

PBI Colombia

Women leaders

WOMEN DEFENDERS
IN COLOMBIA:
AGAINST WIND
AND TIDE

THE WHITE DRESS

BUENAVENTURA:
THE WOMEN OF
PUENTE NAYERO

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INDEPENDENT

TRUCK COMPANY

Women human rights defenders are women who, individually or in association with others, act to promote or protect human rights. Around the world, women human rights defenders face a variety of threats, including verbal and sexual harassment, rape, prejudice, exclusion and repudiation, as a direct result of their human rights work.







**WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN
COLOMBIA**

Against wind and tide

Many women have transformed from victims of the conflict, to leaders fighting for the rights of their communities, and are currently playing a fundamental role in the peace process.



men and women have suffered from the violence of the armed conflict and the political violence that has besieged Colombia; nevertheless, women's suffering has almost always been invisible. But the violence has not destroyed their bravery.

A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN

Colombia is one of the countries with the highest indicators of violence against women. Sexual violence is happening both within and outside the armed conflict taking place in the country. According to the Colombian Institute of Forensic Medicine (Instituto de Medicina Legal) almost 17,996 cases of female rape were registered in 2014.¹ The Colombian Constitutional Court concluded that sexual violence constitutes a "systematic, habitual and generalised practice" in the conflict.² The UN representative for women in Colombia, Belen Saenz, highlighted that the armed conflict has had a disproportionate effect on women and girls "there are more women survivors in the country than men. The great majority of them have lost their husbands and/or sons because they have been recruited, assassinated or disappeared"³ Another indicator is the high number of femicides in the country: four women are assassinated each day in Colombia, and 90 % of those deaths go unpunished.⁴ One of the most abhorrent forms of violence against women are acid attacks, of which 185 were registered against women in the last ten years; ⁵ figures that put Colombia on the level of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and East Africa.⁶ These are all extremely discriminatory expressions of a society

where, as a result, women who take on leadership roles and speak out are doubly rejected.

Nevertheless, despite the threats and discrimination, women continue to take on leadership roles and defend human rights in Colombia. Approximately 38.5% of households are led by women single parents:⁷ it falls to them to look after and educate their sons and daughters alone; and in addition, they are responsible for earning the family's income. Women are also the principal victims of the conflict.

The three conflict-related facts where most of the victims are women are threats (52%), forced displacement (69%, together with children) and crimes against sexual freedom and integrity (87%).⁸ This situation has brought many women to take on leadership roles, starting in their homes and families, then within their communities, in victims' organisations and women's rights organisations. As one of the members of the Sub-commission on Gender at the Havana negotiating tables said: "We discovered incredible experiences of women who made neighbourhoods, who transcended their pain and created social fabric, because their condition as mother, daughter, carer but also activist, leader and human rights defender was brought to the fore."⁹



Harold Christy



Many women have transformed their conditions as victims into those of leaders who fight for their communities' rights. Photo: Charlotte Kesl

WOMEN DEFENDERS

Women who decided to take up these roles are human rights defenders: those who fight for their families and communities to be able to return to the territory they have been displaced from; for there to be reparations; for their daughters and sons to have access to health and education; those who search for disappeared relatives; for justice for their sons, victims of 'false positives'; those who denounce the threats and attacks happening in the conflict. Women are neither silent nor at ease in the face of injustice.

In terms of these attacks, women defenders are still one of the most vulnerable groups. Between June and September 2015, women defenders were the principal victims of attacks; 61% of attacks registered by the Information System on Attacks against Human Rights in Colombia are against women.¹⁰

In particular, the Colombian Constitutional Court has recognised that "displaced women who take on the leadership of organisations of displaced persons, the promotion of human rights or social and community leadership, expose



March in Bogota during International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Photo: Julian Montoni

themselves to multiple threats, pressures, and risks carried out by illegal armed groups which often lead to their assassination.”¹¹

Additionally, attacks against women have a specific character: they are not just aimed at the woman defender, but also against her family, and the threats have a sexual and discriminatory element.

