



# COLOMBIAN VICTIM AND SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION IN INFORMAL TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE



## **Cover Photo**

Women leaders of the municipality of Planadas walking in the villages affected by the Colombian armed conflict. August 15, 2021. San Miguel (Tolima - Colombia). Credits: ©Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

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## **Layout and Design**

Wezank

**Research Coordinator:**

Dr Louis Monroy Santander

**Research team:**

Laura Juliana Colmenares

Laura Ximena Cortés

Viviana Espitia Perdomo

Germán Otálora Gallego

**Support team:**

Juanita Marulanda Chirivi

María Fernanda Díaz Ardila

María Alejandra González Prieto

María Camila Leal Palacios

*Edited by Christalla Yakinthou and Manal Sarrouf.*

# About



## **BSocial**

BSocial is a non-governmental organisation dedicated to using research and social innovation strategies to deal with development challenges in Colombia by co-creating solutions with vulnerable communities. Our bottom-up work is based on principles of innovation, creativity, and social commitment geared toward community empowerment in various regions in Colombia, using knowledge-building and the sharing of ideas as platforms for problem-solving and project development for positive transformation of communities in various territories in the country.

[https://www.bsocialgroup.org/  
contacto@bsocialgroup.org](https://www.bsocialgroup.org/contacto@bsocialgroup.org)



## **Impunity Watch**

Impunity Watch (IW) is a non-profit human rights organisation dedicated to ending impunity for severe violations of human rights, especially in countries emerging from a violent past. We analyse, advocate, and partner to help local communities seek accountability for gross human rights abuses and for systemic injustice. In our work, we adopt a bottom-up, participatory, and context-sensitive approach, and support victims and survivors in exercising their rights. Our work is legal, social, and political. IW began its work in 2004 in response to calls from Guatemalan human rights groups for greater support in their struggle for redress after the internal armed conflict of 1960-1996. It was registered as an independent foundation in 2008 in the Netherlands. Today, IW works in a wide range of countries and has offices in Burundi, Guatemala, and The Netherlands.

[www.impunitywatch.org](http://www.impunitywatch.org)  
[info@impunitywatch.org](mailto:info@impunitywatch.org)

# Foreword

This country report is part of a broader multi-year comparative research project entitled Promoting Access to Justice through Victim Participation: Foregrounding Informal Processes, implemented by Impunity Watch and research teams from six countries: Colombia, Guatemala, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, Syria, and Tunisia; and funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

We interviewed or partnered with survivors and victims from these six countries, in line with a participatory and survivor-lead research model. We conducted qualitative research on the dynamics of survivor and victim participation in informal spaces before, during, and in the absence of transitional justice processes. While the research focuses on survivor and victim engagement after sustained political violence, it starts from the position that activism in the face of injustice happens along a spectrum, often beginning many years before violence ends, and the whole field of justice delivery has much to learn from survivor and victim engagement and activism. This learning, in turn, should inform justice initiatives that are more linked to meaningful change as envisioned by survivors and affected communities. The research collects, analyses, and interprets the views, expectations, experiences and motivations of survivor- and victim-activists, in order to strengthen their ability to seek justice and societal transformation.

The research findings and key recommendations will be used to guide policymakers and practitioners to better support the meaningful inclusion and leadership of survivors and victims in transitional justice processes, and to help think more broadly about the prevention of conflict.

## Acknowledgments

This report is the product of the collaborative efforts of several individuals and organisations. BSOCIAL and Impunity Watch would like to thank all participating organisations ACTE/Embrace me with Hope, ASODEMUN/Association for the Development of Black Women, ASMURVIV/Association of Rural Women Victims of Vichada, ASOPROSAM, Association of Agricultural Producers and Leaders of the San Miguel Municipality in Planadas, Tolima, MOVICE/Movement for Victims of the State, and RMVP/ Women's Network for Victims and Professionals. BSOCIAL and Impunity Watch are grateful for the valuable input provided by the victims who participated in the interviews.

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## List of acronyms

ACTE	Embrace me with Hope (NGO)
AFRODES	National Association for Displaced Afro Descendants
ASODEMUN	Association for the Development of Black Women (NGO)
ASMURVIV	Association of Rural Women Victims of Vichada
ASOPROSAM	Association of Agricultural Producers and Leaders of the San Miguel Municipality in Planadas, Tolima (NGO)
AUC	United Self-Defence Forces (Paramilitary organisation)
CEV	Colombia's Truth Commission
CNRR	National Commission for Reparations and Reconciliation
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
ELN	National Liberation Army (Insurgency)
EPL	Popular Liberation Army (Insurgency)
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Insurgency)
JEP	Special Jurisdiction for Peace
JPL	Justice and Peace Law
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IOM	International Organization for Migration
M-19	April 19th Movement (Insurgency)
MOVICE	Movement for Victims of the State
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PAPSIVI	Programme of Psychosocial Attention and Integral Health to Victims
PDET	Development Programmes with a Territorial Focus
RMVP	Women's Network for Victims and Professionals (NGO)
RUV	Unique Victims Record
SIJVRNR	Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition

## Executive summary

Colombia's protracted conflict, caused by the lack of political participation, unequal land distribution, socio-economic inequality, and injustice witnessed a peacebuilding opportunity through the 2016 Havana Peace Agreement between the National Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The peace agenda was further developed to include a holistic approach to transitional justice—initially formalised through the Justice and Peace Law—and its reach was extended, to create a combination of judicial and non-judicial measures to address issues of the missing persons, truth-seeking, accountability, reparation, and land restitution.

Colombia is exemplary of how bottom-up transitional justice activism combined with top-down promotion of participation, has boosted the impact of victim and civil society participation in peacebuilding; hence, allowing a people-centred justice model. This study explores victim participation, in formal and informal transitional justice spaces, from a gender lens and focuses on gender activism and its impact in redefining political power, recovering political agency, promoting anti-war and conflict resolution initiatives, breaking the silence around violence against women, and reparations. Victims in Colombia have been affected by forced displacement, homicide, threats, enforced disappearance, dispossession of land and property, sexual violence, terrorist attacks, and kidnapping. Today, drug trafficking and paramilitarism pose serious threats to peace in the country.

The study examines the goals of the victim movement in Colombia; with a focus on women's associations that are adamantly working on fighting impunity, pressuring institutions to address sexual violence and atrocities committed against women, healing and empowerment of victims and youth, and achieving a more integral approach to reparations. The research touches on endemic barriers to attain these goals including the lack of institutional coordination and understanding of victims, bureaucracy, constant threats to civil society actors from paramilitaries and the government, discrimination against indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, and cultural and linguistic barriers which all lead to social tensions.

The study focuses on the impact of gender activism in terms of effecting change, trauma healing, and establishing organisations' autonomy. We give special attention to the relationship between civil society organisations and justice institutions, and the lack of strategic communication between formal mechanisms and communities, which compounds the distrust felt by the victims toward the transitional justice institutions.

The study analyses how women's organisations have informally helped processes of comprehensive reparation and access to justice, and how they can support the prioritisation of victims' needs in institutional spaces.

The study interprets fieldwork data collected over a period of five months through interviews or partnerships with a wide range of women's associations covering the regions of Antioquia, Cauca, Chocó and the Pacific region, Cundinamarca, Tolima, and Vichada; in an attempt to understand their perceptions of informal activism in transitional justice.

# Colombia's transitional justice framework timeline



1980

**Law 35/1982:** Offers an extension of amnesties for guerrilla members to demobilise. The law recognises victims' possibilities of economic redress from members of insurgencies.

**Law 37/1981 and Decree 474/1982:** Amnesty for political crimes and connecting crimes as promotion of peace dialogues.

1985

**Law 49/1985:** Gives executive powers to the president to cancel punishments of guerrilla members after judgment (for political crimes only). It gives possibilities for victims seek truth and reparation from responsible non-state parties.

1990

**Law 77/1989 and Decree 213/1991:** offers cessation of criminal procedures and pardons for insurgencies, allowing demobilisation processes.

**1991 Constitution:** Establishes a range of political participation instruments intended to deal with historical political exclusion. The catalogue of international human rights is included within the Constitution.

2000

**Law 418/1997:** Establishes legal arrangements for government peace talks with FARC, encouraging ceasefire and demobilisation. The law permitted amnesties for political crimes and recognises the situation of victims as a key issue in the negotiations.

**2002 Ratification of the Rome Statute (ICC)**

2010

**Law 975/2005 (Justice and Peace Law):** Formally introduces the concept of transitional justice into the Colombian legal regime. It extends the definition of victim to include relatives of those affected by violence. Insists on authority's obligations to assist victims regardless of victimiser. The law formally consecrates rights to truth, justice, and reparation for victims, allowing collective reparation programs, channeling economic redress via the criminal justice system.

**Law 1448/2011 (Victims and land restitution law):** a framework recognising victims as subjects of special state protection, with land restitution as the primary reparatory component. It established a range of institutions to regulate reparations and protect victims' property rights: the Unit for Victims Reparation and the Unit for Land Restitution.

2016

**The Havana Agreement** between FARC and the Colombian government leads to the creation of the integral system for truth, justice, reparation and guarantee of non-repetition (SIJVRNR). The agreement recognises the multiple harms endured by the Colombian population, recognises the need to address victim needs and the responsibility of various groups (including the State) for the victims' conditions.

**The SIJVRNR is comprised of:**

- The Unit for the Search for Missing Persons in Context and because of conflict.
- The Commission for the Clarification of Truth.
- The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP).
- Measures on comprehensive reparation for peacebuilding and guarantees for non-repetition (Recognition of collective responsibility, Reparative actions by wrongdoers, Collective plans for return and reparation)

# COLOMBIAN CONFLICT

## *Controversial roots and causes*



1

Socio-economic and political issues: representation, land ownership and distribution, and state model.

2

Violence is the result of a terrorist threat to the state financed by drug trafficking. Informal and illegal economic interests.

3

A war against society because of widespread human rights abuses committed by all parties.



**9,000,000+**  
victims

48.9%  
women

51.1%  
men

-  forced displacement
-  homicide
-  threats
-  enforced disappearance
-  dispossession of land and property
-  sexual violence

-  terrorist attacks
-  kidnapping
-  massacres
-  arbitrary detentions
-  maintaining the humanitarian crisis

**2016 Havana Peace Agreements** ended the conflict, BUT the prevalence of drug trafficking and paramilitarism imposes a serious risk for peace.

**GROWING NEED FOR MEANINGFUL  
TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE ADDRESSING:  
TRUTH, JUSTICE, TRAUMA-HEALING,  
AND SOCIAL REPAIR.**

# Victims' and survivors' movements



## Bottom-up transitional justice activism

Focused on women's visibility, reparations, dealing with the past, and the healing of trauma.



## Top-down promotion of participation

Focused on the use of a range of transitional mechanisms for truth, justice, dealing with missing persons and memory.

## IMPACT OF VICTIM AND CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION IN PEACEBUILDING



**Victim organisations:** through anti-impunity activism + establishment of formal mechanisms for victim participation

EVOLVED FROM

**Marginalised and ignored actors**

TO



**Central political players with increasing power and organisational skills**



## ORGANISATIONS

- Enabling platforms for denouncing atrocities
- Raising awareness about the need for truth, justice, and reconciliation in Colombia
- Breaking the silence around sexual violence, racism and discrimination
- Advocating for the obligation upon conflict actors to devise reparative approaches that include:
  - economic compensation, and
  - meaningful reparations through memory practices, truth-telling, and community-focused trauma-healing

# THE IMPACT OF INFORMAL TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE PRACTICES

Different forms of impact



The ability to have sustained presence and to be trusted within communities

Effective changes in attitudes and relations between men and women

Increased requests from local communities for NGO support

Actions that gave legitimacy to organisations



Sustained territorial presence

Localised confidence-building measures

The ability to maintain projects and activities within local communities

Keeping trustful relationships with communities

Finding ways to monitor the human rights situation in different territories

Changing relations between individuals and communities on the ground

Change varies from local to national settings depending on:

Location

Type of activism

Engagement of different organisations with the communities

Promoting sexual education and raising awareness about trauma from sexual violence has helped:

Healing of trauma

Changing people's relations within communities

Establishing relationship-building processes in many territories

The need to expand these efforts to many territories in the country, in order to establish a powerful voice for women.

## Examples

Trauma-healing practice akin to empowerment:

Painting and knitting of memory quilts

Women talk safely about deep traumas

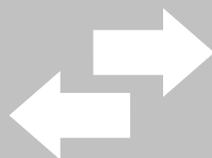
Memory quilts became platforms for women's political pursuit of justice, contributing to giving women's agency

Local impact

National impact

i.e. denouncing violence in more formal spaces

Trauma-healing



Talking about an experience of sexual violence on one's own terms

1

**CONTEXT**

## 1. Context

This study looks at people-centred justice in Colombia in its transition between protracted war and post-conflict peacebuilding via the 2016 Havana Peace Agreement. An outstanding feature has been the genderisation of peacebuilding combined with the efforts of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to raise awareness about gender, legal advocacy for women’s rights, and litigation interpreted as creole feminist justice.<sup>1</sup> This process started in the 1980s, when women’s feminist organisations began collecting testimonies, documenting human rights cases, and publishing reports on women and war. They then evolved into workshops, roundtables, and civil society discussions using varied methodologies dealing with sexual violence and women’s trauma; making women’s leadership visible amidst forced displacement.

In this sense, this publication studies how survivor and victim engagement in informal transitional spaces has re-shaped justice goals toward the needs of survivors and community, dealing with gender-related issues and recovery of political agency. The focus on gender derives from the fact that the Havana Accords have been praised for including this perspective as a platform for victim empowerment. This has motivated this research to critically observe the real impact of gender perspectives and compare them to informal grounded views of the concept. The report presents Colombia’s conflict, peacebuilding, and transitional justice contexts, to then describe the landscape for the work of victims’ associations work, with special attention to gender in society-building. It concludes with data analysis from different women’s associations, explaining issues of activism, engagement with institutional actors, and the way organisations balance between the achievements and challenges.

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1 Lina M. B, Céspedes-Baez. “Gender panic and the failure of a peace agreement,” *American Journal of International Law* 110 (2016): 183-87.

