by. Because, actually, ever since we left our hamlets) we have suffered, because some of us as displaced persons,*

*principally I mean me, we have never received any kind of help. So we have suffered all of this, but my plans are to keep moving forward and maybe down the line God will give me a better future.* Macayepo, Sucre, 1998, p. 236

Memory goes beyond the simple reconstruction of the event or image.<sup>3</sup> It is a re-elaboration, a reconstruction of the emotions experienced, in order for the women to explain it to themselves; memory is locating oneself in the present and projecting oneself toward to the future.

The proposal of the *Ruta Pacífica* to collect a women's truth has been the intervention necessary for the women interviewed to decide to share their testimony, accounting for all these dimensions of memory.

## II. Truth and Memory of Women

Establishing a women's truth presumes a correlation between the incidents experienced – what the women lived through – and what is said about this experience. It presumes that their words faithfully express the experience of having suffered violence and survived it, words that so often are deleted, covered up or silenced. Such a truth is established through the narratives of the women about their history.

Through the mediation of other women – the interviewers – the women interviewed offered the memories of their experience as victims and their trajectory of confrontation to survive the horror of the violence. In the space of the interview, the interviewers accompanied the emergence of the truth of each woman speaking. With the trust of those taking their testimony, the women passed through the silence of years, supported in a place of respect and valuation of the credibility of their words. In this process, subjective truths were gathered that, woven together, create a truthful map of the feminine experience in the setting of Colombia's armed conflict.

### Memory of truth

We use the expressions *memory of the truth* and *women's truth* to identify the exercise of bringing a lived past experience to the present, with words capable of faithfully telling this experience from the subjectivity of the women who give their testimony. It deals with a truth uninvestigated until now, and one that lacks a space in which to be told and is therefore unheard. It is a truth of past events, which prolongs itself in time until the present and needs the memory of women who have preserved it in order to be told and heard. In this project, truth and memory weave into each other.

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3 Teresa del Valle, "Interpretaciones de ciertos mecanismos del recuerdo" (Interpretations of certain mechanisms of memory), *Ankulegi*, revista de Antropología social, 10, 2006, pp. 11-18.



Establishing the memory of truth from women is a gain in freedom because they have made themselves the owners of memory itself so that it might not be manipulated. This means they have been the masters of silence and of words, upon reliving the experiences that pass through their bodies and hearts. It also indicates that the women have given their own meaning to this experience and have avoided the patriarchy's interpretation of the events, an interpretation which confirms again and again the victimization of women, even when it appears to denounce the violence against them.<sup>4</sup>

The memory of truth, in its collective dimension, allows narrative to be a bridge between an intimate experience of pain and a collective hurt that can be recognized in a new shared memory. The memory of women's truth reopens the struggle for the signification and the appropriation of historical discourse as collective memory. Bringing women's truth to light reveals that one part of the memory has not been incorporated into the common history. The bias becomes evident in the historical narrative written by a masculine subject, most often western and from the dominant class. The distortion of the collective memory also becomes visible; a distortion which makes the history of this masculine subject pass for the totality of human experience.

The memory of the truth speaks from subjectivities until now subordinated, creating a space of intersubjectivity that offers more Truth: every partial narrative constitutes one component of the same truth without needing to cancel out the other subjectivities. This truth opens, on the one hand, the possibility that experiences of difference can be named and heard, and on the other, it enriches the meaning of the human experiences that form the historical discourse. Recreating the collective memory with previously unseen perspectives is a healing process that contributes to the transformation of the society and lays down a foundation for violent acts not to be repeated.<sup>5</sup>

## **Factual Truth and Narrative Truth**

In transition processes from situations of political violence or war, investigations have been carried out into truth and memory: Truth Commissions emphasize the occurrences, the testimonies as sources of information that can make room for processes that might recognize and penalize the confirmed incidents, and thus combat impunity. They are works of memory that seek to collect the testimony of lives made invisible or episodes that the dominant narratives have wanted to erase from history.<sup>6</sup>

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4 A feminist perspective observes that the excessive emphasis on sexual violence against women could end up creating a new stereotype of women in the context of war. Marta Grau, *La memoria histórica, ¿active transformador de la desigualdad de género? Análisis crítico del discurso del Centro de Memoria Histórica en Colombia a partir de una mirada de género e interseccionalidad* (Historical Memory: an active transformer of gender inequality? A critical analysis of the discourse of the Center for Historical Memory in Colombia from a perspective of gender and intersectionality), 2013, p. 16.

5 *Ibid.* Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *La memoria histórica desde la perspectiva de género. Concepos y herramientas* (The Historical Memory Group, *Historical memory from a gender perspective. Concepts and tools*), Bogotá, 2011.

6 Alejandro Martínez Rodríguez, *La paz y la memoria (Peace and Memory)*, Madrid, Los libros de la Catarata, 2011.

These investigations draw out a “factual truth” and a “narrative truth.”<sup>7</sup> Processing the testimonies gathered from this Commission's project involved working with both these truths.

Factual truth concerns what happened, to whom, where, when, how and who was involved. This truth tries to capture the context, causes, patterns, and impacts of human rights violations. It reveals the nature of the violence and violations. This is one way to present the experience of the women who have given their testimonies, a way that is essential to capture the magnitude and nature of the events and also, to help support the process of filing charges. From a judicial perspective, the recuperation of memory and testimonies about the events establish a truth; this truth becomes the basis to gain justice for victims that deserve respect, and in that way they can receive reparation for the harm suffered.

Narrative truth concerns subjective experience and the meaning given to this experience. It can also be called experiential truth. This truth furnishes knowledge about personal stories, beliefs and values, impacts and resistance, and about the gendered social-sexual gender system and socio-symbolic order of patriarchy. It gives reason for the previous situations, thus affirming the dignity of the victims and survivors. It has to do with the “healing” dimension – both individual and collective – of the truth. Each victim that speaks out receives the possibility of giving her own meaning to her lived experience, of expressing it and making it known to other victims. This can be a therapeutic act because it gives order to a senseless experience that has been traumatic. It can be a restorative act because it presumes the recognition of the value and credibility of the victim's word. It is also restorative at the community level because it allows bits of the truth that had been erased to become visible. That the experience of the victims might actually be heard mitigates the symbolic violence supposed by the imposition of the discourse about the facts by those who exercise power.

Just as factual truth has been recognized as a method of investigation and obtainment of knowledge, research into collective memory and history, and especially feminist researchers, have proposed the Narrative as a method of investigation. The premise of narrative research is that there is no one absolute truth in human reality. Telling one's history is, in fact, a source of knowledge about society but also about one's own position within that society. Personal narratives not only refer to the events but they also constitute reflections about those events.

In the project of this Commission, each woman has contributed, in addition to information about events, a unique and irreducible experience; each woman has given significance – her own meaning – to this experience. And it is precisely the act of communicating this unrepeatable something that makes it possible to “touch” others with the words of truth. Putting this truth out in the world has a function distinct from that of factual truth: its purpose

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7 Rina Kashyap, “Exploring the Narrative of Truth: a Feminist Critique of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *Contemporary Justice Review*, 12 (4):449-467.

is to make possible the meeting of and the connection between subjectivities. A meeting that activates something related to what we share, as women or as human beings, and modifies the perception and understanding of the events occurred.

## Human Rights Violations Against Women within Truth Commissions (TC)

The incorporation of women's experiences in reports of political violence or armed conflict in the framework of transitional justice processes has been the result of initiatives and pressure from feminist movements and women in countries where these processes took place. As such, South African feminists were the first to pose this demand by presenting a report that was, in itself, a petition for the incorporation of a gendered perspective in the final report elaborated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.<sup>8</sup>

Other reports of truth and memory commissions, as in the case of Guatemala with project REMHI,<sup>9</sup> sponsored by the Catholic Church, and the Commission for Historical Clarification (*Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico*),<sup>10</sup> have incorporated the concept of gender in various chapters with the experience of women in the context of the political violence lived. A few years later, the TC in Peru established gender as an operative concept and initiated the systematization of patterns of violence against women.<sup>11</sup>

However, in not a single one of the cases mentioned were the human rights violations relative to women, or the violence against them, incorporated initially in the mandate of the TC; actually its inclusion was a result of pressure from the feminist movement or of the sensitivity of the people who carried out the report. Since these initial experiences, new truth commissions included in their mandates what is referred to as "gender perspective," giving way to an institutionalization of this perspective, although adopting very different forms, as distinct as the mandates of diverse truth commissions. Thus, progressively but

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8 In 1996, Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjes prepared a specific document to present it to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) proposing that the Commission incorporate a gendered perspective; it was titled *Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: A Submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*.

9 Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica – REMHI, *Guatemala, nunca más*. (Interdiocese Project for the Recuperation of Historical Memory Guatemala Never Again), made public in January 1998. This report, which does not have the institutional character of a TC, dedicated one of its chapters to violence against women: in the first volume, *Impactos de la violencia (Impacts of the Violence)*, we find chapter six: "Confronting the Pain. From Violence to the Affirmation of Women;" there are also references to the experience of women in the chapter dedicated to "Familial Consequences of the Violence."

10 Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH) de Guatemala, *Guatemala: memoria del silencio* (Commission for Historical Clarification of Guatemala (*Guatemala, the Memory of Silence*), February 1999. In Chapter II, Volume 3, Human Rights Violations, is the section "Sexual Violence against Women."

11 Comisión para la Verdad y la Reconciliación (CVR) del Perú, *Informe final* (Commission for Truth and Reconciliation in Peru, *Final Report*), published in 2003. In Volume VI, Chapter 1: Patterns in the Perpetration of Crimes and Human Rights Violations, is the section 1.5: "Sexual Violence against Women" and in Volume VIII, the second part: Factors That Made the Violence Possible, Chapter 2: The Varied Impact of the Violence, is the section "Violence and Gender Inequality."

in a very unbalanced way, the TCs have adopted in their interpretive frameworks the concept of gender and some of the perspectives offered by feminism.<sup>12</sup>

The aspects investigated in the diverse TCs that have contemplated a gender perspective have been: the construction of gender in the culture and society studied, sometimes connected to the history of colonization or to specific structures like *apartheid*; the treatment of violence against women and specifically sexual violence with the establishment of patterns of violence and the detailed classifications of abuse against women; other impacts of violence in cultural, political, socioeconomic dimensions, etc.; the positions women have occupied in the contexts of violence, extending progressively from the experience of women victims, direct and indirect, to that of women perpetrators and also to that of women who have resisted, been activists or leaders.

As a whole, it can be said that the presence of women's experiences in contexts of political violence or armed conflict has continued to grow and gain a nuanced richness in the reports of TC, to give space to the diversity of women's suffering and achievements in the contexts of war and violence. However, there has not yet been a truth commission created and carried out by women as a symbolic space open to feminine subjectivity.

### **The Feminist “Advantage” in the Commission of Truth and Memory of Women**

The publication *Memory for Life: A Truth Commission from Women for Colombia*,<sup>13</sup> situated *Ruta's* truth and memory project (CVMMC) relative to other Truth Commissions with attention to the similarities and differences between them. Some of the singularities of the CVMMC have to do with the fact that it was propelled by a nonviolent feminist social movement.

The nature of the *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres Colombianas*, as a feminist movement and network of women's organization, has generated the trust necessary to obtain testimony from women who have been victims of human rights violations and that, given the current situation of the armed conflict, face a real danger. The experience of organization, mobilization, and accompaniment to victims has provided the knowledge necessary to carry out this project, which was also completed with specific training. That is to say, it is precisely the fact that the *Ruta* is known for its commitment to peace and to women's issues, but also its capacity to protect and accompany women, which has facilitated access to women's testimonies. Such testimonies constitute the centerpiece

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12 Document from Vasuki Nesiah, *Truth Commissions and Gender: Principles, Policies, and Procedures*, International Center for Transitional Justice, July 2006, Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths. Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions*, New York, Routledge, 2011.

13 This publication reviews the systematization and methodology of this experience of the Commission of Truth and Memory of Colombian Women. See *Memoria para la Vida* (Memory for Life). Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, Carla Afonso and Carlos M. Beristain. Hegoa, 2013. Accessible at <http://publicaciones.hegoa.ehu.es/publicaciones/290>

and give meaning to the recuperation of memory and the establishment of truth from their perspective.

The *Ruta* has promoted an investigation carried out with the standards of other commissions, putting in place, however, its own mechanisms to access the protagonists of the study and a methodology to collect information that differ from institutional commissions. Also, the objective of uniting rigorous knowledge and political impact in favor of women's rights, human rights and peace, is particular. The project of the Truth and Memory Commission of Colombian Women is a unique project that joins the production of knowledge with a political significance.

In reference to investigation, this study begins from the premise that epistemology is not neutral. Feminism has demonstrated that the position in society of the researcher permeates the process of investigation. Conscious of this fact, feminist methodology has openly taken the experience of women as a source of knowledge and has declared as a principle its commitment to empowering women.<sup>14</sup> In the CVMMC project, the first person narratives of the experience of Colombian women are considered a source of knowledge. The narrative of women has been mediated by other women in a space that attaches meaning to experience and that accompanies the women participants. In this investigative work, the conceptual frameworks that feminism has contributed orient the focus to the facts and give tools for their interpretation. The perspectives and methodologies inherent in human rights research are also adopted throughout this work.

The feminist *advantage* of the CVMMC project also takes root in a practice whose political dimension has brought feminism into prominence in its affirmation that the personal is political. The work process has rested on a network of relationships of trust between women: trust between the coordinators of the *Ruta* and the women in the network who carried out the interviews; between the women of the *Ruta* and those who took the opportunity to testify; between the *Ruta* and other organizations of women or victims of the armed conflict that facilitated contact with other victims. The women's trust in the *Ruta Pacífica* movement, a movement to which they were confidently disposed to give their testimony, materialized in the trust between the interviewers and the women interviewed in the moment of testifying.

The form in which the sequences of the work were carried out during the process also demonstrates the importance bestowed on all the women who made it possible. "Women who made the project possible" means all those who have had anything to do with the process, beginning with those who gave their testimony, followed by the women who documented it, to the coordinators, transcriptionists, analysts, researchers, etc. The women participants configured a work style that included mutual care and individual and

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14 Carmen Magallón, "La perspectiva de género en los estudios sociales de la ciencia" en *Pioneras españolas en las ciencias*, ("Gender Perspective in Social Science Studies" in *Spanish Pioneers in Science*), Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1998.

collective reflection. This was reflected in the publication *Memory for Life (Memoria para la Vida – see footnote 13)*, since a political meaning is also given to the way in which the process was developed.

The centerpiece of the entire process is the narrative as a relational act given that to narrate a story involves both speaking and listening. Listening plays a key role in creating a protected and safe space for the woman who tells her story; it is an action that requires concentration and energy. The one who listens is a participant observer<sup>15</sup> who not only accesses the knowledge of a history but shelters it and recognizes its integrity. The interviewer, who receives the testimony, in turn becomes testimony of another's experience. In this relational and intersubjective nature of the narrative resides the possibility that a women's truth emerges, communicable to women and men.<sup>16</sup>

Patriarchy has systematically invalidated feminine meanings; the experience of women has been interpreted and signified, by men and women, according to gender stereotypes and at the service of masculine dominance. To hear and tell the experience of women without taking gender stereotypes as the model, whether to conform to them or transgress them, is to be open to embracing all the meaning that a woman could give to her experience. It is to accept an unbounded meaning of the experience. In this project, based on trust and creating trust, the feminine mediation has meant that it is another woman who collects the testimony for a project from a women's organization. This mediation has allowed for the creation of a space for sincere words that has facilitated in the majority of cases the expression in words of an intimate experience of pain and its confrontation.

The project has also worked with the circulation of a shared knowledge of women. Nancy Harstock affirms that women are more perspicacious when they investigate the lives of other women due to their placement in the sexual division of labor and their experience of oppression.<sup>17</sup> The knowledge of the distinct manifestations and intensities of violence comes not only from the other woman-victim whose experience is another's. This knowledge circulates among women because in some measure we are all immersed in the Continuum of violence. In particular, we all know the experience of being imprisoned because we live in a socio-symbolic (OK) system that makes us inhabit a violable body.<sup>18</sup> The pain of another woman reaches all of us through this shared knowledge.

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15 Funtowicz, S. y Ravetz, J. R., *Ciencia postnormal* (Postnormal Science), Barcelona, Icaria, 2000.

16 Rina Kashyap, "Exploring the Narrative of Truth: a Feminist Critique of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission", *Contemporary Justice Review*, 12 (4):449-467.

17 In Rina Kashyap, "Exploring the Narrative of Truth: a Feminist Critique of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission", *Contemporary Justice Review*, 12 (4):449-467.

18 Alessandra Bochetti, "Discurso sobre la guerra y las mujeres" (Discourse on War and Women) in *Lo que quiere una mujer* (What a Woman Wants), Madrid, Cátedra, 1996. Elena Grau, "Vivir en un cuerpo violable" (Living in a Violable Body), magazine *En pie de paz* (Towards Peace) 28, 1993.

To conclude, the fact that women victims of human rights violations have narrated their histories to make them publicly known through the CVMMC report has meant empowerment. The very act of narrating one's own experience helps to transform the victim into a survivor, and narration is a political act that begins to change the conditions that made the abuse possible. Furthermore, this collective construction of knowledge has demanded that there be a two-way communication so that the results of the study are returned to the women participants, a return that gives strength to a recovered voice.

The awareness about the reality produced by the report constitutes an input for the political practice of the *Ruta Pacífica*, and in a wider sense for the women's movement in Colombia, because the public presence of a women's narrative about the violent acts in Colombia is a form of political intervention. The contribution of the CVMMC to the transition towards a post-armed conflict setting is as much making visible women's experiences in the war as the expectations and demands that they put forth. This contribution opens the possibility of propelling changes in a new setting of peace, in particular with regards to the relationships between the sexes and the discourse of sexual difference. There should be a discourse that does not translate differences into inequalities but rather as an enriching diversity and that would thus contribute to ending the relationship of power between men and women.

### **III. The conceptual framework. Some reflections**

One reality that causes profound unease emerges from listening to the testimonies of women who have been victims of human rights violations: a systematic practice of violence by men who deliberately direct it against women, because it is men who attempt to control the lives of women. It is armed actors, mostly men, who exult in treating feminine bodies with great cruelty and who strive to destroy the humane conditions that are the work of women much more than of men.

#### **The Continuum of the violence**

Based on analysis and reflection from the feminist point of view, an effort has been made to understand the mechanisms of violence and to give some explanation for this reality so painful for women. One of the useful tools to analyze the types of violence and the environments in which they occur is the so-called Continuum of violence. The idea of Continuum of violence answers the question: Why is it that for women the line between war and peace is not very significant? We have seen over and over again that violence against women does not end when the war is over. At the same time, we see how in contemporary armed conflicts violence against women is a continuation of the control and violence that is exercised upon women in times of peace. For women, it would be more meaningful to speak of peace as a situation not in contrast to war, rather to violence.<sup>19</sup>

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19 Irantzu Mendia, "Strategies of women's organizations for a peace with gender justice", Seminar *Mujeres en situaciones de conflicto (Women in conflict situations)*, Hegoa, Bilbao, 19-21 February 2008.

The Continuum of violence helps one to understand how the specific violence of war relates to violence present in the relationship of domination between men and women existing in times of peace. For that, Caroline Moser proposes that one distinguish among three categories of violence – economic, political and social – which manifest themselves in different categories: individual, interpersonal, community and structural all influenced throughout by a gender bias that form the ways in which women and men find themselves involved and experience violence.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of Continuum of violence facilitates perceiving how in a patriarchy violence permeates all aspects of life and relationships crossing social and institutional lines. It is also a tool that helps us describe how and where violence in wartime acts and interacts situating the role of violence against women in each armed conflict.

For the reality of Colombia, testimonies manifest how masculine domination over women, which is at the root of multiple acts of violence that are committed on them, shapes a continuum of violence that takes place in all spheres. Women who are victims of the actors in an armed conflict are simultaneously, or during their entire lives, victims of the control and physical or psychological violence of their partners in the domestic sphere, or in affective relationships. More than a fourth of the women interviewed declare having suffered violence as children; almost a third confirms having been a victim of violence by their partner and 15.2% have suffered from sexual violence their entire life. In addition, a good number of the women who were mistreated during childhood were also mistreated by their partners (43.7%) or experienced sexual violence during their life (36.6%). We see, then, how multiple acts of violence – psychological, physical, sexual, economic, cultural – cross in the lives of many women who are victims of the conflict, intensifying their discrimination and subordination.