WOMEN WHO SPEAK OUT

In Colombia, women’s organisations are many. They are strong, and achieve what was always thought to be impossible. In recent years alone there have been many

important achievements: a law that defined femicide was ratified, sentences for attacks with acid were increased, a gender focus was applied to the protection of women defenders, and a law was enacted to guarantee access to justice for victims of sexual violence.

Colombian organisations also played an important role in creating and getting passed Resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council on Peace, Women and Security in 2000.

“WE DISCOVERED INCREDIBLE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN WHO MADE NEIGHBOURHOODS, WHO TRANSCENDED THEIR PAIN AND CREATED SOCIAL FABRIC, BECAUSE THEIR CONDITION AS MOTHER, DAUGHTER, CARER BUT ALSO ACTIVIST, LEADER AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER WAS BROUGHT TO THE FORE”

WOMEN FOR PEACE

These women, who have often been very hard hit by the armed conflict, inequality, poverty and discrimination, before and during the current peace process, have nonetheless been an engine for peace building. It is them who, more than anyone, believe that a country at peace is possible, in the face of a generally sceptical society.¹² In March 2015, in a moment when the conflict's violence was escalating, they sent a statement asking for an immediate bilateral ceasefire.¹³

In the Colombian peace process, which entered its public phase in August 2012, women have played a crucial role since the start. Victims participated widely in the process of drafting the agreements. Of the five victims' delegations of twelve people each who travelled to Havana, most of the delegates were women.¹⁴ In the three forums (spaces for citizen participation in the peace process) on the issues tabled for agreement, 85% of participants were women.¹⁵

More than 5,000 women marched in Bogota, in December, to express their support for the Colombian peace process.¹⁶ Eighteen women's and LGBTI organisations were invited to the table in Havana, to make recommendations to the Sub-commission on Gender.¹⁷ The organisations contributed to the agreements with important proposals on the search for disappeared persons,¹⁸ and particularly disappeared women, a focus on women's rights and sexual violence in the Truth Commission¹⁹ and demands to demilitarise land as a guarantee of non-repetition for women.²⁰

After pressure from the women's movement, the Sub-commission on Gender was set up at the negotiating tables in Havana in September 2014.²¹ The Sub-commission is made up of five members from each delegation, is supported by external advisers and meets at least once during each cycle.²²

In general, the Sub-commission was received positively, but there was criticism about the absence of a woman's vision at the negotiating tables. The publication of the report of the Commission on Truth, Cohabitation and Non-repetition in February 2015, which dealt with the history of the armed conflict in Colombia, its causes and origins, factors for its resilience, and the impact on the Colombian population, did not reflect the will to include a gender focus, with 13 of the 14 essays of the report drafted by men and none focusing on the impact of the conflict on women. There is only one woman taking part at the negotiation tables.²³ The Sub-commission on Gender is one of three subcommittees and is of equal standing to the others.

Through the input from the organisations and from the forums, recommendations made to the Sub-commission on Gender, reports on the situation of women in the country and the countless actions each day to affirm their rights and those of their families, women defenders will continue to play a fundamental role in what remains of the peace process.