## History of Colombia

Colombia has suffered from extended violent periods, starting with partisan disputes paving the way for successive hegemonic and repressive governments. This begins with *'La violencia'*: inter-party violence between Liberal and Conservative parties between 1948 and 1958. This genesis is categorised into three stages: a) a rural bipartisan war stemming from the killing of populist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948; b) the rise of guerrillas in the mid-1960s coupled with militarised counterinsurgency approaches ('the security statute'); and c) a shift in conflict and state response: the emergence in the 1980s of narcoterrorism with criminal organisations as conflict players, mixed with emerging paramilitary groups, and efforts from different governments to negotiate with insurgencies. Since then, Colombia has seen increased violence sponsored by the influence of drug trafficking on the economy and varied counterterrorism efforts, all whilst political dynamics remained the same: guerrillas and state maintaining a violent competition for power, and territorial and population control in rural areas where the state has been particularly absent.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the conflict, it is important to describe the different forces at play. Left-wing guerrillas emerged out of a lack of political space for socialist ideals in the country; after a power-sharing agreement in 1958 known as *'El Frente Nacional'* established Liberals and Conservatives as the sole actors in Colombia's politics, excluding other partisan options. Paramilitary groups emerged in response to the guerrillas and the state's inability to contain violence. Paramilitaries became a powerful unified force, waging war against civilian populations via massacres, forced displacement, torture and other methods; quickly establishing ties with economic elites, benefitting from the complicity of state agents, including the army, local politicians, and Congress members.<sup>3</sup> Their ongoing economic and power structures as well as financing derive from drug trafficking, a strong connection to land ownership, and their relationship with state agents. Both state and paramilitaries have engaged in war against insurgents, harbouring a cohabitation relationship interpreted as war against civilians.

Drug cartels and criminal gangs also brought a different dimension. Drug trafficking established itself within Colombian society due to a permissive stance by politicians, who facilitated the entry of drug money into the economic and political system, particularly through legalisation of drug lords' incomes.<sup>4</sup> 'Narco-terrorism' resulted from a conflict between known drug barons and the state over extradition, territorial control, and political power. Drug cartels constantly sustained complex relations with other armed

2 Daniel Pécaut, "Una lucha armada al servicio del statu quo social y político," *Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas, Contribución al entendimiento del conflicto en Colombia* (Bogotá D.C.: Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas, 2015), 599-651.

3 Rodrigo Uprimmy and María Paula Saffon Sanín, "Uses and abuses of transitional justice in Colombia," 165-195.

4 Fabio Andrés Díaz, "Transitional justice and the Colombian peace process", in *Truth, Justice and Reconciliation in Colombia: transitioning from violence*, edited by Fabio Andrés Díaz Pabón. London: Routledge, 201, 1-12.

groups, from financing their activities to becoming directly involved with them. As a result, the conflict perpetuated itself; as drug trafficking worked as an unlimited source of financing for conflict actors.<sup>5</sup>

The role of the Colombian state, as a conflict actor, can be interpreted through different counterinsurgency approaches. In the latter decades of conflict, due to ties with paramilitarism, the national army has been identified by victims as a perpetrator of human rights violations. Historically, governmental policy toward armed groups oscillated between hard security measures (counterinsurgency) and peace-making (ceasefires, open as well as secret negotiations with guerrillas, and Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR)). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the state's response was through military operations targeting regions where guerrillas such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) established operations. Noteworthy was President Julio César Turbay Ayala's (1978-1982) 'security statute:' a strong militarised response to guerrillas, which included human rights abuses, torture, and disappearances.<sup>6</sup>

Since the 1980s, successive governments engaged in peace-making, establishing encounters with insurgencies to demobilise them, and creating incentives for their incorporation into civilian life. The 1980s also saw the first attempts at dialogue with guerrilla forces: the 1984 La Uribe agreement enabled conversations between government and FARC as well as posterior ceasefires with guerrillas such as the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) and the April 19th Movement (M-19). Through the 1990s, this trend became more prominent with formal peace initiatives by the Gaviria administration (1990-1994) with FARC, ELN, EPL, involving international actors; negotiations with the ELN during the Samper presidency (1994-1998); as well as President Andrés Pastrana Arango (1998-2002) who established a demilitarised zone in Colombia, facilitating talks with FARC. Successive policies fluctuated between repressive military approaches as with the Uribe presidency (2002 – 2010) coupled with a DDR process for paramilitaries and an international negotiation during the Santos administration (2010-2018) ending with the Havana Agreement with FARC.

5 Uprimmy and Saffon Sanín, "Uses and abuses of transitional justice in Colombia," 165-195.

6 Fabio Andrés Díaz, "Conflict and peace in the making: 1948-2010" in *Truth, Justice and Reconciliation in Colombia: transitioning from violence*, edited by Fabio Andrés Díaz Pabón. London: Routledge, 201, 16-34.

## History of transitional justice efforts

Transitional justice started with measures throughout the 1980s guaranteeing peace talks with guerrillas. Between 1981 and 1993, blanket amnesties and pardons for crimes such as sedition, rebellion, and riot were offered to insurgents willing to disarm themselves and reinsert into civilian life; regulated by Law 37 of 1981 and its Decree 474 of 1982 passed by the Turbay government.<sup>7</sup> In parallel, this administration established a security statute countering guerrilla activity and limiting the impact of the amnesties.

Following this conflictive framework, President Belisario Betancur's Law 35 of 1982 offered incentives for guerrilla demobilisation, recognising the possibility that those affected by conflict could seek economic redress from guerrillas, regardless of amnesties. Decisions on an alternative criminal justice framework that could enable dialogues with insurgent groups were furthered with Law 49 of 1985, giving powers to the executive to reprieve members of insurgencies from political crimes only after being subject to trial. This process could have given space for seeking truth and reparations for victims from the responsible parties, yet did not recognise it explicitly. Various peace talks emerged from these decisions, with successive agreements and demobilisations of various insurgencies in the country, while remaining in stalemate with FARC and ELN.

Law 418 of 1997 advanced Colombia's peace legislation, setting the stage for the 1998 El Caguán negotiations between President Pastrana and FARC. This legislation allowed the government to conduct peace talks with insurgents (opening possibilities for talks with other groups including paramilitaries), providing amnesty for political crimes to those participating in individual or collective demobilisations, establishing alternative legal frameworks to end conflict; sustained under a discourse of the 'superior right to peace.'<sup>8</sup> Although transitional justice as a legal and political practice had not yet been undertaken, Law 418 provided the first legislative definition of 'victim' in Colombian legislation, accounting for civilians whose life, property, and integrity were affected by violence.<sup>9</sup> The Law established state obligations regarding humanitarian assistance, healthcare, and education for victims.

The accompanying Law 387 of 1997 established measures preventing forced displacement via monitoring, protection, and socioeconomic stabilisation of those internally displaced by violence. This law formally and institutionally recognised displacement, not simply as a migratory phenomenon, but as one of the modalities violating fundamental rights of citizens exposed to the crossfire between armed

7 Marco Alberto Velásquez Ruiz, "The emergence and consolidation of transitional justice within the realm of Colombian peacebuilding," in *Truth, Justice and Reconciliation in Colombia: transitioning from violence*, ed. Fabio Andrés Díaz Pabón (London: Routledge, 2018), 50-65.

8 Heydi Abuchaibe, "La justicia transicional del posacuerdo con las "FARC"-EP," *OPERA*, no. 20 (2017): 129-153.

9 Velásquez Ruiz, "The emergence and consolidation of transitional justice," 50-65.

actors.<sup>10</sup> By means of Law 387 of 1997, “The state recognised its legal and political responsibility for the prevention and attention of the phenomenon of forced displacement, establishing a concrete policy framework for institutional responses.”<sup>11</sup>

It is in the context of negotiations between President Alvaro Uribe Velez and paramilitaries (the United Self-Defence Forces, AUC), that transitional justice discourse and practice was formally initiated via Law 975 of 2005, known as the Justice and Peace Law (JPL). The latter created a new institutional structure, establishing a National Commission for Reparations and Reconciliation (CNRR), a National Unit for Justice and Peace within the Prosecutor General’s Office, the High Courts of Judicial Districts, a Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation, which would administer a victim reparations fund as well as new oversight roles of the Ombudsman’s Office and the Attorney General.<sup>12</sup>

The JPL also created a special justice framework with differential penalties for those demobilised from the AUC, giving an alternative to previous decisions on aspects like pardon and amnesty.<sup>13</sup> It offered alternative penalties to demobilised paramilitaries who presented themselves before courts and showed an “unwavering commitment to the truth about their crimes, the money derived from these, and to the non-repetition of illegal conducts.”<sup>14</sup> Special conditions of confinement in penitentiary centres and sentences of five to eight years would be granted. The JPL sought to guarantee victims’ rights to truth, justice, and reparation, while formally considering victim participation in peace negotiations. This would be institutionalised through three components: 1) judicial consequences for those who committed crimes, 2) truth processes to clarify the facts and develop historical memory, 3) victim reparations.<sup>15</sup>

Implementation of Law 975 and a DDR process with paramilitary groups structured a transitional justice discourse, recognising victim rights and inclusion for different peace actors (civil society, the polity and the international community). Such processes focused on a more comprehensive transitional justice logic, permitting discussions about victims’ rights to justice, truth, reparation, and redress.<sup>16</sup> The topic of land policies was prioritised in this agenda, making land restitution central to victims’ rights. This recognition, tied to the 2010 peace policy of President Juan Manuel Santos which led to the peace talks with FARC, created a legal regime to conduct reparations through

10 Carmen Jimena Holguín, “Pierre Muller’s Concept of Referencing Applied to some Forced Displacement Public Policy Instruments in Colombia,” *Ciencia Política*, 12, no.23 (2017), 129-130.

11 Diego Andrés Molano Aponte, *Avance, Perspectivas Y Retos De La Política De Atención A La Población Desplazada* (Colombia: ACNUR, 2008), 3. <https://www.acnur.org/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2008/6063.pdf>.

12 Jemima García-Godos and Knut Andreas, “Transitional Justice and victims’ rights before the end of a conflict: the unusual case of Colombia,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 42, no. 3 (2010): 487-516.

13 Germán Darío Valencia Agudelo and Carlos Alberto Mejía Walker, “Ley de Justicia y Paz, un balance de su primer lustro,” *Perfil de Coyuntura Económica*, no. 15 (2010): 59-77. <http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/pece/n15/n15a3.pdf>.

14 Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *¡BASTA YA! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 2013), 244.

15 Valencia Agudelo and Mejía Walker, “Ley de Justicia y Paz, un balance de su primer lustro,” 59-77.

16 Velásquez Ruiz, “The emergence and consolidation of transitional justice,” 50-65.

Law 1448 of 2011 (known as Victims and Land Restitution Law). This is the first legal instrument in Colombia that defines itself as a transitional justice mechanism. It prompted a discourse by government, armed groups, victims, and civil society around the concept of transitional justice, coupled with practices in formal and informal spaces. This legislation expanded the notion of victims, not only as those suffering from forced displacement, but also those who individually or collectively suffered damage through events that occurred within armed conflict after 1985. The law proposed measures of attention, assistance, and comprehensive reparation for victims of the conflict, including various at-risk groups: women, youth, children, older adults, people with disabilities, peasants, social leaders, members of trade unions, human rights leaders, and victims of forced displacement. Integral reparation was established through the creation of the Programme of Psychosocial Attention and Integral Health to Victims (PAPSIVI), guaranteeing rights to truth, justice, reparation, and non-repetition. The official recognition of victims as well as a legal standing to demand their rights was given through the Unique Victims Record (RUV) (Law 1448 of 2011), giving victims concrete and enforceable rights. Additionally, by establishing mechanisms for collecting truth and memory narratives, legislation allowed victims to make their stories known, increasing prospects for healing.<sup>17</sup>

Transitional justice acquired a holistic tone as the Havana negotiations between Santos and FARC extended the peace agenda to include land restitution, political participation, and the establishment of an integral system for truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition. Stemming from an understanding of multiple causes and harms affecting Colombians after the conflict, negotiations renewed prior recognitions to victims and the responsibility of different groups for victims' conditions.<sup>18</sup> The establishment of a comprehensive transitional justice regime, incorporated within the peace agreement, is based on the complementarity of different mechanisms and institutions regarded as necessary for justice.

Havana's transitional justice framework combines judicial and non-judicial measures for various purposes: dealing with the missing, engagement with truth-telling, recognition of collective responsibility and integral reparation, dealing with the gravest and most representative crimes of the conflict, and strengthening land restitution, among others. This framework consists of the following components:

- ***The Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and non-Repetition***, mandated to clarify what happened during war, acknowledging victims as actors and political agents, recognising the responsibility of institutions and individuals participating in conflict and promoting coexistence via peaceful conflict resolution and the construction of a democratic culture.

17 Elivira Maria Restrepo, "Leaders against all odds: Women victims of conflict in Colombia," Palgrave Communications 2, no. 16014 (2016): 6.

18 Camila de Gamboa-Tapias and Fabio Andrés Díaz Pabón, "The transitional justice framework agreed between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP." Truth, Justice and Reconciliation in Colombia: transitioning from violence, edited by Fabio Andrés Díaz Pabón (London: Routledge, 2018), 66-84.

- ***The Search Unit for Missing Persons in the Context and as a Result of Conflict***, accounting for disappeared citizens within conflict, identifying remains of the deceased, and coordinating the search, identification, locating and return of remains.
- ***The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP)***, a judicial body fulfilling a constitutional duty to probe, indict and sanction crimes that occurred during armed conflict.
- ***Measures on comprehensive reparation for peacebuilding and guarantees of non-repetition***, include acts of recognition of collective responsibility, actions of reparations by wrongdoers, strengthening collective reparations, implementing collective plans for the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs), reparation for victims living overseas, strengthening of land restitution processes, and monitoring the FARC's commitments regarding the integral reparation for victims.

## Human rights and violence today

The Colombian war is embedded in political controversies about its roots and causes. For some, the war is perceived as an internal armed conflict based on socio-economic and political issues (political representation, land ownership and distribution, and the state model to be adopted). Others claim that violence comes from a terrorist threat to the state, financed by drug trafficking, and war is perpetuated through informal and illegal economic interests from conflict entrepreneurs. Conflict is also perceived as a war against society because of the widespread human rights abuses committed against civilians by all parties to the conflict, including the state.<sup>19</sup>

Victims have been affected by forced displacement, homicide, threats, enforced disappearance, dispossession of land and property, sexual violence, terrorist attacks, and kidnapping. Reports issued by the Unique Victims Registry (RUV) in 2021 note that more than nine million people have been recognised as victims, defined by Law 1448 of 2011 (Article 3) as: “persons who individually or collectively have suffered harm (...) as a result of violations of international humanitarian law or serious and manifest violations of international human rights law, occurring during the internal armed conflict.”<sup>20</sup> Around 48.9 per cent of them are women and 51.1 per cent are men. Less than 0.1 per cent of victims have been identified as LGBTI or did not report their gender.<sup>21</sup>

Each violent dynamic constitutes a unique challenge, showcasing the need for meaningful transitional justice addressing truth, justice, trauma-healing, and social

19 Uprimmy and Saffon Sanín, “Uses and abuses of transitional justice in Colombia,” 165-195.

20 Registro Único de Víctimas, Víctimas por Hecho Victimizante - Fecha Corte 31/12/2020 (Bogotá: Unidad de Víctimas, 2020), <https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394>.

