

Understanding Colombia Series

THE IMPACT OF WAR ON WOMEN

In Brief

- The majority of the millions of displaced people in Colombia are women and girls.
- It is estimated that more than half of displaced women are not registered, and so, are not receiving any emergency assistance.
- Sexual violence against women is a common weapon of war employed by all armed actors in the conflict – especially the paramilitaries.
- Domestic violence is a serious issue and one that often goes unpunished because women do not report the crimes for fear of reprisal.
- There is insufficient state-funded health and prenatal care for women, especially IDPs.
- Despite oppression and marginalization, Colombian women have historically played a central role in the peace movement, and continue to do so.
- The US government should use its good offices to urge the support of women's issues in all peace talks

Background

Violence against women multiplies exponentially during wartime all over the world. This is no different in Colombia. Since the 1980s, women have become targets in the ongoing civil conflict. Women in Colombia – like men – have been victims of homicides, threats, and torture. In addition to this, however, Colombian women have been subject to sexual violence and aggression by all parties involved in the conflict. These facts are well known, but response to them has been insufficient. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) reports that “the majority of violations of the rights of women and girls remain unpunished, due to a lack of official investigations, the low number of complaints because of shame, lack of credibility of the justice system, and underreporting in cases of death or sexual violence.”



Women from a rural part of Cali take part in an outreach program whose aim is to educate and empower them to promote peace in Colombia.

(Web Photo)

Important Facts

Displacement: Women are disproportionately affected by displacement resulting from the country's 40-year armed conflict. According to the Colombian NGO, CODHES, over 70%, of Colombia's four million internally displaced persons (IDPs), are either women or children and over 50% are women. 50% of internally displaced families have women as the head of the household. IDP women and girls are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence, sexual abuse, and sexual exploitation. Due to their traditionally domestic role, displaced women are less prepared than their male counterparts for the socio-economic crisis of displacement.

Emergency aid: Once displaced, IDPs are entitled to three months of emergency state assistance. In order to receive the assistance, IDPs must register and be certified by the government. Displaced women from the rural sector are much less likely to possess identification than men, leading to structural impediments to women's access to emergency aid. Even if identification is obtained, IDPs frequently fear the stigmatization of registration. For these reasons, USAID estimates that 60% of IDPs, most of whom are women and children, are not registered and therefore are not receiving aid.

Sexual violence: Colombian women face increasing incidences of rape, forced contraception and sterilization, forced prostitution, and sexual slavery. Paramilitary and guerilla forces utilize sexual violence to threaten women leaders and to exert regional social control. Violence against civilian women by armed groups has become common practice and a strategic tool in the conflict. Forced sex, sexual slavery, and prostitution are utilized by paramilitary and guerrilla forces on members of their units. Female FARC combatants are commonly forced to undergo abortion and/or use birth control involuntarily.

Domestic abuse: 52% of IDP women experience domestic abuse, as compared to 20% of non-displaced women. It is estimated by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) that less than half of battered women seek help and less than 10% make formal complaints in the legal system due to the fear of reprisal. Under President Uribe, new legislation prohibits everyone but the victim from making an official complaint, thereby limiting the likelihood of legal prosecution.

Health care: The Colombian Ministry of Health reports that cuts in its resources and personnel have resulted in decreased ability to provide care. The government also fails to directly provide sexual and reproductive healthcare to IDPs, instead relying on the nonprofit *Profamilia* to deliver services. Government numbers indicate that 30% of displaced teenage women are pregnant, about double the number from the non-displaced population. Without sufficient information on birth control and very few options for self-actualization, young women and girls will continue experiencing high rates of pregnancy into the foreseeable future.

Auto 092 of 2008: *Auto 092(2008)* of the Colombian Constitutional Court declared that "Sexual violence against women is an habitual practice that extends, systematically and invisibly, throughout the context of the armed conflict in Colombia, as are sexual exploitation and abuse on the part of the illegal armed actors, and, in some isolated cases, on the part of individual agents of the Public Forces." In the *Auto*, the Court also reminded all Colombian authorities that under the constitution, they are required to try to prevent the disproportionate displacement of women and that they must work to ensure that displaced women are guaranteed all of their rights.

Women struggling for peace: Women continue to organize peacefully- despite the fact that paramilitary and guerrilla forces have sought to repress this activism through intimidation and assassinations.

US role: The US should use its good offices to support a peace process in Colombia that includes the participation of civil society, with the strong and representative participation of women. USOC calls on the US to support programs that include women in the design, implementation, compliance and review processes and to help ensure that basic socioeconomic necessities of mothers and families are guaranteed as a way of reducing young men and women's need to join the illegal armed actors.

"Too many violations are being perpetrated against girls, teenagers, and adult women in Colombia under the shadow of the conflict, and yet there is very little awareness of this in society, or in the media, which could help to raise awareness on this issue."

- Claudia Mejía, head of
Sisma Mujer

For More Information

Planeta Paz

www.planetapaz.org

Peace Women

www.peacewomen.org

Iniciativa de Mujeres Colombianas por la Paz

www.mujiresporlapaz.org/organisa.htm

Sisma Mujer

www.sismamujer.org

CODHES

www.codhes.org

Take Action!

Write a letter or call your US Congressmen/women asking them to urge the Colombian government to protect female IDPs, prosecute perpetrators of crimes against women, support peace initiatives by Colombian women, and ensure that women's issues are central in any peace negotiations. To find the address and phone number of your senators and representatives, please visit www.congress.org

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