Photo: Julian Montoni

1. El Tiempo. Ellas no Callan. No date
2. ABColombia. Mujeres y violencia sexual en el conflicto y el proceso de paz. November 2013
3. El Nuevo Día. El conflicto ha tenido un impacto desproporcionado en mujeres y niñas. 7 March 2015
4. El ciudadano. Ni una mujer menos: en Colombia hay 4 femicidios al día y un 90 % de impunidad. 6 February 2015
5. RCN. Fiscalía investiga 272 denuncias por ataques con ácido en Colombia. 2 February 2016
6. El mundo. Ácido de género. 18 October 2015
7. El Tiempo. Las señales de que el país es un mejor vivero. 21 March 2015
8. Sisma mujer. Los derechos de las mujeres en Colombia y la esperanza de un escenario de paz. No date
9. El Espectador. Negociación con aroma de mujer. 18 July 2015
10. Quarterly Bulletin of the Information System on Attacks against Human Rights Defenders in Colombia, SIADDHH, Trabajo por la Paz = Amenazado/a, 23 October 2015
11. Human Rights Watch: Rights Out of Reach, 14 November 2012
12. Sisma Mujer. Los derechos de las mujeres y la esperanza de la paz en Colombia, p. 4. 3 March 2015
13. El Tiempo. Dirigentes de organizaciones de mujeres en la Habana. 17 March 2015
14. El País. "Las mujeres han sufrido demasiado por el conflicto": representante de la ONU. 9 March 2015
15. El Espectador. Negociación con aroma de mujer. 18 July 2015
16. La Ruta Pacífica. Mas de 5000 mujeres recorren el país por la refundación de la paz.
17. El Espectador. Negociación con aroma de mujer. 18 July 2015
18. Fucsia.co. primer informe sobre desapariciones forzadas de mujeres en Colombia. No date
19. El Tiempo. Dirigentes de organizaciones de mujeres en la Habana. 17 March 2015
20. Gara. "Un 52% de las mujeres pide la desmilitarización como garantía de no repetición". 14 February 2015
21. Mesa de Conversaciones. Comunicado Conjunto. 11 September 2014
22. Mesa de Conversaciones. Comunicado Conjunto. 11 September 2014
23. Fucsia.co. "Es inaceptable que las mujeres deban suplicar para estar en la construcción de paz". No date

The women of Puente Nayero







ESPACIO HUMANITARIO PUENTE NAYERO

Protegido con Medidas Cautelares otorgadas por la CIDH.

Defendiendo el territorio construyendo la paz.

stian
aid

FOS - COLOMBIA
Fondo para la Sociedad Civil



The Puente Nayero Humanitarian Space is a community initiative that enables local people to continue to live on their land, despite being besieged by the dynamics of armed conflict and violence.





The view from Puente Nayero street. Fishing, which is done by the men, is an important source of income for families. Women earn their living gathering shellfish, growing plantain, working as domestic helpers, midwives and street sellers.





A girl makes the most of the water, which is available every three days, to wash.





Before coming to Buenaventura, many families lived in remote rural areas in the Naya river basin.





Women and men wait their turn to fill the barrels with water in the three or four water collection points in Puente Nayero's street.



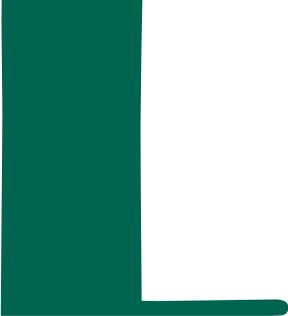


At low tide the large amounts of rubbish underneath the houses is striking. With the heat, the stink becomes so intense that it stings the nostrils.





Buenaventura's port is one of the largest in the country. Rapid growth in trade in the Asia-Pacific region has increased shipping in southwest Colombia.



ola and her parents came by sea on a canoe to get to Buenaventura and the journey lasted eight days. It was 1956 and Lola was just eight years old. Her parents built a wooden house on stilts resting on the bottom of the sea, where Lola was to live her whole life.

When the tide rose, the house became an island surrounded by sea; when the tide went out, Lola and her friends would climb down to play hide and seek under the houses. Lola's father cut wood and built a bridge to connect their house with the others and with the land. Lola had a peaceful and happy childhood, despite the absence of drinking water and electricity. When she grew up she started a business: she would go with her motorboat to buy coconut, fish, oranges or gasoline that she sold from the first floor of her house. She had two children and because business was going well she adopted nine others; they had a "sweet" life on the second floor of her house.¹

Meanwhile, the neighbourhood grew. When one day, in 1990, a girl fell off the bridge and drowned, Lola and her neighbours decided to roll up their sleeves and started building a street. They did not want a tragedy like to this to happen ever again. During five years they filled the street with rubbish which brought flies, mosquitos,

and illnesses, and under the midday heat the bad smell would fill the air, becoming unbearable. Despite all the discomfort, at night people would play the marimba and have a good time. When they finished there was a huge celebration- at last the families could sit in front of their humble homes, the women swapping recipes, gossiping and playing cards. Despite their poverty they lived happily. There was something beautiful there, trust and respect.