21 *Ibid.*

repair. Government figures identify more than eight million Colombians as forcefully displaced, creating an ongoing victimisation cycle where IDPs constitute one of the most marginal sectors of society due to the socioeconomic deprivation derived from displacement. Other pervasive abuses in the framework of the armed conflict include homicides, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, kidnapping, massacres, and arbitrary detentions, maintaining an ongoing humanitarian crisis.<sup>22</sup>

Since the signing of the Havana Agreements and afterwards, the prevalence of drug trafficking and paramilitarism have been highlighted as a risk to peace; particularly regarding the security guarantees for demobilised individuals and society at large. Negotiating parties emphasised their concerns for the security of social leaders, human rights defenders, and political party leaders supporting the accords. Despite the existence of governmental protection mechanisms, these have not been fully implemented by the government of current President Iván Duque Márquez, and the institutional component proposed for the peace agreement turned out to be inoperative.<sup>23</sup> The effect of this can be seen in the death toll of civil society leaders in recent years; from 2016 to 2020 around 415 civil society leaders have been reported as killed and hundreds more live in a situation of harassment from illegal groups in the country.<sup>24</sup>

## Notes on methods and limitations of research

This context is important to understand our research design and limitations, which are related to the climate of insecurity previously described. As the study observed informal transitional justice practices in Colombia, it looked at prospects, advantages, and barriers to empowerment of victims. The duality between the institutionalisation of peace mechanisms and sustained violent practices structures data collection around how women’s associations perceive activism. Data was obtained during March - May 2021 via semi structured-interviews done virtually (using Zoom) and through telephone (in areas with low internet coverage). Several focus groups were also organised with leaders and beneficiaries of projects conducted by various women’s associations.

All participating organisations included concepts of gender, truth, justice, and activism within their organisational framing. Participating organisations work on sexual violence within and outside conflict, while others focus on promoting conflict resolution within an antimilitarist and gendered approach. Other mandates included activism for collective reparations, trauma-healing for women victims of war, and inclusion and participation

22 Uprimmy and Saffon Sanín, “Uses and abuses of transitional justice in Colombia.” 165-195

23 Fundación Ideas para la Paz, Participación de las organizaciones de mujeres que realizaron aportes en el marco del proceso de paz con las FARC (Bogotá: Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2018), <https://cdn.ideaspaz.org/media/website/document/5a1735ee6eb2c.pdf>

24 International Crisis Group, Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia’s Front Line of Peace (Bogotá/New York/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2020). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/82-leaders-under-fire-defending-colombias-front-line-peace>.

of communities like indigenous and Afro-Colombian women. A total of 55 participants were interviewed through 19 semi-structured interviews and six focus groups.<sup>25</sup> The geographical span of this research sought to incorporate different regions and conflict dynamics:

- The Antioquia region and the city of Medellín (Central and Western Colombia), known for its connection to drug trade and paramilitarism.
- The Cauca region (Southwestern Colombia), characterised by the presence of various indigenous communities.
- The Chocó and Pacific region (Western Colombia), where many Afro-Colombian communities reside.
- The Cundinamarca region and the city of Bogotá (Central Colombia) the political and administrative centre of the country and the base for many NGOs' advocacy efforts.
- The Tolima region (Central-Western Colombia), a historical haven area for FARC.
- The Vichada region (South-eastern Colombia), a highly rural area home for historical territorial disputes and affected by the cultivation of illegal crops.<sup>26</sup>

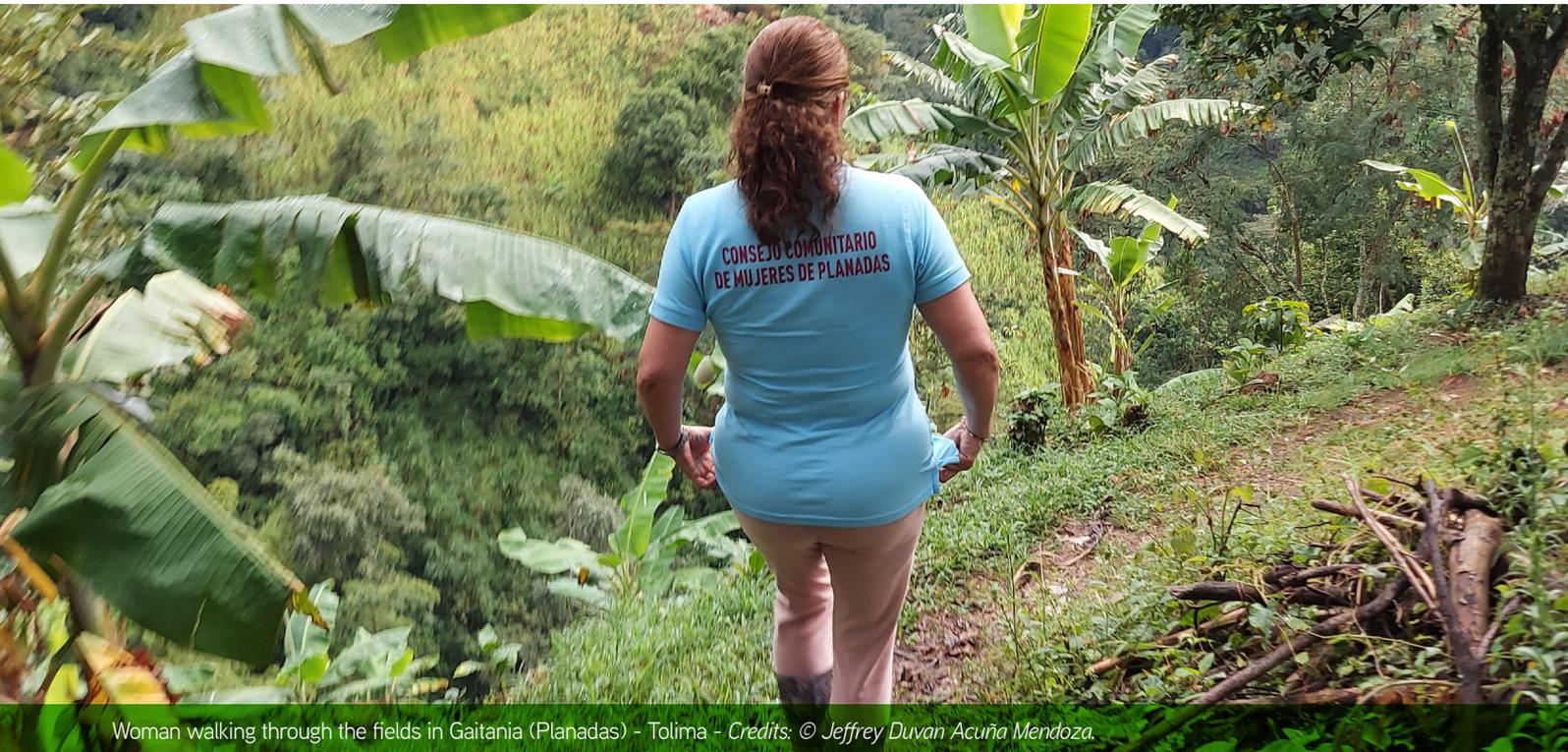


A view of Bogotá - Credits: © Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

25 For detailed information on data collection, please see Annex 1.

26 It is important to state that in cities like Medellín and Bogotá, many participants came from different regions of the country (many as IDPs), adding to the geographical diversity of the sample.

While seeking an understanding of activism, gender, and political agency from varied women's associations, research was affected by three issues. First, the fact that Colombia still faces conflict with ELN, FARC dissidents, renewed paramilitaries, and criminal organisations, maintaining a climate of insecurity and constituting a barrier to accessing all the country's areas.<sup>27</sup> Second, the COVID-19 pandemic, which during 2021 showed an increase in cases and widespread concerns about citizens' biosecurity, forcing most interviews and focus groups to be done virtually or via telephone. This was at times affected by connectivity issues, and the need to provide support to women who had not experienced virtual interviews prior to their engagement with this research. As the research is intended to amplify the voices of different associations, all interviewers proposed various options for locations and times for liaising with participants. Additionally, during April and May 2021, Colombia saw widespread anti-government protests, which resulted in urban and rural violence including police brutality and vandalism. This constituted a particular stumbling block for interviewing due to increased instability and insecurity. As a result, there was a slight decrease in the number of organisations willing to discuss issues, due to security concerns and the sensitivity around interviews and the discussions for data collection.



Woman walking through the fields in Gaitania (Planadas) - Tolima - Credits: © Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

27 According to the International Crisis Group (2020), from December 2016 until April 2021, 906 civil society leaders and 276 demobilised combatants were assassinated in a campaign to sabotage the Havana Agreements. Human Rights Watch (2021) follows on this data stating that the targeted killing of civil society leaders in Colombia responds to a void left by FARC after their demobilisation, one that has led to a territorial dispute by paramilitary groups and drug organisations, making visible both the state absence in many parts of Colombia as well as the vulnerability of civil society associations campaigning for victims' rights.

# 2

## VICTIMS' AND SURVIVORS' MOVEMENTS IN COLOMBIA

## 2. Victims' and survivors' movements in Colombia

Colombia's transitional justice activism emerged amidst the undermining and violent targeting of social movements. Peaceful resistance and advocacy mark the trends of peacebuilding engagement by women's associations. Civil society work, together with the institutionalisation of human rights discourses, remain resistant to impunity, as NGOs have allied with international actors to fund projects supporting victims. Such alliances have brought an opportunity for advancing transitional justice as an amplified inclusive human rights approach seeking to address root causes of conflict, rather than a limited governmental political discourse, often denounced for hiding violations committed by the different actors in the war and evading accountability.

Colombia is exemplary of how bottom-up transitional justice activism (focused on women's visibility, reparations, dealing with the past, and the healing of trauma) combined with top-down promotion of participation, has boosted the impact of victim and civil society participation in peacebuilding.<sup>28</sup> Victim organisations evolved from marginalised and ignored actors to central political players with increasing power and organisational skills, the product of both anti-impunity activism since the years of the JPL under Uribe's government, and from the establishment of formal mechanisms for victim participation. For women's organisations, this has enabled platforms for denouncing atrocities, raising awareness about the need for truth, justice, and reconciliation in Colombia, breaking the silence around sexual violence, racism and discrimination, and insisting on the obligation from conflict actors to devise reparative approaches. These approaches not only encompass economic compensation, but also symbolic and meaningful reparations through memory practices, truth-telling, and community-focused trauma-healing.

The concept of transitional justice has been used strategically by NGOs to advocate for better mechanisms; critically engaging with governmental peacebuilding discourses to insist on real change. Such strategy has become an opportunity to establish a parallel, practitioner-based understanding of truth and justice to amplify victims' voices and contest efforts promoting impunity from all actors involved in conflict. For domestic advocacy groups such as the Movement for Victims of the State (MOVICE), Uribe's idea of transitional justice was unacceptable, deemed as a strategy enabling impunity.

**By arguing that there was 'no peace and no justice' in the JPL Law, MOVICE and other victims' groups insisted that justice required a human rights discourse: while the government's approach permitted widespread impunity, it also amplified debates about transitional justice which led to new localised ways to express demands and enabled a victim-centred view of the concept.**

<sup>28</sup> Maria Paula Saffon-Sanín and Viviana Tacha Gutiérrez, La participación en las medidas de justicia transicional: un estudio comparado (Bogotá : Dejusticia, 2019), <https://www.dejusticia.org/publication/la-participacion-en-las-medidas-de-justicia-transicional/>

Gender-based activism emerged out of women's associations work over the last decades, beginning in the period between 1988 and 1996, when women's organisations explicitly resisted armed violence through advocacy and campaigning.<sup>29</sup> Women's activism, expressed in actions like protests, dialogue, and political engagement among others, demanded a public acknowledgment of how war has particularly affected them. The different human rights violations perpetrated against women were part of strategies, violent repertoires, and social regulation practices by conflict actors in order to impose obedience and fear in many local populations.<sup>30</sup> Besides giving visibility to the violence women suffered through reporting, advocacy, and memorialisation efforts, associations have formed solidarity links between women; building a collective sense of shared struggles, overcoming loneliness, broken social and family relationships, and helplessness into which traumatic events usually plunge them at first. Such efforts, still very much active today, have brought some hope for the future, despite the conflict dynamics where women's organisations receive constant threats from illegal armed actors who deem gender and peace activism a threat to their existence.

To illustrate the way women's associations have brought change amidst conflict, it is important to note some landmark moments in gender-based activism that signal the diversity and evolution of organisations and how these helped shape a feminist local peacebuilding agenda. This can demonstrate the impact gender activism has had in promoting anti-war and conflict resolution initiatives. Besides, solidarity networks built by women have been established surrounding initiatives for breaking the silence around sexual violence, peaceful protesting in favour of women's rights within peacebuilding; all of which describe features of the activist context in which data was collected.

The first collectives emerged from left-wing political currents, trade union, or university movements disconnected from armed actors.<sup>31</sup> Women's anti-war initiatives focused on recognising the voices of women facing war,<sup>32</sup> particularly those of mothers losing their children. *'Mujeres por Colombia,'* one of the first women's networks focused on victim solidarity, was created out of women's anti-war demonstrations in May 1990.<sup>33</sup> The Caguán peace dialogues (1998-2001) also saw another women's anti-war movement emerge. As women were excluded at the start of this dialogue, this propelled a range of initiatives throughout diverse public hearings, insisting on having their voices be recognised as well as the voices of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.<sup>34</sup>

29 Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *Mujeres y Guerra: Víctimas y Resistencias en el Caribe Colombiano* (Bogotá: Taurus, 2011), 311, <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Mujeres-y-Guerra.-V%C3%ADctimas-y-Resistentes-en-el-Caribe-Colombiano.pdf>

30 Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *Mujeres y Guerra*, 307.

31 Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *Mujeres y Guerra*, 317.

32 UNIFEM Colombia, s.f. *Las mujeres colombianas en busca de la paz. Una aproximación a sus iniciativas y propuestas.* (Bogotá: Programa de Paz y Seguridad en América Latina and UNIFEM Colombia, 2004). 31, <https://repositorio.unal.edu.co/handle/unal/51055>.

33 Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *Mujeres y Guerra*, 314.