In some cases, the victims report sexual violence starting in adolescence. In this regard, the testimony of a displaced woman from Tolima (P249) is very eloquent. Owing to the extreme poverty of her family, she married at age 16: *“What can I say, I don’t know, I was a very naïve child, my husband was a person of much experience and I was raped by him, because as I understand it, rape is when a man grabs a woman by force, and even more so if it’s a child”*. She goes to her mother in search of help, but the mentality of her mother is formed by cultural beliefs that operate to violently control the life of women: *“She told me that I could not separate from him because I was married and had a son, and that people could talk...”* The experience of rape is followed by the very difficult experience of abortion. The woman lives through successive pregnancies working in the sun under difficult conditions: *“He is the one who set me to work on the farm, planting bananas, planting yucca, picking coffee, pregnant, I did everything, pregnant, I took out the coffee, loaded it, took the mule to the village with five arrobas on each side, pregnant...”* The

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20 Caroline O. N. Moser, “The Gendered continuum of Violence and Conflict. An operational framework” in Moser, C.; Clark, Fiona (eds.), *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors?: Gender, Armed conflict and Political Violence*, London-New York, Zed Books, 2001, pp. 30-51.



extreme violence to which this woman was subjected in her domestic life doesn't end with the assassination of her husband. The armed actors exercised cruel violence on her.

On the little farm she inherited from her mother, where she tries to rebuild her life, the guerrilla bursts in and she is overcome with terror: *"There the guerilla were going to take my girls, and I had to flee..."* however, the guerrilla managed to kidnap two of her daughters: *"They took them, they took them around 10:00 in the morning supposedly to a meeting, they took them forcibly, I was fainting and crying out to the people, please not to do that, I cried so that they would not take the girls..."*. Her daughters were not returned, and she must live in silence the worst sort of humiliation, as she is obliged to cook for the guerrilla that have taken her daughters to recruit them: *"I was furious to have to serve food to that comandante"*. She continues to pray for the liberation of her daughters and finally manages their return. *"There they returned the girls and told me run! Scratched, dragged, their little buttocks peeled from running, from the blows...we left for a village called Monte Loro, from there we set out to C ndor, from C ndor to Planada and from Planada to Neiva, we came for free because we didn't have even one peso, I cried to the chauffeurs to bring me."* Since then, she lives in a constant state of anxiety: *"That is the threat now, because the guerilla is looking for me"*.

The epilogue to this life marked by all sorts of violence is the effect on her daughters: *"One took to drink; she would start drinking and the other would follow. That was hard, to see that child drinking and with hatred, that hatred, that rancor of hers, as if life was worthless..."* Natagaima, Tolima, 1978-2009, P. 419.

Looking for a way to explain the horror lived during the war, a woman refers to the continuum of violence in his own terms:

*You can see that the lives of women are like a historical circle. The violence I lived before is very similar to the one im living right now. Right now it is ever harder, because of the displacement, because of everything. The violence against women has been present for ever".* Auro Buey, Choc . 2005. P. 419

In the Colombian armed conflict, the Continuum of violence against women includes specific forms that have to do with the respective interests involved. In this conflict, economic, social and political interests come in to play surrounding the land and through the control of the territory: extractive activities and large scale agriculture that respond to the interests of the big multinational enterprises; the construction of infrastructure to facilitate these activities; occupation of the land in the political battle between the State and the insurgent guerrilla forces – – all that with the background of social inequality in the distribution of land. In almost all the conflicts that develop in Colombia, the key is to separate the people from the land.

This has been verified by the testimonies of a large number of rural women, indigenous or afro-descendants, victims of a brutal violence, who have suffered forced displacement of themselves and their families. The violence not only propels the people into displacement,

but also intends to prevent the possibility of return and reconstruction of the communities. It has for its objective to uproot the people from their environment in order to open the way for the greatest exploitation of natural resources. This violence that separates the civil population from the land acts deliberately against women because they are the key to the existence of life under humane conditions.

To achieve that objective, the violence focuses on women because they are the ones who have historically maintained, and continue to maintain, the conditions of humanity understood to be the minimum standards for quality of life (shelter, food, hygiene, education, etc.) necessary to sustain people. And beyond the material conditions of life, although not separate from them, it is above all the women who create and relationships that humanize and civilize, giving identity, recognition and value to people; creating close ties among family and community relationships that form the social fabric. Violence against women, then, has as its objective to undermine the humane conditions of the people, as it is the work of the women to care for one's body, the relationships and spaces of life that create these conditions.

One could speak, in the case of the armed conflict in Colombia, of a sexual policy of continued undermining of the practices that make and rebuild relationships and conditions that sustain the individual and collective life of the people, which are practices more of women than of men. It is a matter of a sexual policy because it is a systematic and premeditated manner of acting against women that takes the form of destructive violence against what women do and that acts with merciless violence against the bodies of the women, to leave a lasting mark of dominance. The attack against the feminine body, against the network of relationships that they weave and care for and against the spaces in which their forms and means of life develop, is calculated to put an end of the task of social creation that ties the collective life day after day, giving continuity to the life of the people and communities.

Notwithstanding, the violence of war continues, as we have seen in the quoted testimony, to intensify and amplify the violence that is present in the lives of Colombian women at the margin of the armed conflict. This violence in all spheres and throughout their lives includes harassment, abuse, mistreatment and violation present the living arrangements in the home, at work, and in the village or community.

The idea of the Continuum of violence has been used throughout this report as a lens that makes visible the interactions of physical, psychological, economic and political violence and to describe its manifestations, either simultaneous or sequential, in the lives of the women, in both the public and private sectors. Nevertheless, that capillary action of violence that tends to make it omnipresent, also finds resistance. It is curbed by the practices and spaces of women and men who act according to the logic of respect and care of other human beings.

## Patriarchal and militaristic violence

The Continuum of violence seeks to reveal the forms violence takes that is inherent to the patriarchy as a system of domination. Violence as a habitual and legitimate practice in the patriarchal system has its origin in how it resolves the relations with the other and in the place that the bodies occupy in this socio-symbolic order.

The patriarchy that has formed in the West resolves the uncertainty, fear or threat that a relationship with the other supposes, the irreducible or unclassifiable that characterizes the others, male or female, by dehumanizing them – – that is to say, not recognizing them as equal in nature and worth, even though different. This understanding of the difference in inequality has permitted the establishment of instrumental relations that disregard the respect for the dignity of one who is different. One of the mechanisms that has functioned under this premise, confirming it, has been the use of others for one's own benefit. Another crucial element has been denying the word, canceling out the word of the other. All this works together to convert the other into a mute object that can be destroyed. The practice of violence is legitimate in this framework of instrumental relationships; and the use of the same against others reconfirms their condition as objects.<sup>21</sup>

This relationship of an instrumental nature, objectified, is what men learn to establish with women, who are “the others”, men being considered superior; although under Western patriarchy this has taken place repeatedly with other groups and cultures who are fenced in by subordinate identities thus justifying their discrimination.<sup>22</sup> In this way, these practices become the norm as young males are socialized – – abusive, degrading and violent practices against women, as others who are different and do not deserve respect because they are not equal in humanity. Including, within the dynamic of violence against bodies, in a practice like rape or any other form of torture, any manifestation of humanity on the part of the victim must be silenced, eliminated in order to commit the act firmly, which implies even greater savageness in the aggression in order to avoid that possibility.<sup>23</sup>

Some of the testimonies narrate events that make obvious this operation of dehumanization which, in addition, has also served as an example to cause terror by the paramilitary groups.

*They beat her with a stick, they grabbed her in a room, they pulled her back and forth and stuck in her one of those sticks like on the weapons; they poked it in her (they introduced the accessories of the weapons in her private parts) and there was another woman they grabbed and did the same to her, beat her with a stick, stabbed the stick in her vulva; there was another girl they said was the girlfriend*

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21 Weil, “La Ilíada o el poema de la fuerza” in *La fuente griega*, Madrid, Trotta, 2005.

22 M. Rivera, “La cólera masculina ante lo otro”, magazine *Duoda*, nº29, 2005, pp. 81-94.

23 Anne Michaels, *Piezas en fuga*. Alfaguara, Madrid, 1997.

*of that guerilla, Mario, and they tortured her also, and did the same to her, shot at her, dragged her, beat her with a stick and also poked a file in her vulva. El Salado, Bolívar, 2000, p. 252.*

On the other hand, in the patriarchy the body has been trivialized, as they have simultaneously converted it into an insignificant support of human life and territory for the exercise of power.<sup>24</sup> Trivialization of the body in patriarchal culture forms part of the relationship of exploitation that the patriarchy, especially the capitalist patriarchy, has established with nature – a relationship that takes for granted resources and services that nature offers to the human species and considers them inexhaustible, without considering itself a part of the very same nature. Likewise, the patriarchy ignores everything that has to do with the bodies of human beings in their dependence and need for care. In that way, bodies, placed to one side of nature, have been entrusted to the care of women whose work is also taken for granted, thus denying it has any economic or cultural value. The material base of life as part of nature has been ignored and, for that very reason, plundered. The work carried out by women, which is situated in the nexus between nature and culture, has been kept as an invisible part of economic activity and men, therefore, have appropriated it to themselves without any cost.<sup>25</sup>

The atrocities committed against the bodies of women and their capacity to give life are an extreme example of the trivialization of bodies, as can be seen in this case recently carried out by paramilitary groups.

*Here amongst the women, there was a girl, who was not from here; her brother had a business here in the community and she was seven months pregnant. They killed her brother and took her naked (without clothing), wrapped in a towel. She kept saying no, that she was pregnant, and they shoved her. And that woman was shouting in the street don't kill me, it's not my fault, I haven't done anything; and they took her, and at the entrance to Sucre they killed her and they split open her belly and took out the baby and put it on top of her. San José del Playón, María la Baja, Bolívar, 2002, P.207*

In the war settings these patriarchal assumptions are the background that legitimizes atrocious practices supported by one of the most stark manifestations of patriarchal culture: militarism.<sup>26</sup>

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24 Maria Vilellas, *Cuando los cuerpos no importan. Una Mirada feminista sobre el impacto de los conflictos armados en la población civil*, Final postgraduate work on Gender and Equality, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 2007; Olga Amparo Sánchez Gómez, *Las violencias contra las mujeres en un sociedad en guerra*, Bogotá, Ruta Pacífica de las mujeres, 2008.

25 A. Bosch; C. Carrasco; E.Grau, "Verde que te quiero violeta." In *La historia que cuenta*. E. Tello. El Viejo Topo, 2005.

26 Virginia Woolf, *Tres guineas*, Barcelona, Lumen, 1977. V. Woolf was the first person to identify the connections between the patriarchy and militarism reflected in the masculinity of Western men.

Militarism foment the most aggressive values and behaviors which lead to what has been called hyper-masculinity. It ensures the adhesion to a male model that categorically incarnates patriarchal domination. The model of the hyper-masculine hero is characterized by disdain towards what is feminine, criminalization of what is different and devaluing of one's own life and that of the other; and also by the promotion of hierarchies of power and blind obedience that make autonomy and individual thought impossible. Those who take on hyper-masculine values and behavior are precisely the men whose masculinity is subordinate in the patriarchal hierarchy, and who are used as instruments to carry out the atrocities entrusted by other hegemonic men who occupy the spheres of power and benefit from the chains of subordination of the masculinities.<sup>27</sup>

In this way, in military culture the relationship with the others in the conflict reflects the construction of the figure of the enemy, articulated with other devaluing expressions of the other, which authorizes and foments violence and cruelty against them. The habitual outcome to conflicts in this sort of culture is sought through destruction, death and achievement of victory over the enemy. In the context of war, as will be seen below, the armed actors, legal or illegal, try to destroy the material and social foundations of human life to defeat and control territories and people.

*Another one who was a prisoner and who fled from jail today, one William This William continues and is responsible for the gravity of almost of the genocides, raping girls, recent disappearances ordered by him and by one "Power" who is still operating in the community, and a fat one they call the "Motosierra". Because there are still these delinquents there, doing as they please, raping girls and kidnapping them. Bolívar, 2007, P.784.*

In these scenarios, women become military objectives because they are weavers of the collective life, for counteracting with their practices the destruction required to be victorious, for resisting and confronting the armed actors in the name of the bonds that tie. And the feminine bodies, despite the insistence of the patriarchal militarism to trivialize them and maintain their insignificance, impose their symbolic power acquiring multiple meanings in the framework of war. They are mute objects to destroy by the males who torture and assassinate them; they are the territory in which remains the mark of humiliation and suffering inflicted by the victorious; they are the language among the armed men who measure themselves in a rhythm of protection and aggression through female bodies; they are the symbolic space in which the power of life and death is exerted on the people.

In this way, violence against women inherent in the patriarchal domination materializes in a long chain of hierarchy in which some men whose masculinity is hegemonic foment and implement the hyper-masculinity of other men who are subordinate. Patriarchal violence extends likewise in other forms throughout the entire society and economic fabric and

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27 Janie Leatherman, *Sexual Violence*, Cambridge – Malden, Polity Press, 2011; Carol Cohn (ed.), *Women and Wars*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013.

representations of culture, in both the public and private sectors, in a temporal continuity, before, during and after the armed conflicts.<sup>28</sup>

### **The stereotypes of gender**

Reproduction of violence becomes commonplace in the patriarchy and is achieved through a system of gender that establishes the value of “being” a woman or a man and also the forms of “doing” of the man or woman. The value of being – woman or man – is established through the characterization what is attributed to the feminine and the masculine (emotional/rational; active/passive) organized in a hierarchy that accords superiority to masculine attributes and subordinates the feminine. The forms of *doing* become roles, in compartments that are appropriate and acceptable to both women and men. This system attempts to ensure the reproduction of the relationship of domination, forming hierarchies of the value of the being in dichotomies and assigning appropriate behaviors to the doing. The internalization of the values and the roles, through socialization, ensure the reproduction of the relationship of the power of men over women.

The patriarchy as a socio-sexual and symbolic system creates a system of gender that establishes two identities associated with the sexualization of the body, the feminine and the masculine, denying the possibility of any free meaning to the fact of having been born in the body of a man or of a woman. It legitimizes violence against women and, through the gender system, creates stereotypes that make it seem natural, and promotes violence especially against female bodies in the context of war.

Violence against women has, then, historical and cultural supports for what we know as stereotypes of gender. These stereotypes are strongly dogmatic and inculcated beliefs that place women in a position of inferiority, undervalue women and impede them the exercise of their rights. These stereotypes are repeated and intensified in the armed conflict, owing to the condition of greater vulnerability of women, for example in conditions of family or social breakup. When women were left alone in charge of their children, many of them were the object of new forms of violence by the armed actors. Very precarious conditions, forced displacement and poverty, the women having to be responsible for their sons and daughters, social conditions and the need for economic support or protection has led them to numerous new risky situations and/or social exclusion.

*I was in fifth grade then and my father came and took us. We left, no school, nothing. They sent me to the south, the coast. There my father insulted me. From then on I began to suffer because my father treated me badly, or, it was as if I was the one who had sought that (sobs) my father treated me badly and he threw me out of the house frequently. Murillo, Supía, Caldas, P.639.*

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28 Cynthia Cockburn, “The gendered dynamics of armed conflict and political violence,” in Moser, C.; Clark, Fiona (eds.), *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors?: Gender, Armed conflict and Political Violence*, London-New York, Zed Books, 2001, pp. 13 – 29.

Stereotypes persist in Colombia despite legal advances to sanction and eradicate violence against women; violence is reinforced or legitimized between partners and forms a part of a dominating culture in which the desires of women or their sensitivities have been marginalized, including their own emotional relationships. Through these stereotypes, the model of the domineering masculine exercises the role of controlling the life of women – gender or sexist stereotypes that the armed actors assume on many occasions, especially when the women are alone, without a partner, or have a public engagement.

*That I have been a victim, no, but they have tried, including after I became an adult, there have been men who think that because one is a woman alone, that because one is in a social process, the reason one goes to events it is to find a man, yes... it's obvious! If they do it with anyone, how must it be with a young person? They have tried, they force one into bed to struggle, to touch it; of course I have been a victim of that! But it's more as if men think that when women are alone and we do social work, it is because we're looking for a man. Urabá, Chocó, 1995, P.169.*

This way, violence or mistreatment form part of the life of many women, without the possibility of family members reporting it; and the institutions sanction the exercise of violence.

*Well, that was over, my brother's wedding was approaching and I gave him my wedding dress for his fiancé and it had to be taken up a little because I was taller. I was walking along with the dress in the afternoon and he popped out on the road as if from nowhere and he struck me and grabbed me; when I got home he hit me in front of my mother and my mother didn't say anything; my father didn't want to enter into the fray at all because he said he was my husband. Callo Embarrado, El Castillo, Meta, 2002, P.152.*

This silence creates invisibility of the violence against women in daily life, is exacerbated in the framework of war and intensifies the violations of human rights.

## **The Construction of Intersecting Identities in Victims of Violence**

As indicated earlier, patriarchy resolves its relationship to alterity by dehumanizing the other. This enterprise operates through the establishment of subordinate and devalued identities based on conditions like sex, ethnicity/race, age and class; these conditions then justify the discrimination and contempt directed towards them. When these subordinate identities intersect in a concrete existence, the person suffers a pronounced discrimination that amplifies his or her vulnerable situation.

Living in an armed conflict zone is a factor that yields even greater discrimination against women. In effect, women who have found themselves forced into the conflict setting because they live in certain territories recount experiences that configure multiple discriminations. The context of the conflict generates circumstances in which discrimination goes deeper

since it enters in intersection with basic structures of inequality that make women more vulnerable because of their social class, race, or age.

Reflecting over the possible origins of the multiple forms of violence she experienced, one woman notes: *Sometimes I think it was because of a command from God, or a trial God makes one go through...I also think it happened to me because I'm poor, black, and a woman.* Opogadó, Chocó, 1997, p. 477.

A focus on intersectionality makes possible, upon examining the multiple identities that women victims of the armed conflict occupy, the discovery of diverse discriminations present in feminine bodies. This focus recognizes that it is the bodies, and above all those of young women, women farmers (rural women), black and indigenous women – those that operate as places of intersection and meeting of discriminated identities – that constitute the basis for exclusion.

It is important to pay attention to the ways in which certain policies or practices – in this case, the experiences associated with the dynamics of the armed conflict – can shape or modify in different ways the lives of women who live in contexts of war, not only that experienced by males but also that of women who are not exposed to the same combination of factors. It is critical to understand the intersection between gender and territorial localization in conflict zones, and how other forms of oppression and subordination influence this interaction.

The interaction between the category of woman and the condition of victim makes visible multiple discriminations suffered by many women and girls in the country, and reveals that women experience discrimination and exclusion because they are bearers of multiple identities. The gender system assembles with other systems that generate conditions of discrimination, not only for one's territorial position in zones of conflict and the consequent forced displacement, but also ethnic/racial identities, age groups, class and others.

When women victims of the conflict identify the causes of the horror they have experienced, they note the intersection of identities as a circumstance that deepens the violence and control over their lives. The women enumerate multiple identities in intersection, and point out how the violence and domination they experience stems not only from gender discrimination, but also due to categories of race, ethnicity, age and social class.



### The Intersectionality of Victim Identities

Being a woman and young (intersection of gender and age) increases violence and harassment from men in war.

*They could see that the young women were alone and they would go to the houses or ranches and enter however they could to look for them by force. I was young and alone...* Belén de Guajirá, Antioquia, 1992, p.19.

Being a woman and black puts into relationship two discriminated identities that increase the levels of violence and control.

*As Afro-Colombians we have been discriminated in our community and for just being black and women, everything turns out wrong for us* (Quibdó, Chocó, 2001, p. 472.); *in our world everything is more difficult for us for being women and being black* (Quibdó, Chocó, 2001, p. 472.); *You know, as a woman and Afro-colombian, things have been made very difficult for us* (Neguá, Chocó, 1995, p. 474).

Indigenous women have been one of the groups hardest hit by the violence.