Doña Lola started hearing about the armed groups in 2000. Every day new stories would reach them of the guerrillas and paramilitaries inflicting terror. In 2001, many people came to her neighbourhood looking for a new home, fleeing from the Naya River where the paramilitaries had massacred and displaced the Afro-Colombian communities.² Nostalgia for their memories of their previous lives gave name to the neighbourhood of the Bridge of the Nayeros.

In 2004, the Calima Block of the United Self Defence Forces of

Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia) demobilised; gradually, in the neighbourhoods of Buenaventura,³ the paramilitaries' successor armed groups began to appear. The Urabeños and La Empresa began to fight for control of Buenaventura, and a long era of violence began for the city. One of Doña Lola's sons was disappeared. "I lost my mind. He was my son, my friend, my confidant. He washed our clothes, did the dishes, cooked for me on Sundays", she remembers as she falls into a sad silence.

BULLETS FOR BREAKFAST, LUNCH AND DINNER

La Chava will never forget 1 November 2013, when around 15 armed men from La Empresa came and occupied the street of Puente Nayero. Since that day, she lived in fear: there were frequent gun battles, "bullets for breakfast, lunch and dinner, even for snacks...There were four, five, six or seven shoot outs a day". She was afraid for her three sons because she knew that they recruited boys and young people.

"They killed a boy, they wrapped him in plastic and put him underneath a house", was the first act of violence they committed in the street. They turned one of the houses into a 'chopping house' and would go there at night arm in arm with people as if they were friends, kill them by machete and throw their bodies into the sea. She remembers the screams of the victims, their begging, the sound of the chainsaw. The sea and the mangroves turned into cemeteries of mutilated bodies. There was a collective sense of powerlessness, nobody dared say anything, the women tried to carry on normal lives, locked in their homes. La Chava suffered from anxiety, she didn't eat and didn't sleep. The women were forced to cook for the invaders, to wash their clothes. Sometimes they would force the women to hide guns in their houses and the children to carry them in pots or their schoolbags.

Marly was just 22 when the armed men came. When one of them wanted to go out with her she did not know what to do, she felt fear and anguish. She locked herself in her house, hiding behind a curtain to look out of the window, watching the armed men sitting on the sidewalk near her house. She

was terrified. "If you didn't accept them, they would just, somewhere, take you by force". Speaking out was not an option either because of the possible reprisals. "If I speak out, they will kill my family." That was her greatest fear.

They were locked in their small and suffocating houses for nearly two years. But when they killed Marisol, a much loved seafood seller in the neighbourhood, indignation overcame fear.

They sought out the help of the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP) and planned a daring strategy. It was Palm Sunday (13 April 2013), and while the Bishop of Buenaventura was holding mass in the street, members of CIJP came too. That is how the Puente Nayero Humanitarian Space was created, a community initiative to continue living on their land, despite the onslaught of the dynamics of armed conflict and violence. It was the first experience of a Humanitarian Space in a city.

In the entrance they built a large wooden door that they closed at night. Most of the armed men left, some came back, but the neighbours made it difficult for them so that they wouldn't return. Then finally, they left the neighbourhood for good. A few days after the Humanitarian Space was created, CIJP asked the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights for precautionary measures to protect the residents. Today, the police watches the street 24 hours a day, as a result of those measures.

Today the women feel protected within the Humanitarian Space, but Buenaventura continues to be one of the most violent cities in Colombia. "We are more at ease in the streets, the men go and fish, they go outside, but they continue to be afraid", says Marta, whose husband is a fisherman. "When they're fishing they feel afraid, some of them have had their engines, their tools or their catch stolen".

Since Palm Sunday, La Chava, Marta and Marly have become leaders of the street. It is something positive that came from that nightmare. They have created a women's group and there are now 28 of them who meet regularly, celebrate birthdays, sweep the street from the edge of the sea to the entrance door, and organise bingo. The group is called 'Peace and Love' because



Doña Lola was one of the first people to live in Puente Nayero.