34 UNIFEM Colombia, s.f. *Las mujeres colombianas en busca de la paz*, 31.



Bogotá, ACTE women with their quilts in front of the Colombian Congress - Credits: © Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

Equally iconic has been the emergence of *'Ruta Pacífica de Mujeres'* a feminist anti-war movement that has been insisting on the war's effect on women since 1996; however, it gained public acknowledgement around 2006 in publications by the Centre for Victims of Torture.<sup>35</sup> This network, made up of 315 women's organisations in eight regions, advocated for a negotiated solution to the conflict from a feminist, antimilitarist, pacifist, and political proposal based on non-violence principles.<sup>36</sup> This was the first movement bringing together thousands of women from remote regions of the country, to reject war.<sup>37</sup>

Other landmark initiatives include 'peace facilitators,' which are associations providing local conflict resolution based on women's war experiences.<sup>38</sup> Also important is the Madres de La Candelaria (Mothers of la Candelaria) in Medellín, an influential movement for the creation of public policies related to enforced disappearance, making victims more visible. This group uses mass media to disseminate, recognise and legitimise women's activism. All of these examples illustrate how women's activism has created new areas for social, political and cultural participation through collective actions visible through media.<sup>39</sup>

35 María Eugenia Melo Ibarra, "Mujeres, verdad, justicia y reparación en Colombia," *Universitas Humanística*, no.72 (2011): 247-273, <http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/unih/n72/n72a11.pdf>

36 Ibarra, "Mujeres, verdad, justicia y reparación en Colombia," 70.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Mónica Tatiana Rodríguez Vargas, *Iniciativas De Mujeres Gestoras De Paz En Colombia* (Bogotá: Trabajo de grado. 2010), <https://repository.urosario.edu.co/handle/10336/2189>

39 Alba Shirley Tamayo Arango, "Movimientos sociales de mujeres en el conflicto armado colombiano: política participativa y periodismo. Reflexiones en torno al caso de las Madres de la Candelaria," *Comunicación y medios*, no. 28 (2013): 81.

This context shows a divergence inherent to data analysis: on one side gender-activism makes the gains from peacebuilding visible by promoting a human rights-focused approach that amplifies the possibilities of transitional justice mechanisms to address social, political, and economic needs stemming from bottom-up perspectives. On the other hand, barriers to activism from different repertoires of violence limit the potential of organisations to grow and spread their work throughout the country, creating difficulties for organisations in the forms of violent threats, targeted elimination, and a constant survival mode stemming from financial difficulties and a lack of social and political recognition. It is clear that to ensure future sustained peacebuilding efforts, such security and financial issues need to be addressed urgently through various means. The latter include guaranteeing the physical protection of organisations and their members, amplifying their human rights work at the local, regional and national levels, allowing more connections with formal transitional justice mechanisms and international actors, as well as including their observations, demands and critique in public policy discussions, public opinion, media reports, and even academic engagement.

# 3

**MAIN TRENDS  
EMERGING  
FROM  
RESEARCH**

### 3. Main trends emerging from research

This section presents the analysis and findings of data collected via focus groups and semi-structured interviews with a range of gender-based organisations working in informal transitional justice activism. It illustrates the meaning of activism for NGO members and the role this has had on the way they view the present and future of their work in Colombia. The section provides references and explanations from activists themselves, discussing issues like the identified goals and obstacles of their work, their assessment of change and understanding of gender, examples of activities and how these foster a sense of political agency, and the way their work is perceived as bringing justice and a sense of redress.

#### Gender justice and embedded gendered perspectives

The origins of injustice and social inequality as roots of armed conflict are found in the patriarchal structures of Colombian society, explaining why women insist more on the termination of armed conflict and worry about what war has left behind. In discussing gender, organisations recognise the chauvinistic character of society as a basis; a foundational problem requiring change and leading to actions that aim to ‘engender’ activism. Sindy Franco, regional representative of the NGO Embrace me with Hope (ACTE) that works with indigenous communities in Caldas, explains: “There is a lot of male chauvinism, the type where we’re told: ‘women can’t speak, women are not capable, and have no value.’”<sup>40</sup> The gendered approaches of the interviewed organisations recognise violent practices against women and the toll of war that forces them to become heads of households, denouncing ongoing practices of sexual violence, discrimination, and gender inequality within and outside the frame of violent conflict. Yolanda Perea, Afro-Colombian leader based in Antioquia and Director of ACTE, explains how this approach cuts across the country: “From a gender perspective, we work hard to support women, sending a message that we women, farmers, rural women, black women, indigenous women, many of us see more violence in our territories than anywhere else. We are always seen as the weaker sex, but we are not weak.”<sup>41</sup>

Interviewees developed a gender perspective arising from how women directly experienced episodes of discrimination, inequality, violence, or abuse; opening up the spectrum for different forms of activism. Rosamira Campo, an indigenous leader, says: “Gender is women’s right to fight. It is also a set of people with common characteristics:

<sup>40</sup> Sindy Franco, virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego, April 28, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Yolanda Perea, virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego, May 1, 2021.

the problems of women, the problems we have as victims, the discrimination we deal with, and people mocking indigenous women.”<sup>42</sup> Others see gender as demanding economic opportunities for women in different spaces: “Our objective is for women to have better life quality and for their work to get into more technical work, not just to be handcrafts because those are a lot of work but not much profit. We want to strengthen women-led rural projects,” says Afro-Colombian activist Porfiria Chaverra.<sup>43</sup>

Gender and different visions of gender justice define the work and motivation of organisations in different ways. For example, ACTE uses workshops and trainings to denounce and prevent violence against women, particularly sexual violence, as explained by María Choles, an Afro-Colombian leader and member of ACTE in Santa Marta: “[Through workshops] we have talked about different forms of gender violence: physical, sexual, economic, psychological, and against property, which many did not know, and through us realised they too were victims.”<sup>44</sup> Some organisations ‘genderise’ reparations to extend the reach of mechanisms to issues beyond armed conflict. In this regard, Yolanda Perea comments:

*“Colombia has a historic debt [toward women] and must do a symbolic reparation to victims of sexual violence, not only within the framework of armed conflict, but also within domestic violence which is where violence is most common against the bodies of girls, boys and women.”*<sup>45</sup>

Others insist on economic empowerment and equality: “To earn people’s respect and for men in the community to see us as equals. If they are the household breadwinners, well, we can bring home the same bread out of our efforts,” says Olimpa Moreno, an Afro-Colombian leader.<sup>46</sup>

What is most vital in this genderisation is the recognition that women’s social movements demand a redefinition of political power and a new form of understanding politics, one that includes reshaping political institutions.<sup>47</sup> This is why many associations connect their gender vision with the work of the state. An anonymous interviewee working on Afro-Colombian rights commented: “Working on gender has meant supporting the Victims Unit in regard to displaced women, those who have just arrived in the city. Someone sends them to me and based on what I have learned I tell them to go to the Victims Unit... It is important to have links to the institutions in this form of social work.”<sup>48</sup> Those focusing on the intersectionality between gender and other identities often discriminated against, argue that it is important to create platforms for indigenous women to be able to speak and be heard, as commented by indigenous leader Sindy

42 Rosamira Campo, interview with Viviana Espitia, Bogotá, Colombia, April 27, 2021.

43 Porfiria Chaverra, virtual focus group, May 1, 2021.

44 María Choles, virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego, April 27, 2021.

45 Perea, virtual interview.

46 Olimpa Moreno, virtual interview with Laura Colmenares and María González, May 1, 2021.

47 Ibarra, “Mujeres, verdad, justicia y reparación en Colombia,” 52.

48 Anonymous interviewee, virtual focus group, April 27, 2021.

Franco: “I have been working on the victims’ roundtables with an ethnic and gender perspective, where we try to raise women’s voices since those in the territory tend to be very submissive and prone to silence out of fear of being rejected.”<sup>49</sup>

A lesson learned after years of working on gender is how inclusion brings about change at different levels (local, national, institutional, private and public). Gender is not solely about the change of women’s conditions but also in defending rights of excluded communities, particularly male victims of sexual violence and the LGBT community, as expressed by Carmen Guáquez from ACTE who works with victims of sexual violence: “A gender approach may sound like it is work geared only toward women, but what we have achieved does not only represent women but boys, girls, youth, and adults [...] We also include men, although they are a bit more reserved; but, thanks to this support we have reached abused men. We are bringing men to our work as they also have suffered from sexual violence.”<sup>50</sup> Such approaches have shaped new leaderships, as María Choles narrates: “In our documenting violation cases, we ask support from the Ombudsman’s Office so that women could go and denounce cases, and we often encounter men who come to us, wanting to talk to us, broken in tears. Of course, we support these men. In our organisation we have one leader, whom we respect a lot, who has taken the role in leading the fight against this victimising act.”<sup>51</sup> Such reflections become a critical warning to activist sectors about how peacebuilding is being done, as commented by Rosi Albani Pérez, a regional community leader and member of ACTE:

*“Many times, the participation of other people [non-women] is denied, men, and members of the LGBT community just because the event is geared toward women [...] It is not just about women, it is also men, the LGBT community, girls and teenagers [...] We realised that gender focuses so much on women, leaving anything else behind.”<sup>52</sup>*

49 Franco, virtual interview.

50 Carmen Guáquez, virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego, May 11, 2021.

51 Choles, virtual interview.

52 Rosi Albani Pérez, virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego, May 4, 2021.



Paola, LGBT activist from RMVP - Credits: © Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

## Goals and driving motivations in informal activism

The recognition of the historic discrimination and diverse impact of war on women and girls, coupled with women's creative contributions to peace, have enabled women's presence and leadership in Colombian peace initiatives.<sup>53</sup> This can help explain some of the goals with which women associations guide their work: breaking the silence surrounding violence against women; particularly, sexual violence, the pursuit of reparations, making women's harm and resilience visible within politics and society, promoting trauma-healing, and re-dignification of women within communities. It is common to find here calls for civil society unity surrounding these aims.

Atrocities committed against women have meant dealing with complex issues like sexual violence and harassment, the breaking of family and social structures, as well as facing

<sup>53</sup> Bouvier, Virginia M., *Gender and the role of women in Colombia's peace process* (New York: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), 2016), 1-44, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/2/gender-and-the-role-of-women-in-colombias-peace-process>.

phenomena like forced displacement or the enforced disappearance of a loved one. Therefore, one of the key needs leading to activism has been facing and denouncing such experiences. This was made evident by various interviewees who discussed how their activism started through breaking the silence initiatives and fighting stigma derived from rights violations. “You start this fight because of one’s condition [as victim]. One was quiet for so many years because of the fear and shame arising from sexual violence,” mentioned Angela Escobar, Director of the Women’s Network for Victims and Professionals (RMVP) - a network of feminist activists<sup>54</sup> As security risks remain in many territories, activism remains particularly challenging. Omar Aguilar, a male leader of RMVP, explained this to us: “As a victim of forced displacement and sexual violence, I spent years without speaking about what happened to me, because I live in a very conflictive region. I kept my secret out of fear of the consequences this might have on me or my family.”<sup>55</sup>

Activist motivations noted by interviewees and our literature review include personal and collective empowerment via the sharing of experiences, unity derived from associating, fighting against impunity, and achieving social and economic justice. Motivations are tied strongly to visibility, finding spaces for telling uncomfortable truths, and fighting against social discrimination, racism, and poverty; all identified obstacles to the promotion of victims’ rights. The link between the needs created out of violent experiences and the reasons for engaging in activism is made clear in the reasons interviewees gave to starting their work. Solidarity through association is a recurring message, as stated by Carmen Guáquez: “With ‘*Arrópame con tu Esperanza*’ (Embrace me with Hope), activism begins with women coming together out of the need to encounter one another.”<sup>56</sup> She emphasises how many spaces start as encounters that permit trauma-healing to occur, “We were looking to find a space to be listened to, spaces where we could be active, with the disposition and demand to be heard.”<sup>57</sup> This was analysed by ‘*Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres*’ stating how Colombian women have been particularly motivated toward solidarity in different ways:

- Identifying with other women and seeing how they have gone through similar violence mitigates traumatic pain;
- Helping others gives meaning to one’s own existence;
- Preventing other women from living a similar fate;
- Bringing a sense of justice, recognition, and promotion of women’s rights; and
- Building women’s self-esteem, recognising their worth.<sup>58</sup>

54 Angela Escobar, interview with Viviana Espitia, Bogotá, Colombia, April 27, 2021.

55 Omar Aguilar, interview with Viviana Espitia, Bogotá, Colombia, April 27, 2021.

56 Guaquez, interview virtual.

57 *Ibid.*

58 Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, *La Verdad de las Mujeres Víctimas del Conflicto Armado en Colombia*, (Colombia: G2 Editores, 2013), 1-123, <https://www.rutapacifica.org.co/descargue-los-libros/208-la-verdad-de-las-mujeres-victimas-del-conflicto-armado-en-colombia>.

Fighting impunity is another common aim tied to violent experiences, a recognition within civil society of the need to pressure institutions in dealing with atrocities against women, “I am working because I do not want anything of what happened here to remain in impunity, and that these children of violence learn about what happened in this territory,”<sup>59</sup> an anonymous interviewee from ACTE told us. The overwhelming number of cases stemming from decades of violence, of multiple crimes committed and difficulties in reaching so many victims evolves into a driving concern with ending impunity, explained Sandra Guerrero, a social leader working with ACTE in based in Medellín in Antioquia: “We collected around 200 [sexual violence] cases and presented them to the JEP, yet when we look at the figures from the Victims Unit, they reach thousands of victims. This is a great challenge: how do we get to those who are missing in our numbers and that have not been able to speak out?”<sup>60</sup> This has brought expectations to increase the number of documented cases to point to and denounce the institutional weaknesses in appropriately dealing with sexual violence. Connected to this, Sandra Guerrero notes,

*“We presented the cases before the JEP, looking to seeing a macro-case of sexual violence open before this court. Sexual violence is approached as an incidental topic and not as a main topic. This is where we see those institutions and their mechanisms try to manipulate the reality behind sexual violence.”<sup>61</sup>*

Another evident link is made between facing various forms of trauma and the insistence on achieving healing and empowerment for victims of different forms of violence. For Urrutia-Hurtado, peacebuilding requires connection with personal healing conditions that permit the building of relations between people, which includes education and personal development processes that create settings of peace and reconciliation.<sup>62</sup> This is evident in descriptions of “empowerment” as a common concept in activist work. It is equated to healing, achieving economic profit, social welfare, and productivity to participants of different initiatives, pursuing sustainable economic projects, and supporting the health and education of victims: “We started demanding these rights through state petition instruments [...] our aim is to get women surgeries, [because] after rape many were left physically destroyed and were ashamed to go to a doctor,” mentioned María Choles”.<sup>63</sup>

Empowering youth is highly relevant, derived from concerns about how conflict puts barriers to youth opportunities and employment, and a priority for some interviewees. “We motivate people to study, youngsters and women. There are women doing vocational studies, others acquiring law and accountancy degrees,” states Sandra

59 Anonymous interviewee, virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego, April 28, 2021.

60 Sandra Guerrero, virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego, April 27, 2021.

61 *Ibid.*

62 Diana María Urrutia-Hurtado, “Ruta pacífica de las mujeres,” Ruta pacífica de las mujeres, 2017. [www.rutapacifica.org.co/](http://www.rutapacifica.org.co/)

63 Choles, virtual interview.

Guerrero.<sup>64</sup> Economic sustainability, as empowerment, permits project viability and presents a solution to violence and corruption. Sandra Castañeda, an ACTE activist, outlined the connections between empowerment, autonomy, and standing up as political actors:

*“Expectations are not only about social but economic empowerment as well: to have autonomy, to be able to do our work the way we want. We want the freedom to meet one another, implement projects and not be constrained by corruption or people who see us as an obstacle to their political plans.”<sup>65</sup>*

This turns into a key need for organisations: “We would like to have a real ongoing budget for us to have more social impact across the territories.”<sup>66</sup>

The driving motivation for many organisations was stated as the clear need for a more integral approach to reparations in the country. This is underpinned by a dissatisfaction with delays in the official compensation for those most affected by war and the lack of political commitment to the Havana Agreements. Carmen Guáquez explains: “Laws do not work, we wait to be repaired in a dignified way, to be listened to by those who harmed us, face them and ask them why me, why our colleagues, sisters, brothers.”<sup>67</sup> Reparations are not just financial compensation but are articulated as a more diverse and integral need: “[we seek] Women to be repaired, emotionally, legally, and also by encountering perpetrators face to face. We handed over various reports on sexual violence to Colombia’s Truth Commission (CEV) and the JEP; to achieve genuine repair,”<sup>68</sup> says Carmen Guáquez.