*As indigenous people we say resist, resistance – as people who work the land, as women who have had to deal with all these things thrown at us.* Santander de Quilichao, Cauca, 2001, p. 381

Class identity interacting with gender and ethnicity/race, configures situations of extreme discrimination in the framework of the armed conflict. Numerous women, speaking about the possible causes of sexual violence, affirm that the relationship between these occurrences and their lives has to do with their condition as Afro-Colombian, poor women. *I think it happened to me because I'm poor, black and a woman.* Quibdó, Chocó, 2008, p. 497.

It is important to emphasize this intersectional focus present in the reflection of the women victims of the conflict. The 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa, proposes intersectionality as “compound discrimination, double or triple discrimination,” which refers to two or more forms of discrimination. This discrimination in Colombia is produced in the framework of a particular historical and cultural context, and in a concrete dynamic that penetrates their lives: the armed conflict and the relationship to the illegal armed actors and the military or police that act as agents of the State.

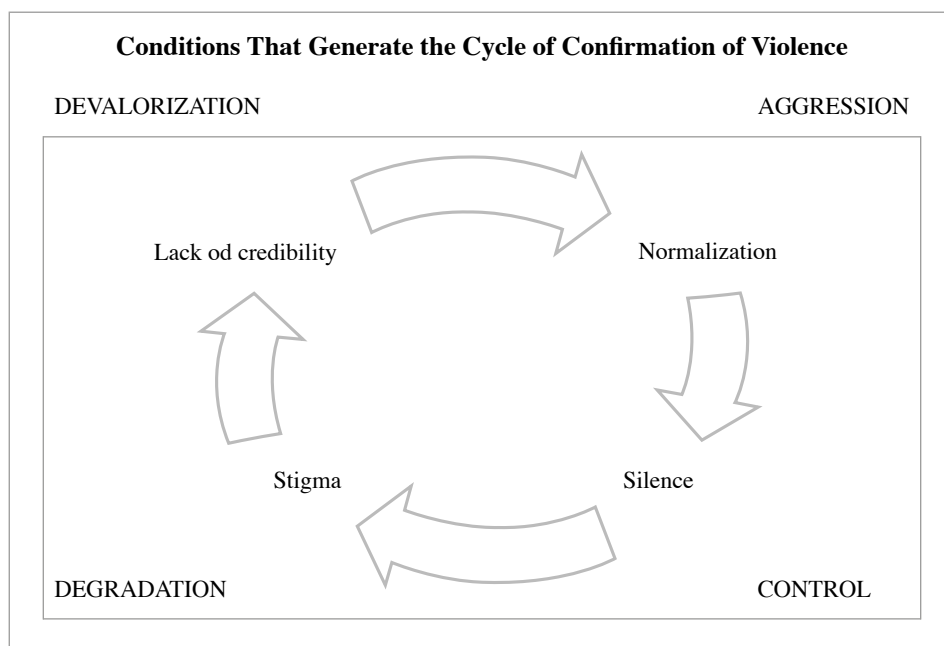
Feminist analysis of what is termed intersectionality illustrates that multiple identities are crossed by different norms of inclusion/exclusion, and that gender intersects other constitutive dimensions of identity like race, ethnicity, age, territorial location, sexual orientation, etc. This analysis is about understanding what happens in this intersection.

One of the central concepts in current studies on gender is analysis of how differences in women's identities are jointly constructed, felt, and modified. That is to say, how they intersect among themselves. Intersectionality is a strategy that serves to link the bases of discrimination (gender, race, age...) with social, economic, and political environments that fuel discrimination and construct experiences of oppression.

### **The Cycle of Confirmation of Violence and the Necessary Re-telling of Violence against Women**

Violence dehumanizes people in two ways: physical violence converts them into objects that can be destroyed; symbolic violence deprives them of their own, unique word. Physical and symbolic violence join together to reinforce their effects: direct violence imposes a fear of speaking, the absence of words confirms an objectification. It is easy to exercise violence against someone considered as an object, and at the same time, the practice of violence denies one's humanity; it does not establish contact with it. Without objectification, it would be much more difficult to sustain the practice of violence against other people, women and men.

The mechanisms that set violence in motion feed back on themselves confirming the victims as deserving of violence and denying them the speech to recover their human value. The testimonies concede the existence of what we have called the cycle of confirmation of violence against women in the context of the Colombian armed conflict (see diagram).



On the one hand, the foundations appear, which secure the legitimization of violence against women: the devaluation of women allows for the aggression which demands control over their bodies and lives, degrading them as valuable beings and confirming therefore their devaluation and the occasion to attack them.

On the other hand, in the operation of society we find a normalization of violence against women and a silencing of that violence. Often it is not seen by others or they fear to denounce the violence since it is stigmatized and the blame is placed on women. This stigma diminishes their credibility when they denounce the violence to which they have been victims.

As a counterweight, there is the necessity to tell and tell again – the re-telling – the experience of suffering violence. Given that the elements that make it invisible and confirm it overlap, complement and increase each other, it is difficult to open a social space for hearing about the events.

*It's something that affects all of us women, and that we always keep quiet about, because we feel ashamed, we are afraid, because there are a thousand prejudices against sexual violence in the family. We have to learn and we have to know that these things need to be shared.* Sotará, Cauca, 2005, p. 387.

The normalization and causing of violence against women to become invisible has been a key factor in maintaining the Continuum of violence. The fact that the words of women victims of violence are not valued and that even they do not recognize themselves as victims, results in the questioning of their accounts of victimization.

*This always happens. Of course, because one believes that since he's my boyfriend, then it's an obligation! And sometimes one begins to think that one lives without valuing oneself a little.* Guarne, Antioquia, 2009, p. 670.

The normalization of violence against women has been produced above all during a time of peace, since until not too long ago interfamily violence was categorized as a private matter or between couples, and in which the State shouldn't interfere. Therefore, neither specific laws nor mechanisms for warning, protection or intervention in these cases existed.

*When he got drunk, he would hit me, he could see me bleeding and on top of that, he wanted to be with me! And I said no, can you imagine, no way, and he would grab me recklessly and say, "You need to be with me".* Putumayo, 1990, p. 575.

The women, moreover, in general prefer to keep quiet about the violence suffered, whether because they don't know how to report it or because even if they know how, they don't believe that it would offer any protection or lead to justice. Intimidation also forms part of interfamily violence, since the aggressors threaten their victims so that they won't speak out. It is a threat that women comply with to prevent their sons, daughters or family from

finding out or, supposedly to avoid censure, social control, or even bigger problems. The women keep the acts of violence to themselves because in war, the armed actors impose their own law by intimidating and obligating women not to speak.

*Like them, the militia, they say that they are in charge, that one who submits a complaint has problems. With you, then, come and we'll settle it for you. We told them and they didn't do anything, so why go to the police? Nothing happens.* Briceño, Antioquia, 2000, p.10.

The threats of the violent actors impose silence because the women fear for their lives or that of their families. But moreover, silence becomes a type of individual shame, social censure and collective impunity.

*Some cases are denounced, but others aren't because they threaten family members, which makes them flee. They leave here from Buenaventura; they look for work in Medellín, or in Cali and they abandon everything and leave. But how are they going to report anything? Nothing can be said over there. You can't, or you couldn't, say anything there, because if you opened your mouth, they would shoot you all the same. Just like that, for being an informer. So what's the use?.* Barrio Nayita, Buenaventura, Valle de Cauca, 2004, p.824.

Numerous forms of violence against women are of a stigmatizing nature. Stigma assumes a moral mark that negatively classifies women who have suffered different forms of violence, and frequently blames them for the violence, leaving them in a situation of greater vulnerability.

*They killed women, they killed children, something so shocking it left me very troubled, it was...there were women who worked selling lottery tickets and they said, "We'll kill them because they're street women, because they're prostitutes," and they disgraced them. They would kill the women, they maimed their breasts, they found them raped, I mean, so many things happened that weren't reported, that didn't get out to the public; instead they just remained in anonymity.* Granada, Antioquia, 1999, p. 895.

Finally, when women decide to talk, they have to tell and re-tell in order to be heard, believed, or given attention.

*Many mothers don't believe someone, they believe their spouse. So when I would tell her, she didn't believe me, but when Rosa told her, then she believed. He would hit us more than anything because we didn't call him dad; he knew that we knew he wasn't our father.* Bogotá, D.C., 1986, p. 3.

When the voices of women are heard, such terrible stories are discovered that they often seem unbelievable. The dimension and extension of the violence generates above all shock and astonishment. These experiences of violence need to be heard and recognized; the

testimonies of these women cannot be questioned since they are told with such strength and clarity. In the testimonies, the women repeatedly request assistance and support to confront and overcome the impacts of the violence. The re-counting of the violence against them has been and is necessary in order to make it visible and unacceptable.

This Commission, from acknowledgement among women and the empowerment that it generates, hopes to put into the public space a feminine subjectivity that speaks about the Colombian armed conflict from the experience of women, thus contributing to the destruction of the cycle of confirmation of violence. This cycle can be broken beginning with the creation of spaces in which women's words receive credibility, thus valuing and recognizing their experience and opening a wide space to denounce, challenge and revoke the imposition of silence.

#### **IV. Women Victims of the Armed Conflict**

How have women lived through the experience of the conflict? The testimonies of the women who narrated their experience of the conflict bring to light three dimensions that configure them as victims and contribute to an in-depth view of discrimination, oppression and gender subordination. These dimensions are: the physical, psychological and sexual violence experienced by the women; the losses and need to relinquish plans they had for the future, and the increase in men's control over their lives.

##### **The Physical, Psychological and Sexual Violence Suffered by Women Victims of the Armed Conflict**

Experiences of physical, psychological and sexual violence that produce intense suffering appear recurrently in the women's accounts. The word "suffering" encompasses a multitude of experiences lived by the women. It entails loss, relinquishment, abandonment, confusion, insecurity, fear, humiliation, violence, torture, and loneliness. Everything that the women have suffered in this conflict is indescribable, creating an immense debt to peasant, indigenous and black women in every region of the country.

##### *Violence that Produces Intense Psychological Suffering*

There is a suffering that translates into sadness, and in many cases, leads to death. To throw oneself to death, to die of sadness, to die of moral shame, these are experiences that the women refer to in their testimonies.

*My mom suffered so much –they were going to kill her, her little granddaughter had been raped, and the displacement after that – that she died in La Virginia because she was thinking about it so much. Because she would say: losing one's things because of these people and then being here working and working...so that killed her. The truth is, this is hard, yes, it's very hard. It's just that when someone has a*

*life and then they are displaced and they come to a point where people give them dirty looks, people reject them, that's very difficult.* Tadó, Chocó, 2002, p. 666.

The women have experienced the continuous harassment of one or various armed actors on villages and families as a constant threat that abuses and terrifies them. Not being able to identify the groups that raid their territories and come to their houses demanding all types of services, from information to stews, produces feelings of anxiety, terror and insecurity in the women. Their lives become immediately entwined in an incomprehensible conflict that alters their daily life and destroys their social reference points. It is difficult to know “who is who” and “who is someone with” in this threatening spider web.

One form of psychological violence that profoundly marks the victim is the compulsory witnessing of atrocities that serves to exemplify terror. More than half of the women suffered different forms of psychological torture (54.4%; N=509), such as being followed or forced to witness torture of other people. Every armed actor resorts to torture, to a greater or lesser degree, as punishment to the youth and children that live in conflict zones.

*They (the soldiers) took us (the school children) to the mountain. There was a young boy there, he was a guerrilla fighter, but they had injured his leg and he couldn't walk. I think this is what it means to have cruelty in your heart – to take us, who were just kids, to watch them kill him. It was so awful! They blew up his head with a grenade. That is something that cannot be forgiven! They would tell us that that's how we would end up when we grew up. Can you imagine a child growing up with that in his mind?* Samaniego, Nariño, p. 338.

Psychological torture is reported mainly by *mestiza*, Afro-Colombian and indigenous women, principally in the areas of Chocó, Santander, Valle, and displaced women in Bogotá.

Fear is another expression of psychological violence that the women relate again and again. Gunshots and confrontations between armed actors generate perpetual fear. The dead bodies that float down the river, the bodies left in canoes or tied to the chairs where they were murdered, or scattered throughout the hillside at the mercy of carrion birds, all produce terror. Language itself frequently dehumanizes the victim and justifies violence with expressions like “false positives” or “social cleansing”. These expressions allow for the execution of people considered “undesirable.” The intrusive knocks at the door, threatening speeches given in the plazas, announcements of forced recruitment all disrupt daily life and form part of the same dynamic of fear. Women live through terrifying experiences that generate profound psychological suffering. They fear for themselves and for their families: “Yes, women couldn't go out late at night because of the conflict; there were many dead bodies by the river, all the time, sometimes you had to see the bodies, you had to see them being pulled from the canoes, and that made me frightened...” related one of the women displaced from Puerto Nare.

### *Physical Violence*

The women described kicks, blows, insults and wounds produced by armed actors, including the army. One girl's story speaks for itself:

*It was a Monday, there was a mountain and a road, and I was going on the road with my teacher who, to me, was like the mother I never had. And those soldiers, they kicked my teacher so many times! She had had an operation and they made the wound burst open; they beat her so badly she was bleeding nonstop. And I was shouting at them: You're animals, you're just the same as the guerilla, you kill and don't even realize it! Samaniego, Nariño, p. 338.*

The recurring physical torture that we encountered in the women's testimonies is a brutal and inhumane practice that crushes their dignity and destroys their personal integrity. Apart from witnessing the torture of others, almost one in every six women interviewed reported having experienced physical torture (15%; n=140). Physical torture was reported more often by women between 30 and 49 years old, and especially in the Antioquia, 25, Chocó and Santander regions.

*They came and passed through the Río Viejo lake and killed eight people, one of the people murdered was a woman who was giving food to the workers, because they were planting corn, and that's when they began to kill her. They violently cut through her nipples, they ripped them off, they stuck her nipples in her mouth, cut off her tongue and they ripped off her fingernails. Barrancabermeja, Santander, 161.*

These practices evoke other eras of "violence" that have repeated throughout the country's history. They serve as examples to terrorize the rest of the local residents in the disputed territories. Such terror prevents denunciation and reinforces a law of silence.

*We kept quiet, in silence, because we were afraid where we were, and because of the fear that those people would come further in and finish us all off, they would kill us, and that's why we didn't reveal anything, we didn't dare say anything. Barrancabermeja, Santander, 161.*

As has happened in other recent conflicts around the world, these torture practices in many cases turn women's bodies into combat zones, which take the form of vengeance or selective annihilation that destroy the enemy's morale.

*As a result of the displacement that happened here in Barranca, in which my whole family left, one of my sisters had just given birth; she had given birth January 3<sup>rd</sup> and February 24<sup>th</sup> is when they came to murder her, and they looked for her baby to murder her, too, because they said that the little girl was the spawn of a guerrilla fighter. Barrancabermeja, Santander, 1993, p. 759.*

### *Sexual Violence*

In every circumstance, whether wielded by men who are known or who are strangers, in the domestic or public sphere, in times of peace or war, sexual violence constitutes an aggression, an assault against the integrity and physical autonomy of women. It represents a violent, direct appropriation of their bodies and their sexuality.

Numerous women related that the experience of sexual abuse of girls and adolescents is quite common in the domestic sphere and is reproduced generation after generation. The abusers are usually the men of the family (uncles, stepfathers, fathers...). This type of violence typical of a patriarchal social-sexual system increases and intensifies in territories where the armed conflict operates. Fifteen percent of the women interviewed reported domestic violence at some point in their lives, the majority of which was sexual abuse. Armed actors magnify sexual violence (Barrancabermeja, Santander, 161) since it is a violence that humiliates and destroys the safety and self-esteem of the women victims who inhabit territories of war, in order to facilitate their submission or their expulsion from those territories. In our study, 12% of women stated that they had suffered sexual violence from armed actors. Sexual torture is associated with the reports of *mestiza* and Afro-Colombian women in the regions of Antioquia, Bogotá, Chocó and Valle.

*They forced the girl to stand 24 hours, day and night, and she was eight months pregnant; they raped her, 14 soldiers from that base raped her. The girl didn't want to report it, she didn't want to say anything. Her mother went to the base with her child, she had a four-year old little girl and she told them, "Please, don't kill the girl, give her to me," and she would take her. The girl had fainted in blood. She [the mother] brought her and took her and immediately put her on a boat and took her to the doctor. Barrancabermeja, Santander, 161.*

In some cases, sexual violence is associated with death. There are many testimonies of women who reference this: "those young men went up there and raped them and right afterward, they murdered them," testimony from a woman (Antioquia, 2007, p. 1).

*Zenaida was 40 years old when they murdered her, November 22, 2003. They took her from her home on November 22<sup>nd</sup> at about 10 in the morning, she lived in a neighborhood called March 16<sup>th</sup>. She had a savings account; she had a house in March 16<sup>th</sup>, one son who was a professional soldier and another who worked near Boyacá, and they would send money to their mom so that she could be saving. They forced her to the ATM machine, they made her take out all her money, and from there they took her to one of those motels around there. They kept her there from 11 until 2 in the afternoon; at 2 in the afternoon, they took her out and they murdered her there in the lobby. And according to the forensic report, they raped her before murdering her. She was such a pretty woman! Líbano, Tolima, 2006, p. 154.*



Like Zenaida, women of all ages have been victims of sexual abuse in the context of the conflict: little girls, teenagers, young and adult women: “when they didn’t rape the mother, they raped the little girl,” one woman recounted. In many cases, displacement takes place precisely because of this, to avoid a threat of rape or to escape from perpetrators who have already committed an assault.

The accounts confirm that violence and sexual abuse in the context of the armed conflict form the highest expression of male domination over female bodies. It is a violence that does not set apart one armed actor from another since, according to diverse testimonies, all armed forces have sexually abused women. The quantitative study did not detect statistically significant associations between sexual torture and any one group accused as being responsible, which confirms the use of such sexual violence by all groups, though there may be different actions patterns or *modus operandi*.

*I don't know what to say; if they were part of the guerrillas or the paramilitaries, or if they were soldiers – in that sense, one can never tell, because you should know that soldiers also commit atrocities, we've always known that. So in that sense, I don't know, the only thing I can tell you is that I was raped by 10 or 15 of those types of men, and in front of my child. And that's why my child has this trauma, that he's been carrying for 20 years, because they raped me in front of him. (p. 249)*

Rape has left profound scars and consequences in the lives of many women and girls who are victims of the conflict. “*There were many psychologists treating her, but sometimes she remembers and she starts to cry; the truth is, it's not that she's so emotional, she still remembers everything; it's very hard, very hard*” Tadó, Chocó, 2002, p. 666.

The women’s narratives reveal the use of violence in the framework of the conflict as a form of control that destroys their physical, psychological and sexual integrity. To inflict this suffering seems to be the expression of power and absolute dominance over women or girls on the part of armed actors of every kind. Force, violence against the women, is a powerful tool of subjugation that carries as a result a suffering that is difficult to convey.

## **The Losses Experienced by Women Victims**

*We had cows, pigs, chickens, dogs, all of that was left abandoned, rows of corn, rows of rice, cabbage, all of that was left there, discarded. Can you imagine? Sur de Bolívar, p. 175.*

As a woman from Papayal (Bolívar) indicates, she had to leave everything behind. The experience of leaving everything behind recurs again and again in the women’s testimonies. This experience of dispossession of a woman’s own life, of her home, belongings, relationships and friendships, supposes a tragic dimension of loss. Violence against women also brought with it material losses in four out of every ten cases (42%),

either as a result of the destruction of their possessions (19.7%; n=184), or the destruction caused during raids (11.9%; n=111) or confiscation (10.5%; n=98). These losses were more frequently reported by women between 30-59 years of age, from women who identified as *mestiza*, indigenous, and of Afro-colombian, in the regions of Bogotá, Chocó, Putumayo, Santander and Valle.

*It was about 6 in the evening, they knocked and told us: You have to leave, we'll give you this many hours and you have to leave. And we left everything.* Mercaderes, Cauca, 2006, p. 830.

On many occasions, women had been victims to successive displacements between different regions of the country.

*I stayed there; I stayed there a little while, and from there they forced us out again. Displaced again.* Cañas Gordas, Antioquia, 1998, p. 7.