“We don’t want any more violence, we want to feed this space with good things, and live happily with our neighbours and friends,” Marta explains.

The women must follow a difficult path to change their situation and overcome all the obstacles in order to survive in the midst of poverty.

The street is transformed when the water comes, every three or four days, they never know what day or what time. At four

in the morning, and after two days’ waiting, finally the water comes to Puente Nayero. The women appear with their empty barrels, at the three or four water collection points that exist, and while they wait patiently they talk and laugh. Some of the water pipes run under the houses, and the women have to get in the mud and the rubbish to fill the barrels. Marta has just filled hers and after a deep breath, gathers her strength, grits her teeth and lifts up a 22 litre water barrel



These days, children play in the street day and night.

in each hand, and marches home.

From the edge of Puente Nayero the women watch the sea. A small distance away is the port where around 12 million tonnes of cargo are offloaded every year.⁴ Buenaventura has become one of Colombia's main ports, a port that is apparently seeking to progress, but meanwhile, 80% of the population live in poverty,⁵ like Marta, Lola, Marly and La Chava.

1. Text based on interviews with four women in the Puente Nayero Humanitarian Space, January 2016
2. El Espectador: La masacre del naya, 4 July 2009
3. Human Rights Watch: The Crisis in Buenaventura, 2014
4. CIJP and Mundubat: Buenaventura El despojo para la competitividad, May 2015
5. El Tiempo: Desigualdad, amenazas y conflicto afectan al Valle, 16 May 2013



NOCHE NIEBLA

RS

ESTUDIO

Trujillo, la otra versión



**“I didn’t join a
religious order
to live in a
convent”**



The Association of Relatives of Victims is an example of resistance and building memory in Trujillo, a place that was, between 1986 and 1994, the scene of acts of such cruelty that they are far beyond comprehension.





Maritze Trigos' optimism cannot be dampened. She is very easy to listen to. Captivated, I hold on to her words, the tone of her voice and her noble smile that hides nothing. I remember that day I met her. I had just crossed half the country

to get to Tulua in Valle del Cauca. It was early in the morning and Maritze escaped her house to come and pick me up for us to go together to Trujillo, a place where she accompanied a group of victims who survived events that I will explain later. The affectionate welcoming hug that she gave me made me feel that the person I had in front of me was my grandmother.

Maritze is an unconventional nun, who has spent more than half a century working to defend human rights. Her biography, more than being emotive, is that of a tireless woman, a fighter, a dreamer, given over to other people. We would ask ourselves: how did she become the leader that she is?

She grew up in an environment with a lot of love, sensitivity and freedom. She laughs as she recalls that in that time, it was rare to see girls riding bicycles in trousers: "You're going to lose her!" the sisters would cry to her mother, meaning Maritze. Even if the family environment was not very religious, she was educated with Dominicans from the age of three, a

very disciplined education that she is very thankful to have received.

It was in Bucaramanga, where she arrived when she was fourteen to finish high school, the city where she began to open her eyes a little more. There she got to know the reality of the poorest neighbourhoods of the city. Despite being a dancer and a lover of life, this touched her conscience. There she also discovered that a religious life was a good option to fight for others and for a more dignified society. So, to the surprise of many, she took her first big decision at the age of seventeen: to enter a convent.

Six months later, during an exchange between European and Latin-American nuns, she set off on one of the most decisive journeys of her life, going to France to continue her theology studies. Another world, another culture, another reality. The existentialist current had just reached its peak and young Maritze, thirsty for knowledge, could study the texts of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. It was also there that she discovered Paulo Freire and

his proposals for liberating education, Simone de Beauvoir and her writings on the value of woman, and where she could drink up the words of Marie Poussepin, founder of the Dominican Congregation of the Presentation in the XVIII century, a “sensitive, audacious, creative woman who really held a position of social leadership in her time, despite the obstacles in life.” In fact, that description made me think a lot of Maritze.