Integral approaches to reparations connect different rights and victim assistance modalities. Maritza Mena, an Afro-Colombian leader, summarised it in the following way: “We believe in an integral reparation process for black women, one that has to do with education, housing, and health, because it is all very precarious for us.”<sup>69</sup> All this, she noted, brings a multidimensional character to informal transitional justice:

*“Via activism we have learned that reparations are also about our physical and emotional health, our education, and our opportunities within the economy.”<sup>70</sup>*

A common message is that financial compensation is incomplete, requiring a healing-based understanding of reparations. For example, Yolanda Perea argues: “For us, before economic compensation, what we need is emotional reparation. That is what affected our contexts the most. It even separated us from our families.”<sup>71</sup>

64 Guerrero, virtual interview.

65 Sandra Castañeda, virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego, April 26, 2021.

66 *Ibid.*

67 Guaquez, virtual interview.

68 *Ibid.*

69 Maritza Mena, virtual focus group, April 25, 2021.

70 *Ibid.*

71 Perea, virtual interview.

Sexual violence requires visibility to make it a structural concern in peacebuilding, rather than an incidental one. This is an important motivating factor for those involved from a number of perspectives. Sandra Castañeda from ACTE, for example, explained the need for the establishment of a range of actions to make society understand the burden women endured during conflict: “That all atrocities made against the bodies of women, our bodies, are seen and known around Colombia and the world as a reality [...] For those of us who are still alive, and for those who were not able to survive, such atrocious and inhumane acts were committed within the context of conflict.”<sup>72</sup> Groups’ visibility efforts are specifically geared toward formal transitional institutions, in order to open spaces for victims and get the state closer to their realities. Anderson, a male representative of the Women’s Network for Victims and Professionals explains why this connection is so critical: “The JEP is an important support source: victims find visibility, and an understanding that through unity big things can be achieved [...] The JEP gives us the confidence to talk, dialogue, break the silence and to see that we can make it, we can tell the truth.”<sup>73</sup> Sandra Castañeda argues: “A key achievement has been to be recognised in the [state] institutions as victims of sexual violence, and to be empowered day after day through handing over cases and documentation of sexual violence to the JEP; and the delivery of reports to the CEV for cases of sexual violence within the context of conflict.”<sup>74</sup> Together, these groups and the individuals they support have created significant change in the caseload and led to the visibility of crimes of sexual violence in the JEP and the CEV.

As can be seen in this section, the needs for supporting trauma healing, advocacy for reparations, engagement with breaking the silence activities, as well as dealing with the aftermath of atrocities and sexual violence are tightly linked to the organisational goals of women’s associations in Colombia. The work of these organisations is organic to the experiences and needs of their members; local needs that have been expressed in the different projects and activities developed by interviewees. Yet, these needs remain present in society and require urgent institutional action in the form of effective and integral reparations; which already exist on paper, but are not perceived as being effectively implemented. Such actions present an effective response to the various cases reported before different authorities within and outside transitional justice institutions and amplify the possibilities of public political participation for the different organisations in the country.

72 Castañeda, virtual interview.

73 Anderson, interview with Viviana Espitia, Bogotá, Colombia, April 27, 2021.

74 Castañeda, virtual interview.



Women's Community Council in Bojayá (Chocó). - Credits: © Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

## Challenges and obstacles to victim and survivor organising

After decades of engagement with communities and institution-based actors, gendered activism has encountered opportunities and barriers. On one hand, the range of diverse activities for a gender-focused justice opened the space for a multidimensional peacebuilding approach at an informal level, connecting reparations, trauma-healing, community-building, as well as a democratic building of civil society. Yet, socio-political obstacles like institutional indifference or the lack of commitment toward activists' demands and processes, or the racist and discriminatory environment in which activists survive, create barriers often interpreted as a never-ending drain on activist efforts. Equally, institutional actors perceive activists as a drain on their own time. Gloria Reyna, a leader representing ACTE in Valle del Cauca states: "There is a complete lack of acknowledgment on behalf of institutions affecting us [...] a member of the City Council came and asked me, 'how long will you behave like victims for?' This makes us feel like a burden. As victims, we have gotten used to having to ask for things, which makes politicians say things like 'here comes that victim to bother us again, these people are really annoying.'"<sup>75</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Gloria Reyna, virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego, April 30, 2021.

Activism faces endemic barriers to achieving its goals. This includes frustration derived from the lack of institutional coordination and understanding of victims' situations, confusing bureaucratic practices that impede access to mechanisms to channel demands, and discriminatory attitudes from civil servants. An anonymous interviewee from the Association for the Development of Black Women (ASODEMUN) explains: "State agencies [are] working without the proper knowledge, capacities, or empathy needed to bring us the attention the way it should be."<sup>76</sup> This becomes even more troubling when presenting sexual violence cases before Colombian authorities, as reported by Angela Escobar,<sup>77</sup> who explained how cases are ignored:

*"We went to various attorneys' offices to see what happens with sexual violence reporting. To my surprise, they stated that victims didn't want to report cases. Therefore, we decided to make collective actions around reporting, discovering that 1,500 cases ended in impunity within ordinary justice [processes]. Attorneys took statements of women's testimonies, but a year after there was no process; [instead] it was dismissed, as women were not given evidence of their testimonies."*

For indigenous and Afro-Colombian activists, historical and embedded racism and discrimination make access to rights and repair more complicated. Therefore, the solution must be group-specific: "Afro-descendant women have loads of difficulties to the enjoyment of rights [...] we have been excluded historically, and conflict enhances this. This is why when there is talk about integral reparations; for us this needs a differentiated focus, but this remains only words and not real actions," commented Maritza Mena.<sup>78</sup>

Indigenous women face an additional layer of challenges; cultural and linguistic barriers are evident when reporting violence within their territories and the displacement they endured: "We are not able to report to the attorneys' offices what happened to us as we do not speak Spanish. It has been a year since we talked to attorneys regarding mining megaprojects and their violence against us, [and] we are still waiting for an answer," stated Rosamira Campo, an indigenous leader.<sup>79</sup> For indigenous and Afro-Colombian activists, discrimination also drives their need to deal with the state, as expressed by Afro-Colombian Leader and Activist Yalile Quiñones: "We work so that Afro-Colombian women victims of conflict, poverty, and racism can have real empowerment. With so many laws and mechanisms [in place], we still have not seen empowerment. This organisation seeks [to make] everything said in favour of women a reality."<sup>80</sup>

All of these challenges regarding racism, exclusion, and discrimination also point towards a range of social tensions structuring Colombian society. The urban and rural

76 Anonymous interviewee, virtual focus group, April 27, 2021.

77 Escobar, interview.

78 Mena, virtual focus group.

79 Rosamira, interview.

80 Yalile Quiñones, virtual focus group, April 25, 2021.



Differences in language and cultural traditions are often barriers for indigenous people when seeking justice - Credits: © Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

differences between the cultures of indigenous and Afro-Colombian activists and the more westernised culture in the urban centres they arrive to, as well as marked class dynamics, affects the way victims survive and work to promote informal forms of justice. Racism and discrimination are evident in the way activists are received in the cities, and how they are treated by the citizens and authorities: rejection, indifference, and dismissal are some of the practices they have to face not only in their efforts to promote their advocacy and activism, but also in their attempts to survive financially and socially amidst the new realities they face when they move to places like Bogotá or Medellín.

## Reflections on change and impact of informal practices

Impact is locally perceived and cultivated in many forms. It can be seen as the ability to have a sustained presence in different areas and be trusted within communities; effective changes in attitudes and relations between men and women; and increased requests from local communities for different NGO activities. Certain actions, however, stand out. Sustained territorial presence and confidence-building measures have given

organisations legitimacy with and within communities, as expressed by activist Gloria Reyna: “We try for the process to be continuous: I got into this, and I will keep on doing it. I have gone to the town of Florida four times, and constantly ask people for what they need, seeing what they have been able to do [...] I keep on going there.”<sup>81</sup> This level of trust puts organisations in the driving seat when compared to institutional work, something Rosi Albani Pérez highlights: “We have earned people’s trust because they know us now. We have worked alongside them. We created a space with 30 victims of sexual violence and told our stories, motivating others to speak. We managed to get this supported by local health authorities, that subscribed to agreements with us that permitted our processes to operate locally.”<sup>82</sup>

For those coordinating events on sexual violence, impact is perceived in the healing of trauma, and the changes in people’s relations amongst each another, and at the larger level, in establishing relationship-building processes in many territories. Promoting sexual education, oriented toward raising awareness about trauma from sexual violence, has allowed changes in communities where women had become hostile toward men. María Choles describes this: “We repaired our bodies and then those of other women. One project participant told me, ‘You changed our lives, I used to carry a knife, ready to strike on any man who would come for me, but you made us understand that we cannot turn into aggressive women, those who needed to kill a man to move forward.’”<sup>83</sup> Activists are aware of the need to expand these efforts to many territories in the country, in order to establish a powerful voice for women, as María Choles confirms: “We tell women about their right to their sexuality. This is a myth that people do not often want to talk about [...] even men tell us how things have changed. Women are able to speak up, against their husbands.”<sup>84</sup> What these quotes tell us is that the impact of informal transitional justice activities has gained a political dimension and surpassed the local level to institutional and more political settings.

A particular trauma-healing practice akin to empowerment, is the painting and knitting of memory quilts where women talk safely about deep traumas. This is a way for victims to listen and relate to others; creating a powerful memory tool that tells stories often untold in formal spaces. In some cases, what is perceived as a locally oriented project becomes an activity of high political impact. For Carmen Guáquez: “Knitting memory quilts has been effective because people are not open and are afraid to speak. Quilts allow trauma to come forward and healing to occur. That piece of cloth narrates that the knitter is not only a victim, but a brave person who has overcome such traumatic experience.”<sup>85</sup> This activity is not only geared toward local impact or kept within the boundaries of immediate communities, but extends to denouncing violence in more formal spaces: “[Knitting]

81 Reyna, virtual interview.

82 Pérez, virtual interview.

83 Choles, virtual interview.

84 *Ibid.*

85 Guáquez, virtual interview.

seemed crazy at first, but with time we think it became a strong movement, with national influence, which opened up doors to arrive to the JEP. This took our voices to the national level,” says Carmen Guáquez. **Memory quilt projects became platforms for women’s political pursuit of justice, contributing to giving women’s agency:** “We have been at plenums where people come and write their messages in support of our work. Then in victims’ roundtables we have found women victims of different crimes, getting involved in these processes, painting a quilt and to supporting this work further,” states Maria Choles.”<sup>86</sup> **Thus, in this case, the relationship between trauma-healing and talking about an experience of sexual violence in one’s own terms is closely intertwined.**

Change varies from local to national settings depending on the location, type of activism, and the engagement of different organisations. The ability to maintain projects and activities within local communities appears as an undoubtable effort for many activists, keeping tight relations with communities, finding ways to monitor the human rights situation in different territories, and effectively changing relations between individuals and communities on the ground. Regarding gender, there are wide interpretations of the term. They vary from focusing on women’s needs to address sexual violence, find forms of socioeconomic empowerment, and gain visibility to the conditions faced by women amidst violence within and outside conflict, all the way to extending the agenda to incorporate men as subjects of gender actions as well as the LGBT community in recognition and extension of rights.



Handicrafts made by indigenous women activists - Credits: © Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

86 Choles, virtual interview.

## Participation over time and political risk

The experience of activists has resulted in various lessons on how civil society has operated in Colombia over such a long period, and with so many embedded risks. Activists we interviewed reflected particularly on the importance of consistency in activism and political participation, the value of expanding the work throughout different territories in the country, and connecting with actors at different levels (local, national, and international). By maintaining constant territorial presence and participating in different informal and formal settings, organisations are able to evolve, and people are able to connect to one another, as noted by María Choles: “Before, we were all working separately. One in Guajira, someone else in Cesar, Magdalena in Atlántico [...] But with time, there was a setting where we could all meet up, and Yolanda, our coordinator had the idea of gathering, of seeing one another and working together.”<sup>87</sup> For ACTE, building a network of leaders and activists around the country enhanced an organisational ability not only to provide support to each other, but also to identify and build strategies and actions with a greater impact.

Developments out of the Havana Agreements allowed new spaces and tools for promoting activist work. “The peace agreement has given us tools that we can put in practice, such as the different scenarios of participation, the Development Programmes with a Territorial Focus (PDET). In the regions with PDETs we have tried to have influence through our work, connecting and supporting other organisations seeking to politically participate in such spaces,” says María Choles from ACTE.<sup>88</sup> Drawing from their experience in dealing with previous official transitional justice mechanisms and legislation, women’s organisations have adapted, re-organised and found new strategies to engage with institutional transitional justice dynamics. Hence, activists, leaders, and organisations who had worked under the framework of the Peace and Justice Law that dealt with the demobilisation of paramilitaries in the 2000s, engaged actively in the negotiations that led to the 2016 Havana Agreements to demand their rights. Meanwhile, they have critically engaged in the implementation phase of the accord and its transitional justice institutions.