An overwhelming majority of the women refer to the experience of “loss” as the most painful and unjust event lived by them and their families in the context of the armed conflict. “Since that moment, my life was over,” affirms one woman from the community of Bojayá (Chocó, 2002, p. 83). In effect, the women victims have lost everything in this war. They have lost their roots, they have been stripped of important ties to their territory, their own place or their own culture. Forced displacement demands that they abandon the places they loved, patiently constructed places of life and work: their home, their farm, their land, their animals.

The loss of their house is very painful for the women. Their house is attached to their emotional life, their sons and daughters, to their patiently acquired possessions, to the harmony and beauty that the women imprint on their homes.

*After the burial, which was Sunday, the 25<sup>th</sup>, I left my town, leaving all of my things behind, leaving behind my house. What shocked me most was that those people attacked my house, they stole from me, they practically took my things, many things??! They attacked my house, they kicked my door down.* El Tambo, Cauca, 2001, p. 320.

The necessity to flee, caused by the armed conflict, is especially difficult for indigenous women, who are deeply bound to their land.

*The circumstances of the continuous war that this country has lived were what forced us, me and my family, to go without the things our grandfathers and elders fought for, and who worked for the good of their descendents, who we are a part of. When I was two months old, my parents and my five older siblings, we were forced to flee Natagaima. Inside the territory of the indigenous reservation El Tambo, they allocated a hectare of land for us to make our homes and that's where we*

*lived...Well, it has mainly affected me, and my whole family; it's uprooted me and created a separation from the rest – leaving our territory to come to the city and suffer hardships. Natagaima, Tolima and San Onofre, Sucre, 1997, p. 255.*

Many women also reference their losses in terms of the economic support and stability that their sons and partners provided them.

*It's affected me horribly, because it's my son, and I lost stability, I lost everything, because he was the one who helped me out financially. He helped me to pay the rent, he managed to get food for the two of us. And they killed my son, and now I'm left with no support, my life changed completely. Mesetas, Meta, 2007, p. 191.*

The loss of health and mobility forms part of this painful experience, especially for a great collective of mine victims, made up mostly of the civil population. Anti-personnel landmines produce enormous effects and disabilities, and bring along with them psychological effects and an excessive burden on families.

*I stepped on an anti-personnel landmine on June 11, 1992. It was about 5:00 in the afternoon; I was working because I was the head of the household and I was with my children getting wood for construction. I had sent them on ahead to the house while I followed behind. I let my son lead the way and I left the path, that's when I stepped on the mine. I was hurled to the ground and thrown about 12 meters. When I went to stand up, I couldn't. I looked at myself, and saw that I no longer had my left leg, and my right leg was broken, completely split. El Tambo, Cauca, 2004, p. 303.*

Other irreparable losses are the viability projects of the community, patiently and lovingly constructed by the women.

*I had many plans there in my community where I was. But because of this conflict, I was forced to come here, I gave up the work I had with the community... Vereda El Recreo, Antioquia, 1991 and 2006, p. 54.*

These processes of dispossession generate greater poverty for women; the economic autonomy so arduously attained by them is threatened by the effects of the conflict.

*This has brought me many things, because the family left everything, many people had to leave River Bebará, and this created more poverty for me than I could handle, because I couldn't manage things anymore. I missed his strength; there were times when I lived just buried in the mine. I was alone trying taking care of the kids and give them a pound of rice. Sometimes we had to go without eating because there were days when we didn't have plantains and nobody ate...we needed money to buy meat, we no longer even chatted to each other because we were lonely, bored, stressed out and that's how we lived. Zaragoza, Antioquia, 1998, p. 65.*

But without a doubt, the experience of loss most painfully lived by the women is the loss of their loved ones, sons and daughters, companions, fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers, boyfriends. Three out of four women interviewed indicated the loss of loved ones, whether it was through extrajudicial executions (54.1%, n=506) or forced disappearances (18.7%, n=174). These figures account for the severity and magnitude of human loss. While these losses affected women of all ages and ethnic backgrounds, statistically the women most affected were indigenous and Afro-Colombian, especially in the regions of Antioquia, Chocó and Putumayo, and from the age groups corresponding to those between 50-59 and older than 60.

The loss of family and the horror associated with the circumstances that produce it entail a profound level of suffering for the women victims of this conflict. The story of one woman from El Carmen de Bolívar reveals this painful experience in which she reaches the limits of her strength and yet she overcomes adversity again and again. She is an entrepreneur with businesses in tobacco and cattle. Her farm, settled in the mountains of El Carmen de Bolívar, is prosperous. Several days pass since she received news that, according to the army, her entire family had been assassinated by the guerrilla. She can't understand it: *"When I tried to go back to my house, they told me I couldn't go up there because there were confrontations."* The woman doesn't understand these reasons: *"I asked them, but confrontations between whom?"* That is when they inform her that in her absence, her entire family had been murdered at the farm. The pain is unbearable: *"At that moment, I lost consciousness. I fell down on the ground, I lost all sense."* The woman recovers and makes several attempts to go up to her farm. She feels the loneliness and lack of support: *"So they left me there alone. I stayed under a ceiba tree, thinking about what to do..."* She decides to turn to the police in Sincelejo, but the conditions do not allow her access to the mountain.

So she begins the climb alone, and she is attacked by armed actors: *"I ran into the guerrilla fighters there, but I couldn't identify them, I didn't know what group they were, what their name was. They asked me, 'Where are you off to, you little gossip?' and they smacked my head with the handle of the rifle. I felt a torment and fell down unconscious. They left me there for dead, with blood running from my nose, my mouth, my ears..."* The woman doesn't give up: *"I returned to consciousness, I took off my shirt and tied it around my head, and I continued."* She can't reach her farm, and this time she decides to report it. But the police decide not to intervene yet. It is the mayor of Bosconia who in the end orders a group to go to the mountains of Bolívar. *"The group was about 14 police officers and a truck and the coffins. They asked me how many coffins were needed and I said '9,' and they took 9."* There were nine members of her family murdered: *"It was a huge slaughter...my father, my mother, my four children, my grandmother, my grandfather and my uncles who were all buried in Bosconia, Cesar."* The pain, the horror, the violence experienced by this woman is ineffable. Her story culminates with a sentence that expresses the state of shock and derangement she has reached: *"What more could I say, I lost my senses, I took off running and threw myself against the cemetery gates..."* María La Baja, Bolívar, 1991, p. 225.

*“To this very day”: The Experience of a Loved One’s Disappearance*

In approaching the history lived out by Colombian women in the framework of the conflict, the disappearance of loved ones configures one of the most difficult and traumatic experiences that mark a before and after in their lives. The questions are inescapable: Where are they...? Who will account for them...? One in four women reported the forced disappearance of a relative (18.7%). Many accounts reflect this situation of a permanent emptiness.

*The sister disappeared and to this very day we don’t know where she is. [We don’t know] how they captured her and if she was able to escape from them (the paramilitaries) and we don’t know where she is... I don’t know if she’s dead or alive. Bogotá, D.C., 1986, p. 3.*

Many women remember the last moments they saw their loved ones as a vivid memory, like a flicker of light that has accompanied them ever since. Such is the case for this woman who gave her testimony. A girl at the time, she still remembers her mother’s last words before her disappearance: *“I’ll return when the rains come.”* The difficult experience of the loss of their mother is lived by this woman and her sister when they were children and were displaced to Villavicencio. Their mother decides to risk going back for their things in the place they had been displaced from. She tells her sister to take care of her girls: *“Take care of them for me, don’t ask questions, take care of them for me. I’m leaving you 10,000 pesos for their snacks. I’ll come back for them the day after tomorrow.”* Her two small daughters relate that when she was leaving, she said, *“My little girls, behave properly, I’m leaving and I’ll return in the winter, I’ll return when the rains come...”* She never came back. Her daughters have not forgotten that she left all her things: *“She had been carrying them in a bag, and she left.”*

*Forced Displacement*

*My life has been traumatic because of the continual displacement I’ve faced. Florencia, Caquetá, 2003, p. 108.*

Displacement is the greatest expression of loss: to have to flee, to run, to leave everything behind. Many women express how they suffered multiple displacements. Forced displacement affected three in four women interviewed (76.2%; n = 711). The majority of the cases correspond to displacement of families and relatives (61.7%), followed by displacement of entire groups (8.7%) and displacement of individuals (5.8%). Most of the displacements reported happened between urban areas and specific rural areas. Displacement of families is significantly associated with a woman’s place of residence and collective displacement is linked to ethnicity. In the first case, displacement of families occurred more in the areas of Bogotá, Bolívar, Risaralda and Santander, while displacement of groups is tied to those identified as indigenous or Afro-Colombian.

*I had to abandon this district because of the violence and I had to go to another one from where I also had to move, because of another case of violence in which*

*I had to witness a family member killed. It made me very homesick; it gave me a lot of pain. I went somewhere else, and there I had to see a friend killed...* Bajo Atrato, Chocó, 1998, p. 139.

The armed actors that provoked these displacements were not always the same ones. Moreover, many women relate how they were victims of two or more actors, which demonstrates the intertwined violence they have been subjected to. In the majority of cases, the victims state that the displacement was directly ordered by the armed actors, and that they even put time limits. But in some cases, this forced displacement is part of the actions taken to deal with the events, as a last resort: *"to flee from the pain of the memories,"* one woman expressed. Girón, Santander, 2001, p. 127.

***"Mom, there's no other option here"***

The incursion of the conflict in the life of peasant women disrupts their daily lives, their livelihood projects built around the house, their sons and daughter, their work on the land... The loss that forced displacement entails of their land and projects has pressured women into all kinds of precarious and subordinate jobs. In some cases documented by the Commission, this includes prostitution against one's will as an extreme option with the goal to obtain financial resources for them or their families.

One of the testimonies that recalls the experience lived by a young woman who was responsible for maintaining her mother and small boy, exemplifies this situation. The entire family had been forcibly displaced, and after living through a terrifying night in a precarious apartment in a district of Caldas, the woman described as *"timid, who didn't like to be out dancing or in parties,"* feels that the survival of her family falls on her shoulders. She analyzes the options their new situation offers her and concludes: *"Mom, there's no other option here; I have to do this."* The mother, torn with pain, only manages to respond: *"My daughter, that is your choice, that is your issue, it's your choice."*

This form of prostitution, forced by displacement, dramatically increases the subordination and discrimination of women victims of the armed conflict, and shapes new forms of control over feminine bodies, and of violence they are subjected to in the work of prostitution, especially young women in a situation of displacement and absolute insecurity. San Sebastián, Buenos Aires, Cauca, 2007, p. 328.

***"I had a good life"...Or the Irreparable in the Life of Women Victims***

After reading the women's accounts, an inevitable question arises: How to repair, how to restore so many losses experienced by the victims? Reparations and returns are talked about in general in cases of rape, murdered family members, and loss of land, but what the interviews unveil is that behind these shocking and painful events are irreparable losses concerning lives constructed around particular territory, customs and rituals, and loved ones.

*We had to leave (from Jardín de las Peñas, in Meta, to Bogotá) with only the clothes we were wearing, and that was the hardest thing to have happened to us because we used to have plenty to live off of, we lived very well and since that day our life has turned into chaos because we suffer a lot here. Life here is very hard and we've endured hunger, or we've shouldered the burden, let's say. Jardín de las Peñas, Meta, 1998, p. 114.*

Various testimonies refer to “the good life” that the women had before the acts of violence.

*Before being displaced, my life was very good because I lived very peacefully. I lived in a town called Opogadó, a neighborhood of Bojayá. We lived on the banks of the Atrato, we grew our food, we would go out to the town. We cultivated plantain, banana, corn, rice... My husband did various types of work; he was a fisherman, a hunter. He hunted everything and kept meat on the table, corn... Opogadó, Chocó, 1987, p. 488.*

*I am from Riosucio, Chocó; I lived peacefully – I'll begin with that, I lived peacefully. I had my work as a woman, I had my husband, I lived surrounded by my family and my children, and that peacefulness was shattered one ordinary day when the rumors began that the self-defense forces were coming into Riosucio... Dabeiba, Antioquia, 1988, p. 84.*

This “good life” of which many women speak in their testimonies is characterized by shared household work, possession of assets (a farm, land, animals...), the ability to sustain themselves financially and to have an integrated home, their relationships (with their children, their partners, their neighbors...), communal life, ties to their roots, to their ancestors and, in particular, peacefulness and normalcy.

*My life was a normal one, I was a happy person, hard-working, committed to my family and my community. I was a person who just glowed with happiness. I lived in Community 18, Carmen de Atrato, Chocó. Medio Atrato, Chocó, 1999, p. 420.*

*I led a very active life, friendly, very sociable, I shared a lot of things, I would go out at any hour of the day and didn't fear anybody. It was a normal life, the life of someone who hadn't suffered any type of mistreatment. Then some armed groups that act outside the law, whose names we don't know, arrived on May 2, 2002, at 10:45 in the morning and threw a pipe bomb into the chapel where many innocent people died. That was a crucial point in my life, like a crossroads. From that moment, my life ended, I had no more desire to go on, no desire to fight... Medellín, Antioquia, 2002, p. 83.*

It is important to note that the close link between women and their children, their land, their houses and possessions, their animals and their community intensifies the suffering their innumerable losses entail.

How could this good life that the women victims recall be restored? How does one make up for the loss of a morning greeting from those going off to work the land, the loss of a cup of coffee shared leaning against the fence on the farm, the loss of long afternoons telling stories before night arrives, of community fiestas, of secret loves?

### *Losing Everything to Gain Life. The Meaning Attached to Loss*

Perhaps what is most striking is that despite the countless losses and inexpressible suffering, the women manage to accord meaning to this experience of loss. It can be summarized in one phrase: "losing everything to gain life," as expressed by a woman who lives in a rural community in San Roque, after being displaced by paramilitaries.

*They came there to threaten us and tell us that if we didn't leave, they would kill us. So you know that when someone loves life, the only thing to do is to work hard to get out of there... San Roque, Antioquia, 2001, p. 656.*

This "life at all costs" is made evident in an intense experience lived by a woman in Tadó (Chocó). She narrates the pressure put on her from the guerrilla to turn over her 6-year old daughter.

*My little girl was fair-skinned, short and chubby, and one of the women from the guerrilla wanted to take her away from me by force. I told her I wouldn't hand over my daughter, so she said to me, "What do you want? To lose your life or to hand over your daughter?" And I told her, "I'm not going to lose my life or hand over my daughter." When they left, we took off...We lost everything. Tadó, Chocó, 2002, p. 666.*

This decision by women to protect life is made clear in narratives that demonstrate how many of them lost everything to save their children from death, forced recruitment and abuse. For example, a woman from Callo Embarrado, El Castillo, Meta, 2002, p. 152, narrates how upon her return to the shantytown in which she lived, after participating in a commemorative event for Women's Day, she finds her shack surrounded by armed men who want to take her three sons. The woman thinks, "My sons come before anything else." She renounces her life, rejects the proposal the AUC paramilitaries make, which consists of her continuing to live peacefully in her community if she hands over her children, and she leaves during the night, fleeing toward an uncertain future.

### **Control over Women Victims**

The interviews repeatedly demonstrate the terror felt by the women when faced with the threatening presence of armed actors. These fighters display attitudes, language, signs and symbols associated with masculine power that produce fear and trembling in the women. The ultimate expression of this power is, without a doubt, weapons, which exacerbate masculine violence against women.



The militarization of large stretches of land generates ways of dominating and controlling the lives of women, and heightens the masculine superiority that is the basis of the patriarchal socio-sexual system. This dominance reaches so deep that fighters who carry out forced displacement and exercise control become “the law” in women’s lives.

*Well, when I was in Sánchez, Nariño, I was displaced by the movement that called themselves... “the law”. From there, they kicked us out again, we were displaced again. It was the same thing, “the law”, yes, and that time... gas cylinder bombs, they put gas cylinder bombs and everything, and... yes, “the law” again. Samaniego, Nariño, 2004, p. 280.*

The testimony of a woman from Santander vividly recalls the terror and horror she and her little daughter experienced in one of their displacements.

*The first displacement was in Sabana de Torres, where some masked men were going to kill me. I had my little girl, she was about 6 years old, and they aimed at me and I put my daughter in front of me because I said, if I put her in front of me, they won’t do anything to me. So I was waiting for the bus and I was trembling, and they were aiming at me, and so I hugged my daughter. At the last minute, I was able to leave on the bus, I had to be quick, if not, they would kill me... Sabana de Torres, Santander, 1997, p.184.*

Crude display of masculine power is a constant in the testimonies; the women experience this power as a threat that constricts and disables them. The accounts reveal that the armed groups exercise powerful control over the lives of women who live in territories in conflict, a control that expresses itself in very different ways.

One of these ways is control over the movements of women, who are stigmatized as “*sapas*” (snitch) and “*chismosa*” (gossip). The movements of the population, whether it be to sell their products or because of their social relationships, are frequently viewed with suspicion by armed actors who follow a rationale of controlling the territorial borders they establish and of searching for the enemy among the civil population itself.

*[They say,] ‘Yes, yes, you need to leave because you’re behaving incorrectly and you have no reason to be going here and there... you’re bringing and taking things. You have to leave here, or rather, if you don’t want to die, you have to leave.’ Barrio la Cruz, Antioquia, 2010, p. 8.*

Other forms of control that affect women and that on occasion have cost them their lives are those that are exercised over them through their familial or romantic relationships, as if the women become polluted by others’ behavior.

*Sometimes women find themselves constrained by the politics of illegal armed groups or even those of the State, for example, the proliferation of “informants” and/or “collaborators” in their areas of control. It’s not easy to refuse to*

*“collaborate;”, and this begins to weave a suffocating net around the women, who find themselves more and more involved, in most cases because of relationships that are almost always forced, or because of decisions made by their fathers or brothers, their husbands or romantic partners. In some cases, the women pay with their lives and, in general, they see no way out except forced exile. La Jagua de Iberico, Cesar, 1998, p. 738.*

Armed actors also exercise control over women's emotional lives. There is a characteristic story (Medellín, Antioquia, 1996, p. 81) of a young woman from Chocó, who worked as a rural community health worker and had a good life. In this case, the members of the ELN (National Liberation Army) feel they have the authority to control the emotional relationships of this woman, and in a gesture of their power, they take her prisoner as punishment for loving a policeman. *“They punished me,”* she affirms. The rationale of military presence and the control of territory signify a specific risk for women because of their affective relationships.

This situation repeats itself quite frequently. All the armed actors involved in this conflict, including agents of the State, in a clear exercise of patriarchal power and dominance, feel the right to control the sentiments and romantic choices of women, and even to murder them if these choices are not to their liking. The account of a woman from Barrancabermeja illustrates these practices of control.

*In Barranca at that time there were a lot of girls who died just for the fact that they were talking to a soldier and a militant was watching them; they would kill her on the spot. Barrancabermeja, Santander, p. 161.*

These accounts reveal how women's bodies become disputed territory among the armed actors. Women's bodies are also where territorial control is defined. Women are stripped of their physical autonomy and converted into the property of armed men who keep them at their disposal and use them to “mark” their territory in front of their adversaries.

In the same way, the private daily life of people was invaded and subjected to the control of armed actors who, on occasion, intervened with threats in order to subjugate the will of women in personal conflicts.

*At that time in Pitalito (Huila), an organization was operating there called the National Liberation Army. They were the ones in charge there; they were operating in that town...; my mother had separated from her husband she had been living with, the father of my brothers. And that man wanted the kids to stay with him, so because my mom didn't want to hand them over to him, those people immediately went to her and threatened her. They simply told her that if she didn't hand over the children, they were going to leave her where no one would find her. Pitalito, Huila, 1998, p. 912.*

Threats also served to be able to control the general behavior of women.

*They threatened her that if she didn't behave herself, they would kill her or she would have to flee.* Bogotá, D.C., 1986, p. 3.

The forced recruitment of young women has been another extreme expression of control over women's lives and their freedom of movement, in this case from paramilitary groups.

*I arrived and I asked them, what are you doing here? [They said,] "Listen, my friend told me that he had seen Eduardo, one of the guys they had sent to recruit my daughters, he put Luisa and Brigith in a truck." When he told me that, I immediately said, "They recruited them!" I don't remember the name of the commander. I went crazy; I even forgot my own name, in that moment I went into shock, in panic. They were my two daughters. The next day I walked around the entire night asking around for them; nobody knew. I told a patrol officer and he came with me to look for my daughters in the garbage dumps, where the paramilitaries throw the bodies... Piñique, Atlántico, 2004, p. 257.*

In many circumstances, the control over women's lives led to the kidnapping of young women for the fighters' use: *"I came in 2001; I had to come on December 28<sup>th</sup> because they wanted to take my daughter away. He was supposedly a commander ..."* (Valle del Cauca, 1990, p. 131). Armed men of any stripe acted by using women's bodies as if they were their own property.