This evolution over time is visible in organisations’ interest in connecting with national and international actors, which many had not previously considered. Paola, a transgender rights representative and member of RMVP, comments on how such connections “allowed more participation and interest in working for peace within different territories, with the thematic roundtables initiated in Havana. The support we got from the United Nations, and the ability to move between different territories, and address different issues was also helpful.”<sup>89</sup> Such international support has facilitated networking within

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Paola Caicedo, interview with Viviana Espitia, Bogotá, Colombia, April 27, 2021.

the country, which itself has contributed to supplying certain needs often denied from government agencies: “[Alliances] have given us good opportunities to participate and have an impact in many issues, and support in getting opportunities for work. During the pandemic, there was a moment when we were left with nothing as most of us were street vendors or worked in schools, and it is through these alliances that we acquired money for food, or housing, says Derlly Chará, a community leader and member of the Unión de Costureros (Tailors Association).<sup>90</sup> However, networking efforts are not only there to meet individual and organisational urgent needs, but also to create bigger strategies to boost impact: “I have had the chance to participate in international settings, at the United Nations, with Dr Denis Mukwege, on transitional justice. Then we go to the territory and deal with the topic of transitional justice [...] All of this helps us unite further, from Apartadó, Caldas, Cartagena, it gives us the ability with other organisations to participate, all of us, in transitional justice,”<sup>91</sup> states Angela Escobar.

What is visible through time is the ability of different organisations to become independent from state institutions and autonomous in the way they organise activities. Some of the interviewees, for instance, had the chance to meet others and later organise collectively through their participation in official mechanisms, like the regional and local roundtables for victims. Nevertheless, they make it clear that their work goes beyond their engagement with institutional transitional justice arrangements, and that they want to work independently. An anonymous Afro-Colombian interviewee explained how this has evolved:

*“For me this has changed in a positive way. I arrived to Bogotá 13 years ago, and I initiated a process at the individual and collective levels, transforming my life regardless of the aid provided by the state [...] I know we have rights, and that there are certain government obligations, but we persevere further, as the state always wants to see us as vulnerable. I am always seeking other ways of support; otherwise, we will always be subdued by institutions.”<sup>92</sup>*

Beyond these concerns over institutions and political practices, organisations recognise that perseverance and solidarity are key to growing as a civil society in Colombia, something Joel, a local leader from RMVP, deeply believes in:

*“We have gained the capacity for self-determination and to have our own authority, through activism and citizenship. All of these efforts have been practical exercises in understanding the message that Colombia is not an easy place to fight for human rights. We are a country influenced by the right-wing ideals, a very conservative country with restrictive practices inherited from colonisation.”<sup>93</sup>*

90 Derlly Chará, virtual interview with Laura Colmenares, May 11, 2021.

91 Escobar, virtual interview.

92 Anonymous Afro-Colombian interviewee, virtual focus group, April 27, 2021.

93 Joel, interview with Viviana Espitia, Bogotá, Colombia, April 27, 2021

As Joel noted above, despite lessons learned and the growth that associations perceived in their work, the fact that Colombia is still undergoing conflict harms the prospects for a sustainable and peaceful transition, creating multiple risks for many activists. Such reality is expressed with huge concern, not only in urban centres where organisations operate, but more worryingly in rural territories where projects are implemented. **A current risk is the constant threats to life and property coming from paramilitaries, dissident factions of demobilised actors, and security forces.** Derlly Chará explains how this affected their day-to-day life and organising: “We have to take care of ourselves a lot. It is exhausting. There are days when you don’t sleep. All you can think about is when a grenade might blow-up [...] this is why we decide to keep a low profile.”<sup>94</sup> Organisations constantly monitor risks arising from violence in many territories and modify their modes of work accordingly. Gladys Reyna, a member of a feminist association, stressfully comments:

*“The security issue is a huge risk. We have red zones where it is very difficult to even talk about some of our issues. We end up having to move women from one place to the other or to hold gatherings in the privacy of their homes.”<sup>95</sup>*

She explains that working in different territories becomes tricky, navigating between different political factions that operate violently. “I know of two colleagues who do not report actions against them, because their area is full of Uribe followers, the same people that brought paramilitaries to the area and this is very complicated. One worries about families in the territories,” she adds.<sup>96</sup>

The consequence of this instability and the renewed forms of violence against civil society, complicates the demand for rights, justice, and equality from interviewed associations due to the re-victimisation they constantly face. Yolanda Perea explains both how this affects their day-to-day life, and the gendered element: “There are red zone areas, with threats to various leaders. Some of us have bodyguards but this turns into another problem because most bodyguards are men, and men do not like to be bossed around by women.”<sup>97</sup> **The return of perpetrators to areas where they previously committed crimes is a huge concern.** María Choles explains: “We had to get two colleagues out of the territory, a new form of urban displacement. It was the same man who previously raped them who returned after paying his short sentence and came back to the region.”<sup>98</sup> Despite the fact that the ongoing violent conflict is posing a serious threat to the organisations and their members by constraining the publicity and scope of their work; organisations are still showing a great capacity to adapt to severely adverse conditions.

94 Chará, virtual interview.

95 Gladys Reyna, interview with Viviana Espitia, Bogotá, Colombia, April 27, 2021.

96 *Ibid.*

97 Perea, virtual interview.

98 Choles, virtual interview.

Re-victimisation not only occurs from active armed groups or former perpetrators, but also from state institutions, which, in the eyes of activists, lack sensitivity, interest, or the will toward the needs of victims and their associations. What in a previous section was described as a barrier to activism, in more explicit cases is interpreted as blatant violence and re-victimisation. Local leader Gladys Reyna says: “We’ve been threatened. We were ripped off by a housing project in Bogotá and reported this to the authorities, but it is hard to get them to listen to us; particularly at the Attorney’s office [...] it is horrible to see us victimised over and over again, in the territories with weapons and here as victims. State agencies let this happen to us.”<sup>99</sup> Such situations add to the existing concerns about the institutional approach to transitional justice and victim support, distancing organisations from state agencies altogether, explains Angela Escobar.<sup>100</sup> “A lot of this causes problems when you confront the institutions and tell them how they are doing things wrong. As we live in a society that has stigmatised us so much, how can we still hear civil servants asking questions like did you really get raped? Are you really telling me the truth?” she adds.<sup>101</sup> Such revictimisation has a twofold effect. First, it confirms people’s fears of the state, while strengthening their belief in the importance of the political and activist work of their associations. Olimpa Moreno comments: “We, in the rural areas, feel abandoned by the state, more so if we are women. In the political sphere it isn’t much that we have achieved as black women. This is why we see our organisation as a bridge to try and get seen by the state. But it’s like we did not exist, especially when it comes to the rural communities.”<sup>102</sup>

Assessing the change created by activists and the risks portray a polarising picture of the effect, legitimacy, and impact of informal activism. The decades-long rights-based activism in Colombia shows how perseverance paved the way for trust and engagement within local communities, shifting between short, medium, and long-term activism goals. Being able to move around different territories, connect with more participants, and ensure visibility to more and more victims is evidence of the evolution of projects and organisations. Their ability to network and connect nationally, regionally, and internationally has created spaces for learning, expansion, and acquisition of new projects and sources of income. **Yet, as the country is still undergoing violent conflict, this restricts their ability to reach new participants or maintain the relations they have fostered for so long.**

99 Gladys Reyna, interview.

100 Escobar, interview.

101 *Ibid.*

102 Moreno, virtual focus group.

## Activism in the face of top-down processes and ‘transitional justice professionals’

This research unveiled common points and divergences in the relationship that organisations composed of women victims and survivors have with transitional and ordinary justice institutions, international organisations, and civil society. This requires analysing the experience of organisations with other institutions: main difficulties, lessons learned, and recommendations to help strengthen women’s collective action as well as the social impact on issues of justice, truth, reparation, and non-repetition for highly vulnerable victims and people in Colombia.

As victims in Colombia experience frustrations, fears, violations, and historical negligence from institutions, transitional justice is perceived as a distant ecosystem, directed by the state and in which victims must try to consolidate strategic alliances to participate in it. When asked about the relationship between formal transitional justice institutions and victims’ organisations, María Choles emphasises that despite the work their organisation has done in terms of documenting cases and submitting reports through institutional transitional justice channels, “The state will always have some kind of resistance toward the people [...] although we have not felt any resistance coming from the JEP or the CEV so far.”<sup>103</sup> With few exceptions, participants feel that institutional transitional justice mechanisms impose barriers when engaging with victims, survivors, and activists.

The creation of the Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition (SIJVRNR) in 2017 provided an opportunity to connect formal and informal transitional justice, through institutions like the CEV and the JEP. However, for the organisations interviewed, transitional justice is still a top-down process. A main issue is the lack of information that organisations (and the Colombian population) have regarding transitional justice. This term was misunderstood and even unknown by some participants. Angela Escobar stresses: “Transitional justice is new in this country. Here, we did not know about transitional justice and what is it: justice, truth, reparation and non-repetition.”<sup>104</sup> Such arguments show that when transitional justice is discussed in Colombia, the emphasis is made on the SIJVRNR which was created after the Havana Peace Agreement, without recognising other mechanisms and antecedents of transitional justice in the country (Process of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Observatory, 2012).<sup>105</sup> Interviewees were critical about the SIJVRNR institutions: Gladys Reyna from RMVP noted: “There has been a lack of pedagogical work and articulation to ensure that the mission of the [Truth] Commission is really

103 Choles, virtual interview.

104 Escobar, interview.

105 Observatorio de Procesos de Desarme, Desmovilización y Reintegración, Ley 1424 de 2010: antecedentes, contexto y aplicación en el ámbito de la Justicia Transicional en Colombia (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2012), [https://www.humanas.unal.edu.co/observapazyconflicto/files/6814/3584/5606/ley1424de2010\\_antecedentes\\_contextoyaplicacion\\_en\\_elambito.pdf](https://www.humanas.unal.edu.co/observapazyconflicto/files/6814/3584/5606/ley1424de2010_antecedentes_contextoyaplicacion_en_elambito.pdf)

satisfactory and that it includes rehabilitation and satisfaction measures.”<sup>106</sup> This element was striking in the case of the CEV since it is currently finalising its mandate. Even though this institution opened the door for submitting reports, victims’ organisations did not know how to engage with it or did not agree with its three-year mandate: “I believe that closing the Commission so quickly is a mistake. It was too short [...] there was no real time to know the truth,” stresses Angela Escobar.<sup>107</sup> These statements illustrate some of the pitfalls identified by participants in top-down institutionalized transitional justice mechanisms.

**The lack of strategic communication between communities and mechanisms makes it difficult for formal transitional justice to connect to bottom-up processes.**

Regarding the CEV, Gladys Reyna from RMVP says: “There is a lack of articulation, dissemination, reaching out to communities to carry out the sensitisation exercise, and [understanding] that it is necessary to talk.”<sup>108</sup> This element is added some organisations’ perception about institutional detachment from the needs of the victim communities. Sandra Guerrero comments on transitional justice professionals saying they are almost always behind the desk. “They worked based on what they get from secondary information sources [...]. [Whereas] we go to the municipality, to the village, to the farthest we can reach.”<sup>109</sup>

An additional difficulty for connecting formal and informal transitional justice processes is the distrust felt by victims towards transitional justice institutions due to the lack of compliance with previous agreements. “They promised us 16 seats [in Congress].<sup>110</sup> I feel that they played so badly with the victims,” states Sandra Guerrero.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, interviewees pointed out that there is a lack of continuity in the presence and commitment of public servants working on transitional justice processes, in addition to a lack of communication. Although positive actions from some officials were recognised, there is a common critical stance toward the state: “I think it is corruption. The state does not have the will to prioritise the rights of victims [...] they have all the tools, but they have not done it,” says Maritza Mena.<sup>112</sup>

Consequently, women create initiatives and organisations at various territorial levels (local, national, and international) in order to attain greater impact. Others seek more formal spaces for participation such as the District Group for Follow-up to Auto 092 and the victims’ roundtables or the Community Councils. This facilitates contact with

106 Gladys Reyna, interview.

107 Escobar, interview.

108 Gladys Reyna, interview.

109 Guerrero, virtual interview.

110 A key victims’ disposition for victims from the Havana Agreements was the creation of 16 seats in Congress specifically allocated to victims, something that had been politically blocked by political sectors opposed to the peace agreement. At the time of the interviews the legislation was still pending. On August 2021, the Law finally passed in Congress, and President Duque signed it in October 2021.

111 Guerrero, interview.

112 Mena, focus group.

SIVJRNR mechanisms, monitoring compliance with Law 1448 of 2011, and demanding rights in terms of transitional and ordinary justice. However, to participate in these spaces, it is important for women to have a track record and recognition of their activism. This could hinder the participation of incipient, informal, and more local organisations, creating antagonism between ‘elite’ organisations and more informal ones. Maritza Mena denounced how “Elite organisations are a barrier to other women because they are the ones they take into account [...]. When they comply with them, they believe that they are complying with all women.”<sup>113</sup> Sandra Guerrero agrees: “If you are not part of a victims’ roundtable, the government and the institutions do not take you into account, leaving behind the work of several organisations.”<sup>114</sup>

Interviewed organisations participating in institutional spaces mention achievements like the participation in the creation of the public policy on gender equity and violence against rural women in Planadas (Tolima), the training of officials of the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences for the care of victims of sexual violence in the context of the armed conflict, and the presentation of more than 200 cases of sexual violence before the JEP. However, some remain critical of the possible instrumentalisation of the victims’ groups by the institutions. Yolanda Perea says: “What we do does not generate revenue for the institutions, so they do not care about us. They only care about projects that they can profit from.”<sup>115</sup> Derlly Chará agrees: “The institutions put many obstacles because they see everything in this life in terms of business, and we are a huge business [...].”<sup>116</sup> This also reflects the victims’ need to be resourceful, create financing strategies, and diverse repertoires of collective action that impact the members of the organisation, the communities to which they belong, and civil society in general. However, for women, funding their activism is challenging because their work in informal transitional justice processes is unpaid, forcing them to look for other ways to meet personal expenses. Derlly Chará states: “I would like to go further, but one’s food security is also at stake.”<sup>117</sup> Financial support to transitional justice work remains within the boundaries of institutional spaces or internationally connected and usually national organisations.

Regarding international actors, there were a number of comments on the value and quality of connecting. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN Women, UNDP, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and Dr Denis Mukwege’s network are most mentioned by interviewees as strategic partners for their work. Activist María Choles identifies five reasons for working with international NGOs: 1) as a strategy to ensure the safety of women, especially considering the persistence of the armed conflict and threats to social leaders: “We rely on these NGOs because we often have to shield

113 *Ibid.*

114 Guerrero, interview.

115 Perea, virtual interview.

116 Chará, virtual interview.

117 *Ibid.*

ourselves from the work we do,”<sup>118</sup> 2) support and training on issues that need to be strengthened: “We do not have the budget to hire a person to do workshops [...]. We have to seek this support”<sup>119</sup> 3) a non-partisan role for international NGOs, an ally for the victims when the state is negligent or responsible for violations in the framework of the armed conflict: “They [NGOs] are the ones who also have to accompany these processes since the Colombian state does not do it because it will never hand us over a project from the state itself so that we end up screwing up their lives,”<sup>120</sup> 4) financing or joint construction of projects, especially important for organisations that travel through the territories; and 5) forming a network for the exchange of experiences and joint learning: “I have had the opportunity to participate in many international spaces [...] to talk about transitional justice [...]. We are part of a global network”<sup>121</sup> (The last point was mentioned Ángela Escobar). The organisations that have not received support from international cooperation invite international actors to diversify the organisations they work with. Maritza Mena believes that “It is important to start working with other organisations that are not as empowered,” because it is hard for them to access the know-how and material resources needed to make their work sustainable.<sup>122</sup> It is recommended to strengthen strategies for women, particularly those from rural areas, so that they are aware of current calls for proposals and can access international support.

**It is essential to recognise the anger that the organisations feel in relation to their experiences with academia and transitional justice organisations, which stems from their instrumentalisation as objects of study.** This makes them reluctant to participate either in research projects or alongside larger transitional justice entities. A participant from Afro-Colombian rights organisation ASODEMUN says: “As women we always think: well, another research and that’s all it is, just research and it does not go beyond that. What about the result of the research, what are the conclusions? One sometimes refrains [from participating].”<sup>123</sup> In this sense, research projects like this one require commitment to mobilise actions that benefit communities and make their struggles, efforts, achievements and needs visible.

Reducing gaps between formal and informal transitional justice institutions implies changes and commitments in two ways: 1) that public institutions and international organisations find better communication strategies. This requires considering the type of signal available in the territories (Wi-Fi, telephone signal, radio, among others); considering the intersectionality of the population when communicating messages; and that the information provided is easy to understand (both in length and in the

118 Choles, virtual interview.

119 *Ibid.*

120 *Ibid.*

121 Escobar, interview.

122 Mena, virtual focus group.

123 Anonymous interviewee, virtual focus group, April 27, 2021.

type of language used). This element would particularly help victims and survivors with less academic training to understand and access the institutional services; and 2) that women's organisations identify some gaps they have and mobilise actions to compensate for them (such as trainings on the role of transitional justice organisations and the route of action). In this sense, it could be particularly useful to create a women's network where organisations with more experience and trajectory can promote the learning of those that are just starting.



A woman from ACTE holding a sign that says: "I take care of myself, I take care of you, we take care of each other." - Credits: © Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

## Organising, participating, and increased political agency

In rural areas that are mostly affected by conflict, women are unaware of their rights and how to demand them. In contrast, women's collective action has made it possible for women across the country to acquire more information on the subject and develop tools to demand their rights and meet their needs. This requires addressing initiatives and repertoires of action of the communities that have allowed them to empower themselves and recover or develop their political agency. On this topic, the diversity of the participants' notions of political agency is important to note: 1) agency as a form of advocacy in public policies; 2) as something related to party politics; 3) agency from activism, participation, and the capacity to decide and act as people who are rights-holders.

Interviewees point out that the kind of participation they engage in, informal or within the transitional justice ecosystem, led to diverse understandings of empowerment and different scopes of political agency. For instance, most organisations participating in this investigation preceded the transitional justice process in Colombia. As Angela Escobar highlights that being organised and empowered thanks to informal processes was fundamental in order for activists to be taken seriously in the formal transitional justice process. "If we, as victims, hadn't been reunited and organised, we would have not had the opportunity to present our proposals, supported by the 4,500 signatures we gathered, at the Habana negotiation table."<sup>124</sup> Empowerment through workshops and informal transitional justice spaces allowed victims to gain confidence in raising their voice and led to the acquisition of political agency and the tools to participate in more formal processes. In fact, afterward, the same organisation participated in the design of JEP's sexual violence communication protocol; expanding the scope of their agency to deciding how this institution would address every victim on sexual violence, protecting their integrity, and aiming to avoid revictimisation. As a result, Angela Escobar was able to say: "Transitional justice is [not only] for us, but [also] done by us."<sup>125</sup>

On the other hand, Maritza Mena, agreed with many other women from the same organisation in arguing that their capacity to have a voice in formal transitional justice processes is affected by what they call 'elite organisations,' since it is these organisations that "are taken into account for all activities and whose requests are understood to represents all organisations' needs."<sup>126</sup> Therefore, the feeling of empowerment that results from being organised and working as a collective tends to be shared by all women, whereas the feeling of their ability to influence what they consider important decisions and processes seems to change according to how close they can get to the formal transitional justice institutions.

124 Escobar, interview.

125 *Ibid.*

126 Mena, virtual focus group.

It is striking that women's discourses seem to relate political agency to the public national sphere, and empowerment to the personal and private more local aspects:

*“Being in an organisation is what has allowed us to empower ourselves, form leadership, establish an installed capacity, be able to bring voices together, and be able to make proposals among us so that we can become political agents’ states Angela Escobar.<sup>127</sup>*

In other words, the organisations contribute to women's empowerment to strengthen or generate their political agency. In this regard, it is essential to understand that collective work makes it possible to confront the threats and risks to which women are exposed due to the actions of armed groups that seek to silence social leadership: “In Colombia, political agency has not been easy for civil society, but has been more of an exercise of demands, struggles, and vindication.”<sup>128</sup> At the same time, an anonymous interviewee warned that, “[in order] to exercise political agency, the minimum levels of security and protection for the exercise of rights must first be guaranteed.”<sup>129</sup>

**Hence, women did not lack agency before joining social organisations, but were worried that becoming leaders would risk their lives and that of their families.** In some cases, particularly those of sexual violence, the victimising acts were committed against women to silence their struggles in the territories. Victims' organisations comprise a sum of efforts and wills that facilitate facing the challenges and threats to women, both in their territories of origin and in the areas to which they have been forcibly displaced: “When we arrived in Bogotá, AFRODES [the National Association for Displaced Afro Descendants] was the first organisation that began to support us [...]. We began to know our rights, the routes of action, how to claim our rights. [...] We like to work in a network and in community. It is from there that we have a certain resistance here in the cities. Otherwise, we would not be able to do anything because it is impossible to do it individually,” remembers Maritza Mena about her displacement from Bojayá in Western Colombia to Bogotá.<sup>130</sup>

Gender-related experiences during armed conflict, like the loss of children and husbands, sexual violence against women, sexual diversities, and the inclusion of men, became a decisive subject and motivation for victims to organise and participate since the organisation represented a safe space to finally break silence and even pursue justice. This process, in its own way, creates agency. For example, Omar Aguilar, a member of RMVP, describes how after being a victim of sexual violence he was afraid to tell his story. He feared someone would hurt his family as retaliation. However, after “starting to go to workshops and getting in touch with organisations, I got motivated

127 Escobar, interview.

128 *Ibid.*

129 Anonymous interviewee, online, date withheld.

130 Mena, virtual focus group.

to talk and here I am, still telling my story and motivating others to do so, because this helps us.”<sup>131</sup>

Even aspects not necessarily related to conflict, but gender-related like fighting male chauvinism, domestic violence, difficulties in the effective exercise of sexual and reproductive rights, and economic dependence became a healing and empowering scenario for victims, because they organise to eradicate those social problems; creating safe spaces for victims to talk and re-evaluate what they believed was part of the private sphere. “I work with women who used to be all the time at home. Now they go out and fight for what they want [...] we used to be abused by our husbands, but this has started to change thanks to our workshops,” assures Marta, a member of the Association of Agricultural Producers and of the San Miguel Municipality in Planadas, Tolima (ASOPROSAM).<sup>132</sup> However, this is a long-term battle for women who have always lived under those dynamics and find it difficult to fight patriarchal domination from the collective; focusing more on domestic violence as an issue to work with women from the private sphere.

**Once victims see what they are capable of in terms of transforming other people’s lives and influencing political matters, gender becomes a platform for increased political agency.** For instance, Estebana Roa, a member of RMVP, started giving workshops to teen girls to raise awareness about sexual violence. Today, along with other victims in Cartagena, (Northern Colombia), she “monitors the local governments development plans to make sure that the proposals we made to the Truth Commission regarding sexual and political violence are respected at the local level, especially those related to Afro-Colombians.”<sup>133</sup> Participation and political agency have led women to take part in the formulation of public policies on gender equity, gender-based violence, and decision-making in the Municipal Peace Councils, among others.

Within the repertoires of action of the participating organisations promoting political agency, we find that there are other strategies related to gastronomy, entrepreneurship, culture, sewing, and political training for the exercise of rights. Particularly in women with ethnic diversity, it is observed how food is a tool for the construction of historical memory: “In each product, there is a meaning [...] because behind it, there are our traditions that come from our grandparents,” states Derlly Chará.<sup>134</sup> In this sense, political agency is also reflected in acts of resistance and connection with the repair and reclaiming of traditions, culture, and life history of the participants. It becomes a thread that connects women’s private history with a call for social consciousness and historical memory in the public sphere.

131 Aguilar, interview.

132 Marta, virtual focus group, May 15, 2021.

133 Estebana Roa, interview with Viviana Espitia, Bogotá, Colombia, April 27, 2021.

134 Chará, virtual interview.

For those organisations formed by women with high economic vulnerability, a fundamental component is to provide support, autonomy, and economic gain to guarantee decent living conditions for women victims of the armed conflict. For this reason, some of the organisations interviewed link their work or entrepreneurship to their activism and social commitment. This is a powerful alternative to traditional unpaid care work. Therefore, for the Afro-Colombian and rural women interviewed, it is of vital importance that the social action be sustainable, scalable, and inseparable from productive projects that counteract the neglect and socioeconomic abandonment to which women in the national periphery have been exposed.

Whether through entrepreneurship, symbolic acts or political participation, the women interviewed are aware that one of their greatest interests is to promote the wellbeing of their peers, their families, and the community in general. To this end, they continually seek to encourage leadership and strategic connections with institutions that allow them to have a greater impact.



Social entrepreneurs and peace activists from 'Memories Colombia.' – Credits: © Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

For participants from Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, their racial, gender, and victim identity make an intersectional analysis necessary. Their interests and struggles, besides promoting the dignity of women, recognise the importance of fighting against their historical deterritorialisation, poverty and extreme poverty, and other obstacles to the effective enjoyment of their rights. Maritza Mena stresses: “Racism and stigmatisation limit access to our rights. That is our struggle when we unite because that is the feeling we all have and that is why we associate; to see how we can generate some actions or some impact on the institutions.”<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, race discrimination is often reproduced by public institutions. One of the Afro organisations interviewed stated that they also seek to raise awareness among those institutions so that their struggles, their communities, and their repertoires of action are not ‘exoticised and folklorised.’ In this way, collective action often restricts the way social change is achieved, as commented by Maritza Mena: “Folkloric groups and art expressions are the only subjects in which we can work. Not because we don’t know other things, but because the institutions see us this way and it is the only opportunity. We have to make ourselves visible and get some resources.”<sup>136</sup>

For indigenous communities, organising allowed them to fight against institutional race discrimination from the state and structural patriarchal violence from their own male authorities. For Rosamira Campo, indigenous women couldn’t denounce being victims of sexual violence because they didn’t speak or write in Spanish, and the prosecutors would not take their statement in any other way. In response to that, RMVP with IOM started an alphabetisation programme to help indigenous women have access to justice. “Many women are studying and moving forward, becoming leaders and talking about governance, getting involved in politics, [they are] even having meetings with the governor (highest authority within the ethnic community) to guide him and change the male domination inside our community, explains Rosamira Campo.”<sup>137</sup> **These two examples illustrate how organising has contributed to overcoming some forms of discrimination, and how the agendas to create political agency are strongly focused on the historical forms of violence endured by the diverse communities. In addition, it shows how support and empowerment programmes can have a positive knock-on effect in terms of political agency.**

Despite the difficulties and the diversity of women’s experiences and the objectives of collective action, victim organisations become a supportive, non-judgmental space that helps women empower themselves and confront social and personal challenges. In addition, they recognise that being a leader does not mean that their rights are not violated and that they are not still vulnerable. Nevertheless being a leader reinforces their confidence, recognises their agency, and their ability to help others who are

135 Mena, virtual focus group.

136 *Ibid.*

137 Campo, interview.

experiencing similar difficulties. “From the organisation we have gained so much confidence [...] and we have discovered this: That [some of us] experience domestic violence, gender-based violence, psychological, and economic violence [...] we have begun to advise, to guide [...]. We have rescued women, and it is nice to see that they have a family reunification, they are working, some are studying, and that they feel at ease,” explains Sandra Guerrero.<sup>138</sup> Belonging to the collective and having spaces for public advocacy can help reverse social and knowledge hierarchies. Women’s participation and achievements are examples of what they are capable of. As an anonymous interviewee from Memorias Colombia States, the invitation is “for them [the Colombian society] to get to know me, because I don’t have to hide as [the status quo guardians] want me to.”<sup>139</sup>

## **Informal initiatives as forms of justice or redress**

According to Law 1448 (2011), victims of the armed conflict are entitled to reparation mechanisms that include strategies for restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition. Yet, it is through the building of empathy, trust, and cultural connections embedded in personal bonds within organisations that genuine reparation and trauma healing is achieved.

For this reason, we need to analyse how women’s organisations have informally helped processes of comprehensive reparation and access to justice, and how they can also support the prioritisation of victims’ needs in institutional spaces.

In the face of the attention deficit from the state, organisations constitute the primary support network for women, but these organisations have found support and solidarity among themselves. “They [victims] have nowhere to go and no one to support them, to listen to them [...] they have found small collectives, together with [law] university students who support them to help them with their lawsuits,” says Derlly Chará.<sup>140</sup> As a result, solidarity networks are established as a way to deal with a range of difficulties that NGOs have to face on their own: from economic survival and organisational support to dissemination of their work, publicity and other key tasks for the development of their projects. Solidarity is the key resource amidst the lack of support from institutional structures.

One of the main mechanisms of redress to which they have access through the collective is of a socio-emotional nature. Yalile Quiñones states:

138 Guerrero, virtual interview.

139 Anonymous interviewee, virtual interview with Camila Leal, April 28, 2021.

140 Chará, virtual interview.

*“When I listen to my colleagues talk [...] for us, it is extremely important [...] when we get together to reminisce and tell our life stories [...] to eat something from the territory, and that is why the psychoancestral healing processes must be permanent in us because that is what allows us to get together [...] and through this psychospiritual process we can heal ourselves.”<sup>141</sup>*

The above testimony reflects that in the collective, they find greater empathy, receptiveness, and understanding of the experiences and suffering caused by the armed conflict; taking into consideration that they are women who have lived through similar situations.

On the other hand, the institutions do not show a real comprehension of the needs of the victims: Gloria Curvelo, Afro-Colombian representative of ASODEMUN explains: “I feel that it is only to fill out paperwork because, in the end, one is left with pain, shattered, with self-esteem on the floor. They made me remember my memories to leave me halfway. I do not agree with PAPSIVI. What we need is real reparations.”<sup>142</sup> Such a statement is a clear indication of the importance of psychoancestral and informal psychosocial support that is often offered among organisations. This occurs in contrast to the western-style of institutional approaches to healing trauma which can be negligent of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous women’s Cosmo vision.