Additionally, there is a proliferation of testimonial accounts that shed light on the abuses and violations of women's bodies of every age, from girls to older women.

*There were many women...look, I'm going to tell you a dark secret I have...one of my nieces was at the base there, the military base, and they captured her and raped her... She was with her mother, they took hold of the mother and put a pistol to her head and said, "You go; leave the little one..."* Barrancabermeja, Santander, p. 161.

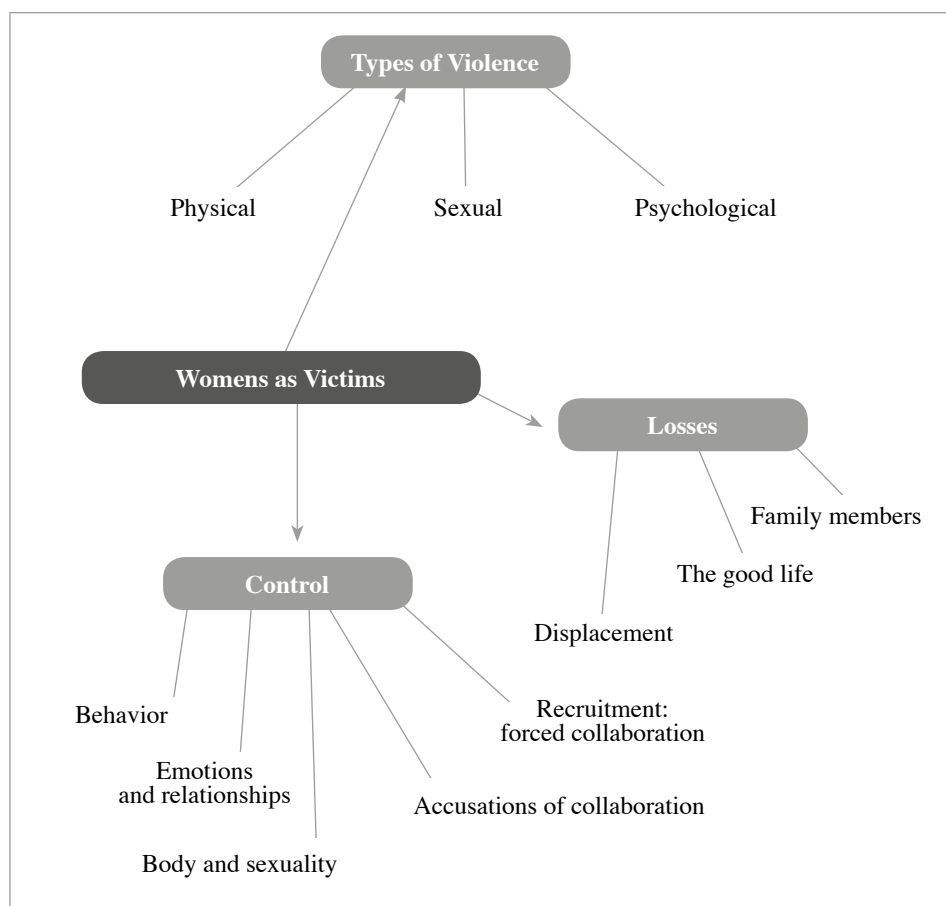
One woman who was raped and threatened by the paramilitaries (p. 60), interprets what happened like this:

*I think this happened to me because they saw I was alone, because at that moment I was the only woman there. Maybe they're so used to doing that, I think, so that's why they did it to me.* El Jardín, Antioquia, 2001, p. 60.

This "used to doing that" refers to the patriarchal constructions and cultural imaginaries that legitimate practices of masculine domination in every sphere of life. These testimonies reveal that in the middle of this conflict, women are victims of masculine control by both legal and illegal armed groups, and also by the men with whom they come into relationship throughout their lives. Their partner's distrust and attempt to control appears again and again in the narratives of the women interviewed: *"I've told you to stop looking for other men"*, one woman's partner says to her when she is indicated as a supposed informant by an armed group. (Barrio la Cruz, Antioquia, 2010, p. 8.).

The exercise of control over the bodies and lives of women and their affective relationships extends throughout their lifetimes and to every area, as we have regularly seen, on this continuum of patriarchal violence that was noted earlier.

The women victims narrate experiences that are marked by a senseless violence manifested in every dimension and that has inflicted serious physical and psychological damage on them. These violent acts have brought great losses to the lives of the interviewed women; losses both material and emotional that have destroyed or taken away a life where the women occupied a certain place and carried out their roles with meaning. Widespread violence focused on women has also meant a loss of autonomy and a greater control of their lives by armed actors.



## V. Surviving women of human rights violations

*I feel a little sad because when I remember it seems that one is living through the events again. But the reality is different and at least I know that my testimony will be known and I hope it gives comfort to other people, to other women. Quilichao Santander, Cauca, 1980, P.526.*

*I think we have to know history to not repeat it, so I am giving this contribution so that the generations to come have better approaches, so they will not suffer all that I suffered. Popayan, Cauca, 1987, p.315.*

The option to speak to bear witness indicates the existence of a consciousness of a surviving woman who wants to become a subject of the discourse narrating her experience in the first person. She expresses the wish of restoring the memory of the facts and telling the truth to make it known. Women interviewed for the CVMMC have survived the human rights violations they suffered and they decided to tell their story because it makes sense for them to make their truth available to others.

*I hope this testimony is useful for guidance and to help other women, so that they do not have to live what we are living through with this chain of bitterness and pain. Cali, Valle del Cauca, P.163.*

How have women moved from the role of victim to the present role of survivor? In the previous section, three dimensions of the experience of the victim have been identified – violence, loss and control – which not only broke the trajectory of their lives dividing them into a before and an after, but they also suffered a break in their being as women. The voices of women who testified relate multiple personal processes of facing their situation and recovery that start from a common experience of them all: the harm caused by the violence that turned them into victims of serious human rights violations.

In the experience of the break, as they tell it, women move flowing among contrasts: they feel as if they are dying but they keep on living; they declare they feel helpless but they can still go on; they say they do not have strength but they find strength even when there is none. In many stories, from their fragility they find strength to cope with extreme situations.

*You feel anger, helplessness, many times even the desire of ending one's own life, because you say: I will not be able. The change for a mother when she loses her son in the circumstances that I lost Julián. How have I faced it? I think with great courage. Tibú, Norte de Santander, 2000, P.778.*

*But look what I say, when one is outside, one sees it is difficult, I mean that while you're not the victim, but if you're the victim you get the courage and the strength from where you [think] you don't have it. But, I feel, I loved my daughter and even though they might kill me, I said I would not leave my daughter here. El Tambo, Cauca, 2001, P.308.*

The complexity of the experience to survive confronting the impacts of violence is conveyed through these contrasts. In the story of the process of transition from grief to a new rooting in life, through the gathered testimonies, it can be seen that the value of life is central for women. In the accounts of women victims of conflict emerge, sometimes timidly, and others explicitly, many initiatives to rebuild one's personal life, almost always associated with family life. Six out of ten women interviewed chose to focus on their family (64.9%, n = 607), often becoming the main economic and emotional support.

In new and difficult contexts, women face the situation of loss. It is this profound decision to preserve life which, assuredly, explains their ability, their strength to rebuild again and again from the ashes, all that has been destroyed in this conflict: a home to live in, relationships and affections, sources of livelihood, the basic means of protection, organizational forms, etc.

In their journey from victim to survivor, there were anchors that gave them the meaning and strength necessary to not surrender to the pain and to move on, restoring what violence had destroyed. In the testimonies, we distinguish three areas of action in which the efforts of women to preserve life against violence of armed actors focus: resist and mobilize on behalf of the links; remake the conditions of humanity; weave together community life.

### **Resist and mobilize on behalf of the links**

The link with the loved ones, and most especially the daughters and sons, is such a significant element in the life of women that it is present in all stages of the narration.

Facing violence, they created strategies of prevention and protection of their children to preclude their being harmed. As it can be seen in the following testimonies, women sought ways to avoid persecution of the children and were ready to move, even [if it meant] losing everything, to protect them from recruitment or the dangers of violence.

*Then he was called Hernán Darío, but now he is not called Hernán Darío; we had to change his name because they tormented us a lot because he broke out tied, so we had to change his name to protect him and all the family because all those armed groups were asking me about Hernán Darío. I don't have any son called Hernán Darío. Tarazá, Antioquia, 1996, P.51.*

*So to avoid their being taken away, I talked like my dad and my mom. Right? They began to get along better, having saved the lives of the children so that they would not be taken to the mountains. Primavera, Arauca, 2007, P.693.*

*My thoughts were to get out and leave everything, in order to leave I didn't have to be concerned with anything, but just took my children and left and I could lose everything but not a son of mine. Chalán, Sucre, 1990, P.210.*

*I'm not going to stay here, lest they start suddenly to kill one's children who are out there innocently. And so it was that we came to Bucaramanga. Vereda Zapatero, Huila, 2000, P.747.*

Sometimes women directly confronted the perpetrators putting at risk their own lives to defend daughters, sons and other loved ones from the abuse of the perpetrators or recruitment by armed groups.

*Oh holy blessed God! I realized that he had entered my house and I encounter him one day and gave him a piece of my mind. Then I said where I got so much strength. He belongs to an armed group that kills a person and sit and laugh and celebrate. They do not care a bit about life. And I said step again in my house and you will see, and leave my daughter alone. I said many things to him in front of many people and I told him kill me and I'll leave a letter, if something happens to me, you solely will be accused of my death and you will pay. Medellín, Antioquia, 1995, P.47.*

*The only thing that people told me was about recruiting, but they never identified which group they belonged to, if it was a guerrilla, AUC or the army, because they were talking to me about recruiting, but they didn't have anything that would identify them. Then I opposed outright, I said: if you take my brother, if you take my son, you will have to take all of us. Sucre, Cauca, 2002, p.390.*

Most women say that after the traumatic events, they kept on going for their daughters and sons. The children for whom they were responsible were the engine that moved them to overcome grief, to resist and act to give them a future.

*Well, life does not belong to those who suffer, but to those who fight, and have to fight for their children to get ahead. Barrio Cerros de Maracay, Valle del Cauca, 2002, P.879.*

*Sometimes you get to such a situation that you would kill yourself, then one says I'll kill myself, I leave everything behind, my mom will see if she takes care of my two children. But it is not true, one thinks that but at the moment one reacts and says no but why do I have to dump my children or why do I have to kill myself, then that makes you a little stronger. Mocoa, Putumayo, p.374.*

Again in the narratives we hear contrasting feelings, in this case the weight of the overwhelming responsibility and at the same time the undeniable will to respond for their sons and daughters. Women feel such a great commitment to raise their children that sometimes they do it at their own expense.

*Ever since he died, it was always work, study and take care of my daughters, always very protective of them. Thinking of romantic relationships for me was to harm my daughters and put them at risk, I take in someone here and what about if*

*this person would hurt my daughters. I would not let anyone say a word to them, one must always be defending them.* Medellín, Antioquia, 1996, P.64.

But also the sons and daughters are expectations and hope for the future. One projects for them the possibility of an improvement, of a hypothetical realization of what was not granted to them, is projected onto their children. To some extent, they are a profound hope that one's suffering was not in vain, that it has served to help others.

*Going forward, that my children get ahead. I want them to be someone in this life. So that what I did not achieve may they accomplish. I have my children all studying now, although it's hard work, but I'm there looking after them.* Carmen de Bolívar, Bolívar, 1987, P.231.

*What happened to me I did not expect, but it did happen and what do I have to do? Well, search for the solution to improve things. Change my lifestyle. Support my children so that they don't follow a bad path so that at least what happened to me doesn't happen to them.* Bellavista, Bojayá, Chocó, 2002, P.468.

The search for missing relatives or fighting for the clarification of the facts, as in the case of "false positives", is an example of the strength of the links that unite women with their loved ones. The significance of affective relationships in the lives of women results on these occasions in mobilization and denunciation, or a tireless work to clarify the facts and restore the dignity of victims. For example, 63.2% (n = 590) of them conducted some reporting of the incidents to different authorities, although almost all of these allegations did not involve effective judicial investigations.

*I do it for them, I do it for Andrés because wherever he is he can know that I did not leave him alone, even when he was dead. So that they grow up knowing that I defended their dad until the last moment. And when I cannot manage to do any more and when this is over, they can continue with the memory of their dad. I believe that false positives, what happened and what will happen when they are sentenced, I think this will be in the history of Colombia.* Desaparición forzada, Bogotá, DC, 2008, P.771.

*That motivated me as a mother to fight for the memory of my son, to show the whole world, national and international, that my son was not a criminal, he was fit to be a member of society, that there was no complaint about him.* Barrio Compartir, Soacha, Cundinamarca, 2008, P.138.

*All these outrageous things they did to my family: they disappeared this brother of mine, they killed him and just threw him somewhere. I had another brother that they also killed and threw into the sea. So I seized the banner to be the voice of each of those victims who cannot give their reports. I am firm like stone with regard to the fact that such events not remain unpunished. I allow other women to open themselves, fill themselves with courage so that they can also present their cases.* Bolívar, 2007, P.784.



## Remaking the conditions of humanity

Closely related to the importance of the links, but also as an affirmation of one's own dignity, is the commitment of women to remake over and over living conditions necessary for the development of human beings. In the testimonies, there is great emphasis on the importance it had for them to rebuild the basic elements for a decent life in the recovery process after the dispossession and loss described. Women provide with their civilizing practices, a common sense logic according to which there is an absolute priority to restore minimum conditions to satisfy basic human needs that allow people to be human beings with dignity. This also meant a change in themselves and their roles, extending these changes into the family setting in more than half of the interviewed women (57.4%, n = 536) and becoming the main economic and emotional support (54.5%, n = 509) of the family.

This logic is found in the great importance they attach in the testimonies to the achievement of establishing a home after experiencing a forced displacement. In some cases, the initial conditions were very precarious, their aim being access to a decent home of their own.

*I was living in a house with some other people and then I decided to just occupy an empty house, to squat in it. I did that because seeing myself in that situation, I needed a house.* Urabá, Antioquia, 1982, p.697.

*I got a job with the Minuto de Dios, temporary for two months, I am thankful for it, and I bought the plot where I am currently living and there, little by little we have built a house.* María La Baja, Bolívar, 2004, p.216.

Another element of restructuring was to obtain income to pay for basic needs.

*When we arrived here in Cartagena, because it all happened so fast and one managed to leave alive, thanks to God. I arrived without knowing anyone and we got a job, thanks be to God. We got a job, which was paramount, and so we have been able to get ahead.* Corregimiento de Canucal, Ovejas, Sucre, 1994, P.289.

Women tell of their survival strategies utilizing the skills often acquired for other purposes. From their testimonies there emerges a great capacity of adaptation and mobilization of their own resources for a purpose that is considered the highest priority.

*I worked in the house of a girl and she gave me a domestic sewing machine in order to make some garment alterations for her, as she is a fashion designer. There I began to do sewing because there I used to do sewing too, but I made very different things.* Caicedonia, Valle del Cauca, 2001, P.664.

*A man told me to get a piece of land there in Tóez and sow beans. Those beans turned out very well and my brother-in-law helped me sow a hectare of beans. We planted them and also someone gave me the seeds and so with that I could*

*maintain myself. I got about 460 kilograms of beans, and then was living well. Buenos Aires, Cauca, 2001, P.310.*

Following the same logic to restore the conditions of humanity, they were very active in the settlements created by people in situations of forced displacement. In the effort to achieve sanitation, education and health services in these new neighbourhoods, they often became leaders of the development of urbanization and achieving a sense of dignity by deploying significant skills in organizing, reclaiming and negotiating.

*Just after I arrived to the Divisa, there was a program that was supposed to be for social development and I asked for material for the staircase and as I started doing that, I became involved in issues of the whole neighbourhood, then stairs were made, the sewage system was requested, I had a snack brought for the children, at that time there was no school there. So I started a very strong leadership there and it was growing. Frontinus, Antioquia, 1990, P.57*

*We have a small school and seventy children and, God willing, we will have to have up to a hundred children and we need a lot for those children. I cook because we don't have the capacity to pay a cook, so we take turns. María La Baja, Bolívar, 1991, P.221.*

*We got a small plot there and I became a leader. We started to think about how to fight for this place in which to survive. They started offering some First Aid Courses in order to be forewarned and prepared there when children or others had an accident or got ill. Zaragoza, Antioquia, 1998, P.65.*

## **Weaving collective life**

Throughout the story of the journey to confront human rights violations, the women interviewed recounted how, despite being stripped of their livelihoods or torn from the places where they played a role in the social and community fabric, their ability to build relationships helped them to remake themselves as women, restoring at the same time the nearby affective network and often participating in community organizations and projects. Among the women who gave their testimony, more than one out of three women organized to defend their rights (35.9%, n = 335) or are part of an organization of women (34.6%, n = 323).

That reweaving of relationships sometimes took place through groups or associations that gave support to women victims. Many times they found new relationships and spaces to act in groups of women or organizations that defend human rights, which offered them accompaniment and training.

*I talked with a priest and he guided me and told me that life goes on, that I had to continue the struggle, and people from Justice and Peace, too. I began to take part*

*in those trainings, and when you begin to take that course, you realize that you are a victim, that there are other people who suffer more than you. Then one begins to become integrated, and things start to change, not to forget, but there is a change.* Peruanza Garzon, Huila, 2006, P.859.

*I was alone until I found those people and they took me to meet others. And it made me very happy; I felt solidarity sharing that pain with them. I know how that mom felt and she knew how I felt, and that made me happy because now I am not alone, because we are a group, even though we are very few. And how nice that the voice of one reaches another and let there be many, because otherwise they will continue to abuse us.* Zarzal, Valle del Cauca, 2005, P.599.

From these experiences emerged a number of women's groups that initiated from productive activities to associations with cultural purposes supporting other women, or groups in which they expressed their desires for change.

*Then we all thought that the name should be Creative Women with Hope. Then I got to thinking: "creative", we create, we think, we work and we are in motion out there, that would be like creating. And with "hope", because we nurture the idea that someday we get out of this trauma, of this situation, that's what I thought.* Argelia, Antioquia, 1990, P.85.

For many of the women interviewed the encounter with other women was a major change in their lives. The creation or participation in women's groups has been a way to find and give support, to create opportunities to share the experience and make sense of it.

*I came to this group feeling out of place because I had no friends, I had nothing. I was very home-loving, like a slave to my husband. I could not go out because I had troubles with my husband: that women in the street learned many things, and women have to be in the house and I don't know what all. Until I started to go to meetings, workshops, and then [I was] like a butterfly that flies to the sun and left slavery behind.* Medellín, Antioquia, 2002, P.88.

In spaces where they have acquired tools to rethink themselves and rethink their lives, to understand the mechanisms of the subordination of women, they have experienced the strength of acting together and they have committed with others to intervene.

*We work so that a woman recognize when there is violence at home, so that a woman recognize that she has values and that the society, the husband, her children, have an obligation to her. So, it's just that, women who take charge of their households, should also be respected.* Granada, Antioquia, 1999, P.895.

*Those of us who leave and get together at the end of the year, we meet and mobilize. Every day others are joining. And when I talk about the movement there are many*

*that like it and say: how does one join? And then I tell them all they need is just to want to join.* Quibdó, Chocó, 2001, P.472.

Among displaced women re-socialization often came in the context of creating settlements around big cities where they could move to escape violence. As noted above, in those processes women played key roles for their commitment to the collective well-being and they became an important nucleus of the network of relations among the neighbours.

*Now here in the city was different because I saw it was difficult sometimes to get things for lack of information. Then I started to help people by bringing them information and without planning to, I began to exercise leadership. What I want is that they respect the rights of women and the general population, right? Not by fighting, or violence, but with legal arguments and being clear about how far we can go and at what point we have to stop.* Betulia, Antioquia, 2002, P.708.

In the involvement of women in the social fabric, we find their wishes to project towards others their learning, the fruit of their experience; the desire to give others the help they received.

*Well, first as an organization we will continue working for women's rights; encourage more women to join us and create awareness that we have special rights; that women don't keep letting themselves be mistreated, that they are able to make denunciations and reports. For all I went through with the displacement and that, I've realized that these are things that are worth knowing because many people die or disappear because of ignorance.* Carmen de Bolívar, Bolívar, 1996, P.222.

*Although my family, after having found César, tells me that I no longer have anything to do here. I've always done social work ever since I was a child and I know that women need me, that men and all the families of the disappeared need me and that no way can I just toss away this that I built myself.* La Jagua de Ibirico, Cesar, 1998, P.711.

The women show empathy with others who may be experiencing situations similar to those they have experienced and they believe that their help is as important as the support they received in times of great distress.

*With displaced people, it happened to many people as it happened to me, that I arrived here and had no knowledge or anything. When someone arrives here displaced, we tell them what their rights are, we lead them, collaborate with them, we take them to make a report.* Bogotá, DC, 2007, P.136.

*Thanks to many things other people did for me and they made me see how valuable I am, that is why I'm here, to help other women to not have the same experiences. The idea is not that we be silent, rather that we help one another to get ahead.* Pereira, Risaralda, 2003, p. 692.

In their processes of facing the consequences of the violence, and despite the enormous suffering and difficulties they had to overcome, women emphasized the protection and preservation of life, their own life and that of the people who were part of their affective and relational environment. Their practices as survivors focused on rebuilding the material conditions to lead a life with dignity, or regain a good life. They also strove to reweave community and collective links with others in order to feel useful intervening to help other victims or improve social life. But the meaning of their lives as survivors derives above all from the bonds with their daughters and sons; their greatest efforts have been devoted to them so that they could have a better life and a future full of hope.





Conclusions.

Perspective of the women  
who participated in the process  
of the Truth Commission





## The Women's Truth

- The Commission on the *Verdad de las Mujeres* (The Women's Truth) presupposes a contribution to the need for peace and for building peace in Colombia because it collects and makes public the words and voices of the female victims who have suffered in the armed conflict all sorts of humiliation and violations of human rights and who, at the same time, have struggled to defend the life and dignity of persons close to them, reconstructing once and again relationships and spaces for life. The topic of women and violence has historically remained unmentioned, perpetuating and endorsing with this silence the patriarchal model which reigns in our society. This Commission, therefore, is a process of making visible and giving social recognition to the women as political actors with rights to demand truth, justice and reparation and non-repetition of the violence against their bodies and lives. With these feminine voices, the silence of the women victims begins to shatter the notion that the acceptance of violence against women and its consequences in their lives is a natural occurrence.
- This Final Report collects the vision of numerous women from very different regions of the country, who have confronted the armed conflict for years. It is a narration of pain and also the forming of hope for another future on the part of a thousand women, who have given testimony about what the war has meant for them and of their dreams for a Colombia at peace. It is a feminine narrative that verifies the effects of the armed conflict on the bodies and lives of the women, in which repeatedly emerge the questions: Why me? Why did this happen? These questions show both the impact and the need to construct memories that will help to recover the fragments of feelings in a conflict and a political repression that has surpassed all limits of logic and proportionality and that has turned the civil population, especially women, into a military objective.
- The Commission shows the various acts of violence that the different armed actors have exercised upon the women and how these violations of human rights have been accepted as normal, even permitted by the public authorities whose job it is to guarantee security and harmonious living among the citizens. Because of this, it is imperative that the women victims receive explanations for the barbaric atrocities committed by the victimizers and that the State give them reparation for the grave harms that the armed actors carried out on their bodies and life projects. In this sense, the Commission offers a political position to consider and contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric and, therefore, national reconciliation.
- The process of the Truth Commission permitted knowing the women's experiences and served to formalize and systematize the effects of the different sorts of violence the women suffer in the framework of the armed conflict. The women spoke of violations to themselves and to other women, almost always their own daughters and sons. But they also decided to confide their own experiences, the dramas and violations suffered by breaking their silence.

- The victims reveal in their testimonies cultural clues that allow one to understand the silence of many of the women. They confirm that it is necessary to eradicate the approach to questioning the credibility of the women when they speak of the impact of the violence and the social insensitivity towards them, so they can be recognized as victims who should be given their rights and reparations and protected from being victimized again.
- This Truth Commission is an example of the valuable contribution of the women towards the construction of memory, truth and credibility from the female point of view and sensitivity, which up until now have been systematically eclipsed by the androcentric (male oriented) model, which the armed actors attempt to perpetuate by degrading the women through violence and coercion with weapons.
- In their testimonies, the women condemn the senselessness of war. They denounce the systematic actions of the various armed actors who have showed no mercy as they violated their bodies, their life spaces and their rights as a form of disdain and intimidation. They show how some of those actors have attacked the women organizing against their intervention in the life of their communities, subjecting the communities to militarization of daily life, by attacking those who would control social movements or protests, or are behind the projects regarding land grabs, which are part of the *modus operandi* of the violence in Colombia, as part of an exclusive society of extreme inequality.
- According to the women who testified, in the process of militarization, the armed actors, legal or illegal, have shaken the courage and cohesion of the family, the social nucleus that allows for the closest protection and trust, as the actors intrude into their private life through the use of weapons to demand and take the land or to oblige the people to comply with their orders and fulfill their demands.
- The women victims point out the responsibility of all the armed actors in the war and demand the end of the armed conflict, because its dynamics are responsible for the impacts on their lives, their families and their communities, the rupture of the social fabric and the closure of possibilities for a life in peace and that is more just.
- The women who decided to confide their testimony to this Commission hope that their words and their most intimate stories would contribute to the achievement of a peace free of violence in Colombia. And also hoping that this memory of the women's truth become part of the social and political accords relative to the prevention of violence and a policy for reconstruction of the social fabric and reparations that the State should guarantee.
- The recommendations included in the systematization of the thousand testimonies should be taken into account as a contribution towards peace, respecting the rights and dignity of the women in any peace process that is created in the future. Among the challenges are making it possible for the women's voices to be heard in the country, uniting support

of the victims with an investigation of the facts and the search for a political outcome to the conflict. A future Truth Commission in the country should consider the experience of the victims as central to their work. The experience of this commission is a revealing experience from which one gleans learning and understanding that should be taken into account.

## **A Feminist Look**

- The logic of war exacerbates the patriarchal domination and control over the life and bodies of women and does so not only in the scenarios of the conflict itself, but in all the spaces where women live and mobilize. And it is the bodies, especially those of young, rural, black and indigenous women, which intersect, and are where one finds those who are discriminated against and the basic foundations for exclusion.
- The women victims of the armed conflict, of various ethnicities, territories and ages, have been affected by this war throughout the width and breadth of the country. They have experienced indescribable suffering, multiple and recurring abuses to their physical, sexual and psychological integrity. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, age and location in the areas of the conflict deepens discrimination against women. The profound articulation of gender with other aspects of identity or situations linked to the conflict, such as displacement or militarization of life generate special forms of inequality and discrimination.
- The lives of innumerable women who live in the areas of armed conflict in Colombia have been profoundly impacted by the war and its inhumane practices, and their lives have been changed in ways that exacerbate the oppression, subordination and discrimination through the implementation of multiple sorts of violations exercised against them, through the experience of loss and displacement, as well as the increased masculine control over their bodies and their sexuality. This dimension of loss, of suffering and of control of life characterizes the experience of the women victims in Colombia.
- This Final Report incorporates feminist speech and practices as part of the analysis of a patriarchal society in which the domination of men over women disregards the female word and legitimizes the violence against their bodies. This analysis permits linking as a continuum the violence experienced in a private setting and in the public sphere with different impacts and responsibilities. The patriarchy is a system of domination and injustice which also results in social, economic and political marginalization and converges in all the contexts of the armed conflict worsening the conditions of life for women.
- To identify the practical significance of the feminist perspective for this work and for the women who participated in it has required the need to disentangle and experience the profound meaning of the voices of the women. This process has presupposed knowing,

characterizing and understanding the armed conflict from their feelings, to make visible its effect on their bodies – the main source of the violence they have suffered – to recognize their contribution to clarification of the truth and give support to the personal and social strength of the women.

- For all the women participating in the project of the Truth Commission, whether they be coordinators or those who recorded documentation, made transcripts, typists, encoders and investigators, this work with the women and their testimonies has taken on confrontation with unimaginable pain and suffering. It has unleashed an awareness of the depth and breadth of the violence against women exceeding any mentioned in speech. In the workshops to analyze as well as in the process of systematization, the stories of the impact of their experiences on the women and on those who listened to them with warmth and a professional approach were at the same time difficult and moving.
- Ruta Pacifica as an organization has become stronger in the process of recording a constant and vigilant account of the horrors of war in the media and from the women victims themselves. Ruta, which channels from within each woman the tenacity not only to mobilize and go out once and again, one day and the next, for years, to denounce in silence, as the greatest shout of resistance possible, that women are not resigned to maintain silence, that they are strong in denouncing and capable of incredible actions of survival. It is Ruta Pacifica that mobilizes hundreds and thousands of women along the roads in Colombia to alert, dramatize, denounce, support, resist, insist, persist, sing, dance, march for justice and the dignity and support of women who in any given corner are suffering victimization by armed groups

## **For the Construction of Peace**

- The Women's Truth Commission contributes to the construction of peace as an initiative that opens new channels for dialogue, since it has broken through the silence of women: those who have most suffered the consequences of the Colombian armed conflict, along with children.
- The Commission enables an in-depth look at the occurrences, and what continues to occur in the country, opening a space for a collective memory that gathers the victims' experiences in a society that has normalized violence, or has lived for the most part ignorant of its victims. It also constitutes the possibility that more men and women take the steps towards shared truth, something which, in the current reality, constitutes a challenge to construct lasting peace. A truth that supposes a social acknowledgement of the occurrences and of the victims. A memory that includes the suffering and violations of human rights committed as the first step toward justice and reparation.
- Women grant much importance to the truth because it offers the possibility of restoring personal dignity, erasing stigma, and it raises the safeguards against impunity, something essential in addressing the construction of peace.

- This Final Report shows what happened to one thousand Colombian women from throughout the country during the armed conflict. At the same time, it reveals how the violence exerted over them is not only a result of the war, but has been a daily fact over their lifetime. The testimonies of the women demonstrate ancestral feminist practices that are reclaimed today to demand a stop to the war as imperative in order to seek peace.
- The working process of the Truth Commission brought out the horror that the women live, a dimension that is unknown even by many investigators and organizations that work with women. At the same time, it confirmed that the victims choose to be active women in the process of personal and collective recuperation, the reconstruction of the social fabric and the construction of peace in the country. This ability to resist and overcome the lived horror is part of the women's importance in the resistance to the war and in the struggle for peace. The State and society should recognize this courage and facilitate spaces for participation for which the women have struggled, and remove the obstacles that hinder more effective participation. In this way, the women do not appear from a victimized position; rather, they present their ability to confront a war they did not choose, but in which they had to begin again, continue with life, and constitute themselves as women, subjects with rights and with a more collective dimension.
- The women unwittingly played leading roles in the war. They have suffered serious aggressions, they have been burdened with the dead, they continue searching for disappeared persons and they have assumed responsibilities that in other circumstances would not be their burden. This experience gives them their own visions and concepts around the construction of peace centered on the conditions necessary for a healthy life and the prevention of violence against women.
- The Truth Commission can impact the current peace process by regaining the presence of women as political subjects, to tell the truth from their lived experience. The empowerment of women, with the visibilization of the events, contributes to social transformation from the acknowledgement of their rights, starting from the elaboration of the impacts suffered and the confrontation strategies developed.

## Women as Victims and Survivors

- Half of the women identified themselves as *mestizas*; one in four is Afrocolombian and a minority is indigenous. The average age of women who gave testimony was 45 years, varying between 17 and 83 years. One in every two women had a stable partner and three in every four have children, on average three. Slightly more than half of the women interviewed participate in some organization in civil society. The women who gave their testimony suffered between four and five violations of human rights, often on separate occasions. Apart from their own testimonies, they referred to the existence of on average one or two more victims in their family.

- Among the violations referred to as first-hand experience, displacement prevails, which happened in every three of four cases. Also, three in four women reported family members who suffered extrajudicial executions or forced displacement. Eight in ten women interviewed report having been the victim of some form of torture, cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment. More than half the women suffered different forms of torture and psychological mistreatment like death threats, harassment or being forced to witness the torture of other persons. Moreover, one in seven women reported having suffered physical torture and one in eight suffered torture or sexual violence. In addition, violence against women also entailed material losses in four of every ten cases. Less frequently, different violations of personal freedom were described by one in every eight victims, such as arbitrary detention, confinement, forced recruitment, or taken hostage.

Violations of human rights against women				
Harassment and destruction	Physical, psychological, and sexual torture	Violations to personal freedom	Forced displacement	Violations of the right to life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Requisitions</li> <li>- Forced entry</li> <li>- Threats</li> <li>- Being followed or surveilled</li> <li>- Destruction of goods/property</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Psychological torture</li> <li>- Physical torture</li> <li>- Sexual torture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Arbitrary detentions</li> <li>- Forced recruitment</li> <li>- Taken hostage</li> <li>- Confinement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individual, familial, and collective displacement</li> <li>- Rural &gt; Urban</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Extrajudicial executions</li> <li>- Forced disappearances</li> <li>- Attacks and injuries</li> </ul>
64%	59.3%	10%	73.77%	72.6%

## Impacts of the armed conflict on women

- The individual and collective impacts of the indiscriminate action of the armed actors on the bodies and lives of women have resulted in the destruction of their life plans, both individual and of the community. The armed conflict has created bitterness, confusion and lack of confidence in the State as the guarantor of human rights. The women who are victims feel that the State and the paramilitary groups that are in collusion with the State and the guerilla organizations ignore the emotional and social destruction that they have generated, trivializing the pain and the impunity.
- A strong emotional impact stands out in eight of every ten women interviewed, as well as severe impact on their economic and living conditions. Three out of four also pointed to a breakdown and loss of their life plans because of the violence. The violence against women also entailed material loss in more than four of ten cases. For the most part,

displacement implied the loneliness of the loss of a network of social relationships in which we construct our identity as persons. This feeling of loneliness and abandon was present in three of every four women interviewed. In the case of Colombia, one must take into account that the acts of violence have continued and many women have lived through various episodes of terror and violence that exacerbate its effects. More than six of every ten women interviewed indicated that they had problems sleeping because of nightmares or insomnia and not being able to stop thinking about the events they have experienced, their loved ones or the impact of loss. The perception of being still emotionally affected is more prevalent among women whose relatives were assassinated or disappeared. In all areas of the women's lives, extra-judicial executions and forced disappearances are the violations of human rights that have had the greatest impact.

### **Data on responsibility**

The majority of women refer to material responsibility, that is to say, the forces or armed groups or the people who directly perpetrated the acts. Some indicated simply those in conflict, others identified more precisely the specific unit of the force or armed group, and others, although fewer, stated even more including the names, nicknames or aliases of the persons involved in the acts. Others also mention the various relationships or alliances among the various groups.

For example, more than one of every two women (52%) did not directly indicate a responsible perpetrator (n=486); while one of every three, 35.9% (n=336), indicated a responsible force; but in other cases the women suffered acts perpetrated by different "sides" in the armed conflict, 11% (n=103) suffered acts for which two forces were responsible and 1.1% (n=10) was a victim of the three forces indicated.

Of the cases in which it was possible to obtain information (48% of the total of women interviewed), the victims identified as responsible paramilitary groups 32.6% (n=305), indicating the guerilla – although it is a matter of various – as responsible for 18.2 % (n=170) of the violations; and the public forces or agents of the State 10.4% (n=97).

- The women who are victims emphasize that the effects of the prolonged armed conflict have left grave and inerasable emotional consequences in families and the children, consequences almost always confronted by the women and which many have not been able to overcome. Regarding this situation, many women hope that in the reconstruction of the social fabric torn by the war it will be possible to break through the invisible barrier between what is private and what is public. This presupposes the need to recognize and facilitate the social participation of women through their own organizations and leadership; and also, that the shared responsibility of caring for the family be part of the cultural transformation to make possible justice and equity in the home, from

the personal to the collective and public, from the micro to the macro, to the end that women don't continue sacrificing their possibility of acting in public matters, nor that men renounce or inhibit their feelings to nurture and offer affection. In their processes of personal and social strengthening and empowerment, women have discovered and questioned the stereotypes of roles, in that the private is not a matter only for women, just as public issues are not solely the concern of men.

- Some women express that the violence against children, in the context of the armed conflict, is a form of reprisal against the female leadership, which the women have assumed in the processes of social resistance confronting the constant attack by armed actors, the continuous violation of human rights and, in particular, violence against women.
- The final report verifies that each family has been affected by systematic violations of human rights against some of its members. These experiences have resulted in strong personal and collective impacts such as the fragmentation of the family. In many cases, forced displacement has been the only alternative in order to flee from the armed actors, despite which threats continue towards women as mothers, sisters or daughters of defenders of human rights. In the great majority of the testimonies collected by this commission, the events had not occurred in the place where the women now live. This shows that the armed conflict goes beyond territorial borders.
- Self-sacrifice and losses the women have experienced, which they define as loss of a "*good life*", woven through many dimensions such as links to their roots, shared family chores, possession of goods, the possibility for self-sufficiency, the home and emotional ties, tranquility, and community projects have profoundly impacted their lives, breaking their beings as women and increasing their suffering, their difficulties and their vulnerability in the new contexts.
- This Final Report confirms that sexual violence has been a weapon of war utilized against women, who have been turned into a military objective. The bodies of women have been both booty of war and territory in dispute among the armed actors. This injurious and denigrating practice of obligatory non-consensual sex has been an exercise of power at any time and any place during the conflict. The experience of sexual violence or the threat of suffering an aggression of a sexual character have produced a distortion in the sexuality of the women, in relation to their own bodies and in relation to men. This violence has neither been recognized nor investigated and demonstrates that the strategies to control the civil population have passed through the bodies and lives of the women.
- The experience of motherhood is a an emotional and life force for women in the context of war, in which they must answer for their sons and daughters constantly threatened or harassed by the armed actors. This internal strength of women related to giving life and feeling responsible for protecting it comes out overwhelmingly in the testimonies and invites one to re-think maternity in the context of war as a deeply rooted emotion to



conquer fear and confront barbarism. In addition, maternity has been used in the armed conflict as a form of striking out at women, utilizing their children as threat against the women, their actions or their leadership. The terror of the impact on their sons and daughters has been used a mechanism of social control.

Impacts of the violations of human rights against women		
Socio-emotional impacts and plan of life	Specific impacts to women	Consequences on health and body
Emotional conditions	Social stigmatization	Hospitalizations
Economic conditions	Identity as a woman	Physical or sensory disability
Plan for life truncated	Sexuality	Wounds
Deterioration in conditions of life	Separation from family Abandonment	Fractures
On social conditions		Chronic pain
Consequences in public or private life		Addictions
		Illnesses
91.6%	74%	79.3%

- Forced maternity, as a consequence of rape, harms the liberty and autonomy of the women upon obliging them to confront an unwanted and unplanned motherhood. It results in numerous ethical dilemmas and a deep questioning of the women regarding the violence exercised against them. Forced pregnancy constitutes an expropriation of the women's capacity to be mothers and of their liberty, as it undermines their sexual and reproductive rights and their own ability to make decisions, as well as their physical and psychological integrity.
- There are serious impacts on the health of the women, both physical and psychological. Said impacts, common in a war lasting several decades, are not overcome by the mere passage of time; rather, they are aggravated as a consequence of the emotional impact, stress, negative consequences in their living conditions, or pre-mature aging, and require comprehensive treatment to overcome. The most significant personal results are the health consequences that were indicated as serious in five of every ten women who gave testimony. In addition, one of every three had immediate physical pains as a consequence of the violations they suffered, and long term consequences on their health were indicated by four of every ten women. Programs for reparation should put

emphasis on attending to the health of the women who were victims including psycho-social issues.