The work done by women’s organisations demonstrates the need for justice to go hand in hand with comprehensive reparation, which while enabling women’s sustainability through economic compensation, also helps to address family, social and emotional traumas and losses: “Yes, they killed my father a few years ago, but I have not received reparations, because people say they are going to pay, but you could never pay a human being in a lifetime. Even if they give you money, they don’t compensate you,” affirms an anonymous interviewee from ASODEMUN.<sup>143</sup> Above all, women emphasise that it is necessary to leave installed capacity in the communities to guarantee the satisfaction of basic needs and the strengthening of people’s life projects: “As victims, we would like to see more projects to improve the quality of life of each person, like what has happened. We would like more projects to improve the quality of life of each person [...] a project of integral reparation for black women that involves education, housing, and health. Because all of this is very precarious for us,” explained another anonymous interviewee from the same organisation.<sup>144</sup>

For some organisations, informal initiatives have been effective and safer ways for victims and survivors to be able to tell their stories, so that civil society recognises their experiences, and for them to be able to vent their feelings. One of the participating organisations created a scenario of catharsis, truth and recognition, where they allied with an audio-visual media outlet in Bogotá to share the experiences of women.

141 Quiñones, virtual focus group.

142 Gloria Curvelo, virtual focus group, April 25, 2021.

143 Anonymous interviewee, virtual focus group, April 27, 2021.

144 Anonymous interviewee, virtual focus group, April 27, 2021.

Porfiria Chavera states: “It allowed me to do a report where I explained many things and expressed things that the whole world was almost watching [...] you take out everything you have kept to yourself, and you let people know what you are afraid of [...] they can see me and know who I am.”<sup>145</sup> Thanks to the collaborative work the organisations share with other collectives or, in this case, with the media, women have a positive impact on the clarification of the acts committed in the framework of the armed conflict, and the coexistence and social recognition of the victim population in Colombia. “It has helped make victims much more visible, achieve productive projects, make the needs known, and generate that impact on society between perpetrators and victims,” explains another anonymous interview.<sup>146</sup>

In terms of justice, RMVP’s focus on sexual violence in the context of the armed conflict achieved a process they call ‘Reparaciones Tempranas’ (Early Reparations): “Those actions and programmes [...] are carried out because while we wait for a judge to investigate the damages caused to the victims’ bodies, we will never be repaired,” says Angela Escobar.<sup>147</sup> In this case, they were able to work with indigenous women in literacy processes that would allow them to access justice. The process arose from dramatisation strategies to learn first about the experience of indigenous women victims: “On a day of denunciations that we did in Chigorodó [...] they dramatised how they are treated in their own justice system [...] and we started thinking about how they are going to access justice if they cannot read or write,” states Angela Escobar.<sup>148</sup>

In response, an early reparation measure implemented by the organisation was the literacy training of 72 indigenous women. “They don’t need certificates, they need to learn how to read and write. They went and changed their identity card because they already know how to sign. We can now do workshops with them to follow-up on justice and health issues, and they already know how to follow the route. Because they used to file a complaint, but it had to pass through an interpreter, but they did not know what the interpreter was saying to the official. This is an early reparation.”<sup>149</sup> This anecdote from Angela Escobar, illustrates how the organisations manage to develop in and with the women tools and competencies for the demand of rights that allow women to fight for justice and reparation mechanisms without depending on intermediaries such as interpreters.

Despite the progress made, it is still necessary to continue working on an element that is key for women and has not been achieved. What they seek the most are guarantees of non-repetition, recognition, and security in the places where they currently live for themselves and their families. **Being leaders leaves them exposed to threats and new violations such as forced displacement at the intra-urban level, which is an extension**

145 Chavera, virtual focus group.

146 Anonymous interviewee, virtual focus group, April 27, 2021.

147 Escobar, interview.

148 *Ibid.*

149 *Ibid.*

**of the armed conflict in the cities.** However, in the face of legal gaps on the issue (Law 1448 of 2011 and IHL not applicable to contexts such as Bogotá),<sup>150</sup> victims will continue to mobilise until they find effective attention to their problems. Dora Quiñones, representing ASODEMUN, explains how this everyday threat affects them: “I was looking for support, they damaged my whole house, and they took my things [...] I filed a lawsuit [...] we moved to another apartment, and we had moved three days before and a car drove into us. They damaged our windows, they damaged everything [...] they do not listen to me, they do not understand me. The police came, they told me to calm down, that they were going to investigate, and to this day nothing has happened.”<sup>151</sup>

Given the lack of institutional response, the participants are committed to accompanying more victims and replicating the impact that the collective process has had on them. They recognise that working hand in hand with other women and men has served as a mechanism for healing and coping, so they want to reach other territories and impact more people. In this sense, Omar Aguilar comments:

*“It has been a great support in our lives. They are always there, listening to us, guiding us, and encouraging us. Reaching the network has been important [to us] because this gives us space. We open up, we can reach other territories, and we can get other victims to break the silence and tell their stories as they should.”<sup>152</sup>*

Several participants said that, despite the reluctance of men to tell their stories of gender violence, they see more and more of them coming forward to speak, in big part due the way organisations approach the issue. **By sharing their own stories, members of the organisations show other survivors -males and females- that they are not alone, that they can offer support, and that gender violence does not only concern women.**

Our participants had a clear idea of how formal and informal justice efforts could complement each other. For example, Anderson explains: “There are many victims who need to be accompanied not only by the state and institutions, but also by other victims. Thus [...], one can recognise and feel the pain of others and can say: I can, I am capable, if that person was able [...] to overcome many obstacles, then together we can achieve to be important and recognised, and this important participation of listening to other victims.”<sup>153</sup> This provides greater confidence and hope that it is possible to survive, heal, and emerge stronger. In addition to being a process framed by the violations of the armed conflict, the connection of formal and informal efforts allows better recognition of intersectional forms of violence that women face. For this reason, for most of the participants it is of great importance to generate spaces for development and economic autonomy, especially considering that some women are victims of economic and patrimonial domestic violence by their partners.

150 Bogotá, the capital city, has not been recognised as a hotspot for recurring violent activity from illegal armed groups.

151 Dora Quiñones, virtual focus group, April 25, 2021.

152 Omar, interview.

153 Anderson, interview.

Lastly, women recognise themselves and their organisations as key agents that help other victims of the armed conflict and vulnerable populations to continue with their personal, economic, and social development. Each of them has been an agent of change, transformation, and social development in their territories, but their capacity to continue doing this work is limited by economic resources: “I would like to help some colleagues who would work with me, I would explain to them, and we would get ahead with this project I have [...] I would teach them, but I can’t afford it,” expresses an anonymous interviewee from ASODEMUN.”<sup>154</sup> To continue with this impact, it is essential to find sources of financing and cooperation with various public and private entities. In this way, the will of the women can materialise in more actions of social impact.

As expressed throughout this section, one thing is how legal and institutional mechanisms perceive reparations, compensation, and healing and another is how women associations achieve this through informal, yet more meaningful, mechanisms. Amidst endemic state absence, organisations fill a void as they become the first point of contact to address many victims’ needs. This becomes even more evident when it comes to dealing with psychosocial needs, as organisations can often provide safe spaces to listen to victims, identify their needs, and address them locally. This becomes a more significant response for victims than state compensation payments, or the institutional structures for reparative justice. A similar effect is felt on truth-telling and remembrance practices, as the work on memorialisation can be more accessible and meaningful to victims than those of official truth commissions. If there is an area in which participants recognise the need for institutions, it is in the provision of security and in guaranteeing the non-repetition of the violence that led to the violations in the first place.



Women have found in activism a new family, a support network, and a source of hope to keep fighting for their rights and their community’s wellbeing. - Credits: © Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

154 Anonymous interviewee, virtual focus group, April 25, 2021.

4

# CONCLUSIONS

## 4. Conclusions

The development of a comprehensive peacebuilding approach in Colombia has been possible partly because of the insistence and efforts of activist groups who have made gender a flag for inclusion, embedding rights, and sustainability. The history of women's associations, LGBT rights groups, and other gender-oriented associations amidst violent conflict, as well as their current engagement with post-conflict peacebuilding, gives an idea of the role that local voices and bottom-up processes have within the social, political, and economic ecosystem that is Colombia.

By looking at survivor and victim engagement in informal transitional spaces, it is clear that gender-focused activism emerged directly from people's own experiences of surviving armed conflict. In addition, exerting pressure in order to fulfil their needs as victims and survivors created spaces within formal institutions as well as in social settings in the different territories where activists operate. Gender arises from local experiences and needs, rather than from imported external framings from the outside; a feature that permits legitimacy, consistency, and permanence within different conflict-affected communities in Colombia.

**Participation in informal spaces creates many opportunities for a comprehensive approach to prioritising justice needs.** Activists named a wide variety of aims like breaking the silence around human rights violations, advocating for effective and integral reparations, creating spaces for trauma-healing, and memorialisation, as well as the empowerment of communities. For activists, informal association has brought different advantages: from finding ways to heal, deal with and talk about the trauma created by violence, finding ways to unite, associate to strengthen aims and processes; all the way to the encouragement to denounce and criticise the state for its responsibility, its inaction, and its fragility in delivering the transitional justice promises established in the Havana Agreements. It has also brought spaces for learning, finding economically sustainable projects, and reaching spaces (at the local, national, and international levels) which many initially did not conceive.

An overarching finding is how activist work is characterised by a fight to gain visibility—particularly within state institutions—for victims' needs and conditions. All organisations expressed some form of criticism about the way government agencies deal with activists and victims; either because of lack of interest, capacities or corruption. It is evident that all organisations either develop work as a response to the state's absence in their territories, or from government agencies' weaknesses and the limitations arising from poor responses regarding rights violations. This 'struggle against the state' is particularly relevant in understanding the objective of this research: organisations find ways to express and deal with victims' needs mostly out of institutional negligence,

bureaucratisation, and lack of empathy toward victims. Although some organisations develop a critical stance against the government; others take a more problem-solving approach, seeking connections with government structures and transitional justice institutions, to obtain visibility, to foster projects, and to include victims' needs within a governmental agenda.

Yet, activism is a very perilous endeavour, particularly in a country that establishes a discourse on a post-conflict transition yet has not taken all the necessary steps for the transition's continuation. Socio-political polarisation often demonises human rights work, and ongoing cycles of violence from a plethora of armed groups all severely undermine the prospects of sustainability, legitimacy, and continuity for many organisations and their work. But more worryingly, it turns them into targets of political violence, evidenced by ongoing death threats, constant re-victimisation, and a lack of recognition or protection on behalf of the government.

After the 2016 Havana agreements, Colombians have been able to publicly and openly express the demands, concerns and needs of victims and citizens to the political establishment. This creates a window of opportunity for inclusion and dealing with root causes of conflict, never seen in Colombia's conflict-affected history. Silence and stigma are beginning to break; activists are using a wide variety of means to express the underlying issues that have brought pain and trauma to so many survivors. Even with the current situation of protests, violence, police brutality and unrest, an agenda that discusses and clarifies victims' and citizens' needs is gaining visibility. This is a tremendous opportunity for change, but one that risks being overshadowed by the type of violence that has characterised the different decades of conflict that gave way to the need for informal activism.



Victims and survivors keep looking for ways to guarantee peace across the country. - Credits: © Jeffrey Duvan Acuña Mendoza.

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# INTERVIEWS

## 6. Interviews

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- ▶ Anderson. 2021. Interview with Viviana Espitia. Bogotá, Colombia, April 27, 2021.
- ▶ Campo, Rosamira. 2021. Interview with Viviana Espitia. Bogotá, Colombia. April 27, 2021.
- ▶ Castañeda, Sandra. 2021. Virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego, April 26, 2021.
- ▶ Chará, Derlly. 2021, Virtual interview with Laura Colmenares. May 11, 2021.
- ▶ Chavera, Porfiria. 2021. Virtual Focus group. May 1, 2021.
- ▶ Choles, María. 2021. Virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego. April 27, 2021.
- ▶ Curvelo, Gloria. 2021. Virtual focus group. April 25, 2021.
- ▶ Escobar, Angela. Interview with Viviana Espitia, Bogotá, Colombia, April 27, 2021.
- ▶ Estebana, Roa. 2021. Interview with Viviana Espitia. Bogotá, Colombia. April 27, 2021.
- ▶ Franco, Sindy. 2021. Virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego. April 28, 2021.
- ▶ Guáquez, Carmen. Virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego. May 11, 2021.
- ▶ Guerrero, Sandra. 2021. Virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego, April 27, 2021.
- ▶ Joel. 2021. Interview with Viviana Espitia. Bogotá, Colombia. April 27, 2021.
- ▶ Marta. 2021. Virtual focus group. May 15, 2021.
- ▶ Mena, Maritza. 2021. Virtual focus group. April 25, 2021.
- ▶ Moreno, Olimpa. 2021. Virtual interview with Laura Colmenares and María González. May 1, 2021.
- ▶ Paola Caicedo. 2021. Interview with Viviana Espitia. Bogotá, Colombia. April 27, 2021.
- ▶ Perea, Yolanda. 2021. Virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego. May 1, 2021.
- ▶ Pérez, Rosi Albani. Virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego. May 4, 2021.
- ▶ Quiñones, Dora. 2021. Virtual focus group. April 25, 2021.
- ▶ Quiñones, Yalile. 2021. Virtual focus group. April 25, 2021.
- ▶ Reyna, Gladys. 2021. Interview with Viviana Espitia. Bogotá, Colombia, April 27, 2021.
- ▶ Reyna, Gloria. 2021. Virtual interview with Germán Otálora Gallego. April 30, 2021.

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**ANNEX 1**

## 7. Annex 1

### Data collection chart

Organisation	Data collection method	Channel	Number of participants
ACTE (Embrace me with Hope) (Various areas of Colombia)	Semi-structured Interview	Video call	10 individual interviews
ASODEMUN (Bogotá)	Focus Groups (2)	Video call	8 group participants
ASODEMUN (Bojayá)	Focus Groups (2)	Video call and telephone call	8 group participants
ASMURVIV (Cumaribo, Vichada)	Semi-structured Interview	Telephone call	1 individual interviewee
ASOPROSAM (Planadas, Tolima)	Focus group and semi-structured interviews	Video call and telephone call	9 group participants 3 individual interviews
Unión de Costureros (Bogotá)	Semi-structured interview	Telephone call	1 individual interview
Memorias Colombia (Bogotá)	Semi-structured interview	Telephone call	3 individual interviews
Red de mujeres víctimas y profesionales -RMVP- (Various areas of Colombia)	Focus Group	Face to face	11 group participants



This publication has been made possible thanks to the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.