- A cultural impact of the armed conflict is related to the loss of land and displacement, as well as practices imposed that are associated with militarism. The loss of trust in others is part of the impact on basic beliefs, the feeling of security and that life and the world have a shared goal. May women confront the impact of violence focusing on religious practices which promote a feeling of protection and delegation, or expression of confidence that there will be divine justice, given that the right to justice from the State, as consecrated in the Political Constitution, has not been part of their lives, with impunity being maintained in the majority of cases. This disbelief and loss of trust in the institutions is an example of the responsibility of the State, as well as disconnect with the victims that should be considered in the policies for recognition and reparation.
- After having suffered grave violations of human rights, numerous forms of victimization were related to the Commission by the women. The situation of permanent risk, of suffering violations over again for not attending to the mandate of terror or for continuing with their posts of leadership, has led to new violence. The capacity of the women to attempt in their daily lives restoration of a "good life" is destroyed when they are victimized again and again by the armed actors, and also the institutions of the State upon not guaranteeing them psycho-social accompaniment and protection.
- The cultural impact has been especially notable among the indigenous women and those of African descent. To be black or indigenous, to be poor and a woman, are conditions that have led to the greatest victimization. The violence crosses over the conditions of marginalization and poverty of various ethnic groups. In addition, the cultural impacts such as the loss of a relationship with nature and the land or rivers, or the changing of places of special respect and community life into cemeteries or spaces of horror, have had an enormous impact on the women of said communities. Their relationship with their ancestors, the land, traditional wisdom and their own authorities have been affected by the violence and have created an added impact on the women, their processes of mourning and trust in others.

## **The *continuum* of violence**

- Women put the violence that disrupts their lives in a *continuum* of violence in the history of Colombia, which has led to all sorts of violations and attacks against their dignity and on their bodies. They find this *continuum* of violence not only in their own paths of life, but in the same history of the country.
- The Commission has found that many women who testified as victims in the war scene, had been exposed to all forms of violence in the place that should be safe for them, their own homes, by men who were part or close to their family. A 26.1% (n=243) of the women declare having suffered violence at their homes when they still were children.

One out of seven women had suffered also sexual violence and other types of violence, in their family for some period of her life. The existence of a continuum of violence that runs through the female biographies, living spaces and the relationship of women in a patriarchy, is therefore confirmed. The armed actors endorse and perpetuate misogyny and violence against women, typical of the patriarchal culture. In the armed conflict, violence against women has achieved the character of strategy to terrorize populations, destroy the social fabric and devastate living spaces to reduce the enemy or opponent. The struggle against violence against women must lead to means of eradicating the base of this practice, which continues in post-conflict contexts although peace agreements are achieved.

- Discrimination is one of the basic foundations of violence against women. This violence takes on precise ways in family, labor, academic, social and political ties. Excluding the voice of women, their opinion, not considering their special needs, exercising power over them by imposing one's will ignoring their particular requirements, are situations that usually girls and women experience in the context of family and social relationships. In addition to those described, there are extreme ways of imposing power, and these are exacerbated in the context of the armed conflict.
- When their body is damaged, the dignity of women is violated. Any aggression and changes in the body and life of women, is an affront to dignity, and therefore the ability for women to choose when they have to decide about their body and their life projects. Violence against women undermines women's autonomy and empowerment as rights and practices of freedom and participation.
- The Final Report highlights how the *continuum* of violence also covers state institutions when historical claims of women are trivialized, not considering them as political actors in peacebuilding, when they are not protected the assaults are not repaired, leaving unpunished crimes that legal or illegal armed actors have committed against them.

## **Sexual violence in the armed conflict**

- The testimonies of women gathered by the Commission relate numerous acts of sexual violence in the armed conflict. They narrate this experience as an arbitrary and brutal exercise of power by the perpetrators, men, causing great pain and terrorizing women. These testimonies suggest that sexual violence has been a common practice, and has been part, although with different *modus operandi*, of the systematic coercion by armed actors used as a weapon of war.
- The Final Report notes that militarization to control territory and its population is an enabling context for sexual violence against women. The relationship established between armed men and civilian women incorporates violence seamlessly, transforming the relation between the sexes into an imposition of conditions and power that can become, in the absence of guarantees for women, a relation of perpetrator to victim.

- In the Colombian armed conflict all armed actors who act exercising control over the populations inhabiting the territory have perpetrated sexual violence against women. One out of eight interviewed women reported sexual violence. Especially rape and the threat of rape have targeted the subjugation, expulsion or removal of women in the areas they intended to dominate or keep under control.

### **Torture and sexual violence**

One out of eight interviewed women mentioned having suffered sexual violence (13.2%; n=123), with an average of two or three ways of violence per woman denouncing them (M=2.33; s.d.=1.75). Sexual torture was more frequent among the testimonies of Afro-Colombians and mestizo women, as well as women from the regions of Antioquía, Bogotá, Chocó and Valle.

Almost six out of ten women that denounced sexual violence suffered rape (56.10%; n=69). Also groping on their bodies (26.83%; n=33), the threat of rape (25.20%; n=31), aggression or mockery with sexual content (24.39%; n=30) and family affective control (21.14%; n=26), seduction or insinuations to women, such as sexual attacks to minors (15.45%; n=19).

Moreover, forms of sexual torture against women were referred, as forced nude (14.63%; n = 18), blows in breasts and / or genitals (8.94%; n = 11), marks on the body of women as symbols of domain (8.13%; n = 10) and impediments to use certain clothes (3.25%; n = 4) as part of the control over women, or the obligation to witness sexual violence (7.32%; n = 9). Also sexual slavery (5.69%; n = 7), forced pregnancy (4.07%; n = 5), torture during pregnancy (2.44%; n = 3), forced abortion (2.44%; n = 3), and some cases sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, sexual mutilation or trafficking for sexual exploitation.

- The testimonies confirm that sexual assaults are expression of the *continuum* of violence, first, as to the relationship between the sexes and, secondly, as a *modus operandi* of the armed groups which aims at women as military objectives.
- The most frequent patterns of sexual violence were sexual violation, the threat of rape and bodily assault and forced seduction or sexual innuendo, particularly to young women. Note the extreme seriousness of some cases involving atrocities that show contempt for human dignity and the level of terror associated with sexual violence perpetrated by some armed groups, especially the paramilitary groups.

### **The strength of women facing violence**

- Facing violence through solidarity and mutual support has highlighted the role of women victims of the armed conflict in the family, community and society. In these

processes very valuable female leaderships have been built, particularly among women in situations of forced displacement. In turn, the gathered experience in community work has led to major changes in the roles of women involved in it.

- Six out of ten women chose to focus on their families to protect their lives and that of their families, but also transforming their roles within their families, being their main economic and emotional support. This transformation shows the efforts of women to support their own and the strong sense of collective duty, coupled with the need to face dramatic changes in their lives, such as bereavement and displacement. But also most of the women interviewed transformed their own role and identity, as a way to deal with the consequences of violence.
- The ability of women to confront and overcome adversity and untold suffering produced by the actors of this war, has proved to be amazing, according the testimonies given to the Commission. Women show an active attitude in defense of life and management of pain and suffering. This attitude does not stay on resistance to destruction and the ability to protect themselves and care for their families, but also manifests itself in the strength to recover, to start again after so many losses.
- The women victims of the armed conflict show themselves through their testimonies as strong, creative and resourceful women. Faced with the inertia and lack of protection of the State, they have confronted, with scarce resources, safety and care strategies. One third of the women interviewed decided not to talk about what had happened as a form of protection, because of the context of danger and the hostility of the perpetrators. In most cases, they have had to make the difficult decision of hiding, fleeing, becoming invisible, masking their identity. They have thus managed to save their own lives and those of their families. They managed to also protect the organizations created to defend the communities and human rights.
- Through the testimonies one perceives how in this process they have sacrificed valuable things in terms of security. For example, mutual trust and bonds of coexistence created during long years of collective construction of life projects. The armed conflict has mortally wounded relationships and affections, and has sown the seeds of distrust between neighbors and human communities settled in areas plagued by both legal and illegal armed actors. Fear has installed not only in the depths of each person affected by this conflict, but in relationships with others.
- The contexts in which women have tried to rebuild their lives have been hostile in most occasions. In a context of fragmented responses focused on humanitarian aid from the state, for women the most important help and what counts above all, is the strength that comes from family and community ties that they have sought to strengthen as part of rebuilding their lives.
- Most women reported the facts to different authorities, especially those in the control of the state or civil society, but seldom to the security forces of the state or the military,

which shows their lack of confidence and, in other cases, the participation of these forces in the violations suffered. However, only one out of six submitted complaints for the suffered violations were being investigated, according to the women interviewed, although in almost all the cases, these investigations had not been effective, nor had led to prosecutions with convictions.

- In general, religious coping experienced by women refer to situations of powerlessness, vulnerability, and a general feeling of meaninglessness and lack of a future. Almost four out of ten women reported having performed some kind of religious coping. But also they express experiences that generate solid forms of resistance and rebuild the capacity of women to cope with loss. In general, religious coping acts as a powerful mechanism for overcoming the immediate impacts of war, providing comfort, protection and security.
- Women must be recognized at all levels as protagonists of a new history in their territories. The hope of the women is part of the desire to continue weaving life. Their ability to survive is manifested in expressions like: "I felt as if I couldn't continue, but I drew the strength to move forward".
- When women victims confronted the armed actors, exercised and demanded, in a way, the right to peace and they self-legitimized as rights-bearers to build conditions for reconciliation and peace. This nonviolent confrontation disorientates and breaks the structures of power imposed by armed actors.
- The female heroism against armed groups was evident when some women, amid armed confrontation, put themselves before to save their children or demanded directly the rescue of them. Direct confrontation with the perpetrators produced relief and helped to save their loved ones; it is a proof of the courage of women to act on the risk, usually with words, although they were exposing their lives by doing this.
- The final report highlights and creates awareness of the various forms of coping of women and how they have tried to rebuild their lives and resist armed confrontation. It underlines the ways in which women have faced violence and its impacts sometimes accompanied by social organizations or by other women leaders.

Facing violence			
Support in women organizations	Change of role and family support	Protection and search for meaning	Organization, denunciation and psychosocial support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Takes part in women organizations</li> <li>- Turn to women organization</li> <li>- Mutual support and solidarity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transformation of the role inside the family</li> <li>- Economic and affective support of the family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not speaking</li> <li>- Religious coping</li> <li>- Focusing on her family</li> <li>- Finding meaning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Made a complaint</li> <li>- Look for psychosocial support</li> <li>- Organize to defend their rights</li> </ul>
40%	66%	78.2%	70.6%

## Organizational processes of women as a way of coping

- In many testimonies, women victims recount how after being abused and/or raped by armed actors and by state neglect, in their efforts to avoid being crushed by the war, they start organizations of women, organizations of victims or for human rights. More than one out of three women organized themselves to defend their rights or are part of an organization of women. Some of them had been part of organizational processes in their communities before; others were part of the movement of the UP. They found in other women the example and the invitation to work in a group, to think about the rights they have as women and as victims. This is how through sisterhood (solidarity among women) many victims become leaders and human rights defenders, and weave their lives to value and recognize themselves as subjects of law, to require state assistance and to help in building roads leading to peace.
- The supportive links established between women victims of armed conflict, mostly in displacement, seem to be strengthening the construction of a female identity, to the extent that they recognize themselves in their similar experiences of uprooting, loss and violence, but especially in their present struggles for a better quality of life in new and adverse contexts. These spaces where women victims meet, discuss and establish agreements, are an important source of empowerment.
- In the organization as a place of empowerment and enforcement, victims forge and project scenarios in which they learn to reclaim their rights. Others come to these organizational spaces in an effort to heal the pains that the different armed groups have caused them and to seek support for coping with the consequences of violence in their own lives or those of their children. One third of the women interviewed sought psychosocial support and went to organizations of women or human rights asking for support. In addition, a quarter tried to face the facts making sense of what happened through mechanisms such as the analysis of reality or political consciousness of what

had taken place. The organization is a space of protection for women deriving from the consciousness and the identity of “we”.

- As women in general, and as victims in particular, they get to join to build actions in neighborhoods, indigenous or Afro-Colombian communities, study groups and female or mixed social organizations, to support one another in feeding and protecting their children, promote their own personal and collective care, and to avoid being abused again. The seeking of protection, support and guidance is part of the meaning of these organizations. They try in different ways to reweave or patch the life projects that war prevented – projects that, however small they might be, took them beyond feeling threatened or raped even in one's own home or community.
- In the processes of organization and empowerment, victims, through their feminine words, with their stories with other women, give awareness to the multiple and ongoing discrimination and violence they have suffered not only in the armed conflict but in their family life. Women feel that the organization is the possibility to build or rebuild individual and collective memory to understand why the armed conflict has affected them and how they can be peacemakers. The organizational aspect becomes a place of minimal understanding where new relationships with other women are established, and many dare to report their case.
- Many women have become leaders in these processes showing their involvement and supportive commitment with the reconstruction of collective life. Also this is why some of them have suffered threats that have tried to paralyze their actions of denounce or their work to reweave the social fabric that wants to be controlled again by armed actors in displacement spaces where women try to rebuild their lives.
- Women are transforming their lives and those of their communities through participation in spaces where they can establish alternatives of a productive and/or business nature as a strategy of recognition that another country is possible through their work and not through begging or humanitarian assistance conceived as grants or subsidies, without a comprehensive approach in support of their needs and respect for their rights.

## **The commitment to repair the irreparable**

- Women indicated the awareness of the impossibility of repairing the impact of violence on their lives as the first step in approaching victims when speaking about reparation. They also told to this Truth Commission, that the reparation is a right of the victims and a duty of the state, and is also one of the ways to ensure the right to peace in general, and the rights of women in particular. This is their consideration when they say that there is nothing that can restore their trampled dignity, and they conceive the reparation as an exercise of recognition and social conditions to “start over” in many cases. This is the sense of a sufficient financial compensation to help them exit the impact of the suffered violence, and social alternative to cope with pain and impunity. First of all women



victims, their families and communities, refer the need for health care and psychosocial care to mitigate the wounds that the armed conflict has left them. The minimization of the reparation as a “check” is criticized by women with expressions like “money does not return what the war took from us”.

- Nearly six out of ten women mentioned the need for economic compensation. They frequently demanded educational measures for themselves and especially for their children, and measures of health and psychosocial care. Five out of ten reported the importance of labour support for women. This means that these measures have to do mainly with the reconstruction of their projects and living conditions, as well as with the attention to the impacts caused by the violations. Economic compensations, often scarce or totally insufficient, cannot be a substitute for this set of measures of reparation.
- Women know that the armed actors will never be able to compensate the damage that they caused them. Nevertheless, most of the women who have missing relatives demand the investigation of the whereabouts or fate of missing or executed victims. More than one out of four victims referred to measures of recognition of responsibility as a way of restoring the memory of the victims, and one out of six victims referred to the need for requests of forgiveness from those responsible for the violence.
- Despite the strong demand for justice in a context of impunity, women have a different dimension of punishable justice, their vision is wider than the mere legality, because more than demanding that offenders go to jail, above all they ask for truth and reparation as chances to win physical, emotional, financial autonomy to rise from poverty, as the way to freedom and peace of mind that they will never be violated again. In other words, they propose transforming the scarce economic reparations, based on a paternalistic approach that rarely sees women as actors of development and peace, to undertake productive and personal or family-reaching growth processes, rather than subsistence or just moonlighting for daily living.
- Another package of measures identified by women refers to the necessary political conditions for the reparation. For example more than half of them designated as an absolute prerequisite the demilitarization of the conflict. Nearly five out of ten pointed at measures aimed to investigate and know the truth of what happened as well as measures of justice to establish the liability of the facts. To a similar degree, women point out the need for changes in the state. Women indicate the importance not only of ending the violence and bringing justice to the victims, but also the need to overcome the enormous inequality that deprives them of the chances to improve their lives.
- Women victims feel that the armed conflict has robbed their dignity. Therefore they propose themselves to rebuild their projects of live and regain their personal, family and community being, but in many cases conditions don't allowed them to do so. The assistance programs implemented by the state keep them in a more vulnerable situation, since they do not ensure them an adequate continuity, and instead those programs keep them in an instability and dependence which does not contribute to the construction of

autonomy. The reparation must entail an energy of transformation of their lives and not just isolated or fragmented measures considered as a charity and not as a way to regain control of their lives in their hands.

- Women victims interviewed by the Commission, aspire to make the State with their government institutions protect them and allow them to regain their identity and organizational processes in which they were involved when they were attacked and displaced by armed actors. In this sense, they maintain the hope of returning to their territory but with the guarantee of being able to strengthen their relationship and vision of territory beyond wanting a piece of land to survive. They conceive the reparation as an opportunity to make or remake projects of economic and cultural sustainability. Legal rehabilitation measures regarding ownership of land or documentation and settlement of the legal situation were cited by a quarter of the population, as well as the return of stolen property and the return of expropriated land.
- Nothing repairs the consequences of war, but women want to contribute to the redefinition of their collective or individual cases facing a new project of life. They require the State to meet them the minimum standards of social rights, the right to housing as well as the territory of their houses which were destroyed and spaces to reweave their affective relationships and the feeling of security for themselves and their children. Reparation should offer them opportunities to create projects originating from the women and organizations.
- The reparation from listening is a way to alleviate the pains of war. The silence of women now have a collective voice that joins many other voices of women and their partner organizations for training and advocacy processes that can be generated from the Final Report and the increasing efforts of victims and women of Colombia to participate in a peace process and the reconstruction of the social fabric that will transform their lives and the country.
- Talking about reparation means also talking about resistance, re-insistence, persistence, about building critical mass which again, like a phoenix from the mythology, amid the destruction takes off again. As one of the documented women says, "... my wings are growing again... and this repairs me". So everyone should become collective, become movement, become political body for the complaint, for the claim of rights, for the enforceability, to speak out and build memory, a memory of the truth experienced by women.

Measures of reparation				
Memory and forgiveness	Changes in the State and legal measures	Truth, justice and protection	Distributive measures and demilitarization	Return of land and properties
Places of memory	Changes in the State	Investigate the whereabouts of the victims	Economic compensations	Return of the land
Ways of collective memory	Legal changes	Real knowledge	Measures for her education or for her children	Return of personal property
Public pardon	Measures for the legal rehabilitation	Measures for the prevention of violence	Employment support	
		Protections for the victims	Demilitarization	
		Judging those responsible	Health and psychosocial help	
30.3%	51.6%	68.5%	86.2%	32.2%

- Women victims understand and ask that the non-repetition should mean that the State guarantees them protection for a life with dignity, without physical and emotional violence or violence owing to their heritage. That means that the negotiation of the armed conflict should reject the military system that understands security as the increase of militarization and of the budget for the armed conflict. Considering the security problems and threats that they still experience in different regions of the country, more than four out of ten women demand measures to protect victims, and measures of protection against violence; and one in three mentions the need for legal and institutional changes for the transformation of the State.
- Women demand the demilitarization of the territory as it has been the presence and the unpunished actions of armed groups which have disrupted their lives, expelling them from the territory, dispossessing them from their property and controlling and torturing their bodies. A life free from harassment by armed groups is a priority to enable them to rebuild their lives, economy activity and the fabric of social and affective relationships that support them.

## The Responsibility of the State

- The State should assume responsibility not as a favor to the victims but rather as an obligation and a way of recognizing the right to truth, justice, and reparation. A state

should be the protector and the guarantor of women's rights, and if it violates these rights, it has committed a two-fold crime. The State needs to recognize it is also a victimizer and that it is responsible by both its action and its inaction for many of the human rights violations committed against women.

- Women victims of the armed conflict have no faith in the Colombian justice system because it does not believe them or guarantee them security and protection. They feel that the legal system caters more to those who commit the violence. When a woman victim decides to put her case in the hands of justice after overcoming her fear and perilous situation, she is often persecuted afterward. She is offered no effective measures to protect her from people who threaten her: those indicated in her denunciation or who could be affected by it.
- The truth of what the war has meant for women does not seem to interest the institutions mandated to guarantee justice. To reconstruct history, memory and the social fabric, it is essential that women's voices be heard and believed. "Hours are spent listening to the perpetrators but where are we?" is a continuous question from the women. They feel that more assistance and accompaniment is given to the perpetrators than to the victims, and they demand a response and that their voices be taken into account. Women victims not only carry pain; they also have ideas for how to reconstruct their lives, and these should be the basis for reparation.
- Women victims of the armed conflict call out the State and society as a whole in contempt of its indifference, inefficacy of justice and impunity for acts like the ones disclosed in this Final Report.
- The State is responsible for reparation of the psycho-social effects that the armed conflict has caused the women. This responsibility should be reflected in overcoming the social indifference toward women victims and in giving them access to services for psychological care and accompaniment. Such services should be centered on human rights, given for an appropriate length of time, and based on trustworthy structures and professionals. They should be oriented toward the reconstruction of the women's life bonds in order to confront their suffering and strengthen themselves as women in relation to other women and empower their experience of resistance.
- The State's commitment to assume its responsibilities should be seen in the compliance of international treaties signed and ratified by Colombia, as well as in national laws to eradicate and punish violence against women. This commitment acts as an imperative to guarantee the right to peace and a country without violence.

## **Methodology and Women's Voices**

- The Truth Commission project, which engendered this Final Report, is a methodological commitment to visibilize the violence and make audible the voices of women silenced by many years of armed conflict.

- By speaking about the crimes committed against them, the women are trying to understand and give meaning to what happened and why it happened; they are seeking the reason behind the extreme cruelty of the armed actors against them.
- The women victims also question a model of the State that allows for such violence against women, that has excluded women from spaces where decisions are made, and that has legitimated a male-centered paradigm in public policies.
- The wealth of this Truth Commission lies in its trust from women who have themselves suffered immeasurable violence in the wake of the armed conflict. The voices of women victims comprise an in-depth study of the horror of the armed conflict. They are voices and an analysis that clamor for the visibilization of the war's effects. They clamor for the urgent acknowledgement and psycho-social accompaniment that the State should provide the victims to confront their pain and fear and to contribute to comprehensive reparation as much during the armed conflict as in the sought-after postconflict. This policy of acknowledgement and service should be a long-term priority in a country with mass victims on a scale that cannot contain the numbers that describe it.
- The Truth Commission was a move towards dialogue around knowledge in the hopes of making words become the mechanism par excellence of human inventiveness. The women's words were upheld by the trust that bound the interviewee to the interviewer, the women's organizations to the victims and Ruta P  fica.
- The investigation's methodology allowed for an ethical approach toward the women victims of the armed conflict without newly victimizing their violence suffered, thanks to the emotional support given, the agreement of expectations, and the appropriate management of the information obtained in each testimony. Giving their testimony was an offering that made sense to the women. Delimiting the interview's script and characteristics formed the center of the process and were key elements to establish trust and receptiveness in the women that participated. Moreover, on many occasions the process advanced deep insight into the motivations and expectations of the women, keeping in mind their situation and needs, which allowed for better clarity of the possibilities and limits of the project.
- The project team managed to create a juncture between professionalism and humanism. The commitment of each woman achieved significant contributions in logistical, investigative and educational terms.
- The relationship of the Ruta P  fica de las Mujeres with other organizations, above all women's organizations, facilitated the project; at the same time, it is a challenge to have greater influence and collective work in the country.
- The successful investigation not only fulfilled certain methodological criteria, but it also carried deep ethical rigor that was political from a feminist position. This allowed the

creation of strategies for investigation and psycho-social accompaniment, despite the scarce resources for such an enormous task.

- The methodology adopted allowed the women victims to be believed because collective memory breaks down the stigma and doubt surrounding each woman. It supports the construction of memory from its basic element, from lived experiences and not from theoretic analyses distant from the experience. It has been part of a process of coming close to the victim's place and understanding more deeply her fears and admiring her strength to overcome the horror of the war. This experience forms a contribution to break the silence from a perspective of complete dignity and reparation and to strengthen mutual support networks.
- The voice of women victims needs to be heard in this country and taken into account by society. A good part of this same society has lived at the margin of this problem and has been conditioned by fear or the representation of a reality that has not given sense to this mass experience. This Report gives a small account of that experience. The State needs to recognize the dignity of the women and the violations committed to their human rights. This memory also supposes a moral sanction on the perpetrators who have caused so much pain and destruction, and it demands a commitment to prevention. At such a stage in the armed conflict, peace is not a naïve and well-intentioned desire; it is a social, moral and political requirement. It is also a proposal from the women, one that this process and report account for and form part of.



## Recommendations





The recommendations of the Commission on Truth and Memory of the Colombian Women are summarized in these pages. They are part of the shared reflections of the Ruta with testimonies of the victims and other organizations and close groups. They collect some proposals for transformation of the armed conflict in Colombia that emerge from this work and that aim to further the debate and political actions to bring about truth, justice, reparations and peace.

## **The Truth for Colombia**

- Colombia needs a Truth Commission to contribute to illuminating the truth and to establish a base for a process for transformation of the conflict including the perspective of the victims as an instrument for the re-establishment of the social fabric that will help to generate a collective and inclusive memory that must reflect the voice and participation of the women. This Commission should develop as a process from the grass roots, from the narrations of the victims, and contribute to rebuilding as a community and with profound respect for their dignity. This Commission for Truth and Memory of Women Victims carried out with the leadership of Ruta Pacifica is a contribution to this purpose and should be taken into account for the initiatives that are developed in the country as part of a real peace process.
- As a priority, a Truth Commission should contemplate in its composition the participation of women, who must know of the situation of the women as a consequence of the armed conflict. And the Commission should have the skill to accept and favor the inclusion of women in the development of the Commission.
- A Truth Commission is not only a report that describes what has happened or investigates its causes in the country with independence and legitimacy, but also must emphasize the dimension of the process, establishing efficient mechanisms for listening and empathy, incorporating the testimonies of the women victims along with psycho-social accompaniment. In addition, a Commission is also a social process, on account of which this truth must be disseminated and heard by other sectors of the society through public hearings and other means that will permit not only an investigation of the facts but also disseminate the results.
- The right to truth is part of the meaning of justice and reparation. The victims need for their experience to be recognized and validated and that the surviving victims and those who are dead or disappeared, as well as the communities affected, be recognized and accorded their dignity.
- The focus on the victims should emphasize the situation of women who have carried the impact of the grief and reconstruction of their lives, families and communities in precarious contexts and in the midst of an enormous affective and social burden. The grave discriminations in all areas must be recognized, the vulnerabilities and injustice

promoted by the State itself that are expressed in marginalization, violence, social negation and exclusion that the victims have suffered during their lives and in the armed conflict.

- An official Truth Commission should have favorable spaces and adequate conditions for the women to tell their stories and the human rights violations they have suffered, in a context of trust and confidentiality when necessary. The preparation of interviewers or investigators is of special importance and must include appropriate tools for investigation and be sensitive to the frequently stigmatizing events of which the women have been the object, such as sexual violence or forced recruitment.

## **Policies for reparation**

- The demands of the women must be received in order to keep and complement the *Ley de Víctimas y Tierras* (Law of Victims and Land) that is now being applied in Colombia. For a suitable reparation, a temporary institutional structure should be created with all the political and operative capacity to achieve integral reparation and should have the power to coordinate ministries and institutions in accordance with the level of the social catastrophe experienced by the country because of the war, given the dimension of the individual and community impact in expansive areas of the land, mentality and culture. This goes beyond the current *Unidad de Víctimas y Tierras* (Unity of Victims and Land).
- The reparation policies that have to do with memory and truth to ensure non-repetition of violence must disclose both the mind-sets and reports that circulate surrounding the women in the armed conflict, pointing out the atrocities, the pain and the particular forms of cruelty carried out against their bodies, in both real and symbolic areas in which the war has been carried out. The policies of memory should be oriented towards transforming the focus of militaristic masculinity that pre-suppose a necessary condition and a practice of violence against women in the country.
- The State and both public and private institutions should contribute to de-stigmatize the condition of the women victims through recognition and public policies that demonstrate not only respect and empathy, but also recognizing their capacity to confront and resist and the transformative action for Colombia of the victims and survivors of the violence.
- The measures for reparation and recognition should draw attention to the situation of the women who are victims. Among the conditions to overcome are the historic discrimination and exclusion of women. From the viewpoint of a focus on the interaction between levels, one must take into account the triple discrimination against women, promoting changes in the conditions that will facilitate effective participation and will avoid the frequent victimization of which the women are the object upon not taking into account the subjective, family or social implications of many of these processes.

- The public policies regarding the victims should consider the organizational and leadership experience of the women, as well as take into account their perceptions, knowledge of the reality and trust of the women as energy for transformation. The women have their own perceptions on reparation, the right to peace and security as citizens that is not militarized and that should be heard by the institutions. These policies and programs should count on specific budgetary allocations oriented to consider the economic, social and cultural needs of the women who are the message bearers and spokespersons.
- The State should provide the women with income for the sustainability of their productive projects as part of an economic policy that will guarantee them integral reparation. These resources must not be delivered as a subsidy such as those given for *Familias en Acción* (Families in Action) and other similar ones that have been devised by political *clientelismo* (practice of obtaining votes with promises of government posts, etc.) and impoverishment of their own finances. The State should also offer a wide range of possibilities for decent and honorable employment or projects to create income for the victims by both the State and private enterprise.
- Women should have access to the restitution of their land in honorable and secure conditions, within an appropriate legal framework which will help to overcome any difficulties of access to the property or recognition [of ownership]. The programs for return or economic reactivation in the rural setting should provide guarantees for agricultural and livestock production which make them part of the productive market and at the same time generate conditions for food sovereignty. The restitution of losses must be independent of the possibility of return [to their land], given that many women have already become an integral part of their new environment and that must not contravene their right to reparation.
- The institutions of the State at their various levels should open spaces to reform the policies for development putting emphasis on the women's needs and leadership, promoting the participation of victims in said reformulation.
- Many women have performed a key contribution in the construction of peace and overcoming the fractures produced by the war, actions which, nevertheless, have been given little recognition. It is necessary to promote the participation of women in all areas of political, social and economic life, especially in the building of peace, given that the women and their movements have demonstrated that they are an essential force to confront the consequences of the war and for that reason also for achieving a stable and lasting peace.
- The State should increase the dissemination and spreading of the Law of the Victims and its decrees. As it is applied, the law should take the perspective of the needs and rights of the women and at the same time be differential with the women applying the principle of equality and non-discrimination, and taking into account ethnic differences, systems of consultation and self-organization of the communities of indigenous women and afro-descendants themselves.

- The State has the obligation to guarantee to the women a life free of violence and non-repetition of the victimizing events, including after the armed conflict is over and in the context of the construction of peace. The existence of mechanisms for participation of the women in that phase of the process is very important in order to strengthen the achievement of peace and so that the violence against women is not privatized. For that to happen, the State must assiduously apply due diligence with regard to prevention, investigation, sanction and protection of the women in all areas of their lives.
- The State should guarantee the satisfaction of social rights of the women such as access to food, health, education, housing, sources for employment and access to the land. Legal guarantees and equality in rights must become effective. The launch of policies for equality and positive discrimination of women must count on institutional mechanisms that can evaluate these policies, observe the evolution of violence against women and promote legal or institutional changes for its eradication.

### **Attention to women and routes for attention**

- Strengthen routes of access for women in order to eradicate the barriers that prevent them from giving the free and informed consent for reparation and restoration of their land, as the Law of Victims establishes.
- Ensure that public servants have the conditions for an adequate attention to women victims in accessing their rights, which is accomplished through training and disciplinary measures for failure to meet quality standards in the attention of women victims. Attention should be given with respect and sensitivity toward women and fully complying with their rights.
- The women demand accessible measures for health care with a perspective for reparation and access to services of quality. It should also encourage national programs of quality psychosocial and trustworthy care that neither re-victimize women nor entrench submissive or dependent attitudes, but which become processes that permit the transition from “victim status” to “position of subject” and ensure that women are actors, protagonists in the processes of reparation and restoration of rights.
- Promote the creation of clinics or specialized centres for comprehensive attention of women victims of sexual violence, which offer services from psychosocial and legal assistance that guarantee their sexual and reproductive rights with a policy of zero barriers to these situations.
- This report shows how the way victims cope is key for women and collective survival. The policies of reparation should help open collective spaces for women and use the positive experiences of mutual support that have taken place in the country to generalize these experiences and promote exchanges between equals, which is so important in the

case of the women. It is necessary to create a bank of these experiences and to provide it with means for their exchange, training and generalization, taking into account the will of women and the local and cultural contexts.

- Sexual violence must be recognized as acts of torture and it is necessary that the victims be provided with the status of legitimacy and respect they have lacked until now. A public recognition of the violence would help women feel that it is recognized, and the pain they carry inside, for which they are often stigmatized or blamed, is legitimized.

## **Education and dissemination**

- Require the National Ministry of Education to promote and design an open academic chair to analyze, from the diversity of Colombia, how the armed conflict has impacted the body and life of women in every region.
- Guarantee the right to their own education, where violence against women is not considered normal and the contributions of indigenous women and women of Afro-descent are made visible.
- Ensure women victims the access to formal and non-formal education that promotes free thought from a non-dogmatic secular vision and that makes visible the situation and their value as women and the construction of an autonomous or their own identity, with ability of the women to make their own decisions about their roles and their lives.
- Education is a recurring demand of women victims. Provide the necessary public resources so that the daughters and sons of women victims may have scholarships that allow them access to standard education, in a way that the losses or the suffering endured are not an added obstacle for their access.
- Use radio and television to promote programs of awareness and memory about the impacts of the armed conflict, the war and the violence on the body and life of women of all ages, social classes and ethnic groups.
- Request the National Television Commission to produce a series of programs and documentaries telling the stories of women victims of the armed conflict, according them appropriate dignity.
- Make visible the collective cases included in this Final Report so that the country knows, from the voices of women victims, what happened to women in these events, which are only a sample of what occurred throughout the country. Take care to employ the necessary consultation in policies with victims, not allowing public display without taking into account their criteria, addressing their expectations in a constructive way and being consistent with the behavior and the action.

## **Satisfaction, access to justice, protection and right to peace**

- The necessary Peace Agreements and their implementation must address the suffering of women victims; their needs must be heard and taken into account from a humanistic approach that has women and communities as part of the necessary social change to overcome the past and the transformation of the present.
- Justice for women victims must have a restorative approach that has to be based on the transformation of the contextual factors, the conditions and the subjective aspects that oppress them. It requires that the perpetrators recognize their crimes and express their acknowledgement towards the victims.
- Memory processes should not focus only on the horror experienced but also on remembering, making visible and dignifying the ability and creativity of women victims of the conflict to resist, and physical and psychological costs that this has meant for them. This deserves a special recognition and is part of the Truth that must be told to the country and to the future generations.
- The ways to remember must be related to the feelings of the victims and enable their participation in these processes and not be seen as a symbolic or aesthetic element constructed from outside. The participation of women in the construction of these symbolic expressions is part of the meaning of memory as an element of reconstruction for the victims and the society.
- There should be institutional reforms of the justice system, police and military; reforms regarding land ownership and towards the eradication of the large gaps of inequality in the country. This inequality is even greater in the case of women. The government and state institutions must have as an indicator of their economic and development policies an inequality index and the position of women in it as a central element and of which periodic public information should be provided.
- Encourage public and military authorities to officially recognize state responsibility, either by action or omission, of the political violence in the country and offer a public apology to women victims of the conflict.
- Ensure access to justice for all women who gave their testimony to this Truth Commission, provided they want to carry out such processes. Women victims should be able to count on legal support and the activation of legal actions for full access to the right to justice for the events occurred and derived from the armed conflict.
- Require that the protection programs ensure in a real way the rights of threatened women, taking into account their personal and family situation. In addition, provide a protective environment for women victims of the armed conflict that enables response to their demands and those of their organizations regarding full reparation.

- The Peace Agreements and the endorsement of these agreements must include the rights of women separately, specifically and in a binding manner.
- The State must guarantee that in the future private or public perpetrators will not continue acting with impunity.
- The State must promote in the negotiation process with non-state armed actors, as well as the state actors, the accountability and truth they can provide, as a central element of the process that contributes to the reparation for women and victims in general.
- Achieve a peace agreement with the insurgencies and fully implement the agreement as a guarantee towards the rebuilding of coexistence and create the conditions for non-repetition. Support the process of peace negotiations that is taking place at present and encourage that it be concluded more globally in order to seek an effective peace.

## **Demilitarization of life and the territories**

- Demobilize and disarm the various non-State armed groups, including those called “criminal gangs”, with policies aimed at submitting them to justice and deactivating the mechanisms that feed them economically (traffic in weapons and drug trafficking) and politically, such as impunity.
- In the processes of negotiation, the rebels must guarantee surrendering their weapons and a clear willingness to reincorporate into a civilian life that will make possible reconciliation in the post-conflict.
- Demilitarization should also include leveling of the uncontrolled growth of militarism in the armed forces and private security and the mechanisms that glorify armed men and reinforce a militaristic mentality.
- The conditions of militarization should be verified in an effective manner with mechanisms for observation in which women can participate with security.
- Generate conditions for the demining of areas where there are anti-personnel mines or other devices as part of the joint tasks of the insurgency and the armed forces, given that both actors have installed mines in the territories. The contribution of the civilian population should be kept in mind with regard to finding where mines are located and to preventing new victims. These victims should receive the care needed keeping in mind their frequent handicaps.
- Comply with the mandate that the sons and daughters of the women who are victims of the armed conflict not be required to fulfill obligatory military service. A law should be promoted that will respect the right to conscientious objection to obligatory military service and promote a culture of peace, not penalizing refusal to contribute to war and considering it as a positive value for peace.

## **Historical memory and rebuilding of the social fabric**

- Include in the history of school textbooks education on the armed conflict and the values of building peace, in a way that highlights the role of women as actors and protagonists of the social and political reconstruction of Colombia.
- Promote in the various regions of the country Houses of Memory for the women who are victims, giving voice to the women in spaces for dialogue of inter-cultural knowledge and artistic creativity in memory of the victims and respect for human rights.
- Measures for collective reparation that will benefit the development of the communities should focus on recognition of the harm perpetrated and the responsibility of the State, as well as recognition of the victims.
- The State should promote processes for reconciliation bound to transitional justice that the victims not be re-victimized and that the grief and sorrow of the victims not be denied. The perceptions of the victims should be heard and taken into account in the construction of alternatives for transitional justice, the first condition being prevention of violence and commitment to peace.
- Peace and the reconstruction of harmonious living are long tasks and also presuppose a cultural change. A culture of conflict resolution based on programs for non-violence should be created and promoted through mass communication, based on the creativity of the communities and with public policies that promote peace.
- Support the initiatives of the women emerging from the civil society as related to making visible the experiences of the women during the armed conflict and, in general, the recovery of memory.
- The State and society should take care that memory can be developed in an active and positive manner so that it fulfills a healing social and political role for the society itself, based on human rights values, and avoiding the polarization that tends to characterize societies impacted by armed conflict.
- The women demand that the insurgents accept that they have committed grave violence against women and they should provide the truth to the country as a form of justice and non-repetition.
- The State should recognize that the processes of demilitarization of the paramilitary groups has left the women and the communities once again at the mercy of new paramilitary groups and should set in motion an effective policy for their dismantling in order to give real conditions for peace and security of the communities and in the processes of reintegration.
- Generate spaces for discussions and public deliberations to face up to the past as a road to arrive at reconciliation, which will materialize if they pay appropriate attention to the



demands of the victims. The process carried out by these more than a thousand women is a collective exercise to look at grief face-on and to try to give it some meaning, a process that is an effort to contribute with their testimony to the rebuilding of relationships severed by the violence. This is also a moral lesson for society and the perpetrators and is a small but decisive seed that we hope will germinate into many others in the country. To listen to and allow oneself to feel this history is part of our commitment and what we have learned of the experience and courage of these women. This report is a way of giving them recognition.



This report is based on over 1000 interviews conducted with women affected by the Colombian armed conflict, and 9 collective cases. This document was written in first person by women living in several places of the country. All women telling their stories are civilians, victims of different kinds of human rights violations, and survivors of a historical context of a 60-year long war taking place in Colombia.

This exercise to verbalize women's human rights violations has a double intention- 1. Tell exactly what happened. 2. To make visible what happened specifically to women living in the areas affected by war. This book is not only about talking about the facts, but also to acknowledging how every woman lived the experience, making visible the consequences of the armed conflict in their lives, their perceptions of violence, their wishes and their proposals for peace. In this text women talk not only about the things they've suffered. They talk about their strategies to resist war, their hopes and dreams for a new country. This book contains the memory of what women have lived in the middle of war, and also how they have transformed their lives.

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