It was the beginning of the 1960s and France was living a delicate situation with many protests about ways of life and restrictions on rights. In that same decade, Maritze witnessed moments that shaped

forth, when they saw her firm devotion to community causes, and how this was her life, they let her take her permanent vows, accepting her as she is and letting her live a religious life with a lot of freedom.

Since then she has been living and working in the most wretched areas, battered most by the Colombian armed conflict.

She remembers, for example, her years of working with drug addicts and homeless people in the area of Bogota known as el Cartucho, where the city’s biggest narcotics distribution centre was operating. She has had to live difficult moments. Giving herself to others in a human rights perspective has

MARITZE IS AN UNCONVENTIONAL NUN, WHO HAS SPENT MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY WORKING TO DEFEND HUMAN RIGHTS. HER BIOGRAPHY, MORE THAN BEING EMOTIVE, IS THAT OF A TIRELESS WOMAN, A FIGHTER, A DREAMER, GIVEN OVER TO OTHER PEOPLE.

history, such as the Second Vatican Council or the revolution of May 1968. But perhaps one of the most vibrant and impacting moments for her was the feeling that “in Europe they were ensuring the life of Father Camilo Torres would never be forgotten”, for his contribution as a priest, sociologist, humanist, social leader, pioneer in liberation theology, beyond his option of joining, at the end of 1965, the ranks of the guerrilla organisation the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN).¹

Maritze returned to Bogota at the beginning of the 1970s, with more political preparation and a firmer life choice than ever, that of wanting to live a religious life in a different way: “I didn’t join a religious order to live in a convent, but to live amongst the people.” A freethinking and stubborn woman, she did not want to agree to all the rules of her order and broke several times with Dominican tradition; giving classes in public institutions, not wearing a habit, participating in marches, living with the people. For that, she was expelled three times. Finally, after years of going back and

not been without cost to her. She describes how she lived and had to face a paramilitary incursion, or the time they pointed a gun at her when she thought she was living the last moments of her life.

I have walked the streets, squares and corners of Trujillo at Maritze’s side. She walks with confidence and misses nothing and nobody. She greets everyone with spontaneity and warmth, they call her ‘little sister’ with reciprocal affection. This municipality, which seems to breathe tranquillity in the middle of the mountains and abundant vegetation, was the scene, in 1986 and 1994, of acts of cruelty that go much further than anyone can comprehend, and that stained the community with the innocent blood of 342 people. This systematic act of annihilating the civilian population, known as the sadly famous ‘Massacre of Trujillo’, happened in the context of a struggle to control this strategic corridor to the Pacific, in the midst of which the population is constantly accused of helping the illegal armed insurgent groups that are present in the area.



In Monument Park there are more than 230 ossuaries, one for each year of the horror, and written on them are the names of the victims and their job or profession.

In Trujillo, Maritze has accompanied the Association of Relatives of the Victims of Trujillo (AFAVIT) for over fifteen years and gives them support in processes for reparation and collective memory like a “cry for justice, a permanent testimony, a claim for our rights”. She started a human rights training process with AFAVIT, from which good leaders have emerged. She retrieved the remains of 66 tortured bodies from the earth, with her own hands, during an exhumation process of people who were disappeared during the massacre.

These remains now rest in ossuaries of the emblematic and beautiful Monument Park which commemorates the victims, who were dignified through sculptures made of clay by their relatives, which serve as a homage and a way of facing the grief of losing their loved ones.

Having accompanied Maritze and had the opportunity to see her relationship with the people of Trujillo, you glimpse in her gaze the admiration that she feels for the family members of the victims. Twenty years after the facts, this small group of



In Trujillo, Maritze has accompanied the Association of Relatives of the Victims of Trujillo (AFAVIT) for over 15 years.

young and old continues to exist and call for justice, despite the adversity it carries with it, turning them into symbols of moral strength and resistance.

I could write you a whole novel on Maritze's life. In fact, many of them, because it is difficult to imagine all the experiences of pain and hope that she has lived in just one life. In this sense I admire Martize a lot, such a low profile, and such a great woman. Nonetheless, what makes me feel the most privileged, is that with the passing of time she has become a very special person in my

life, a great friend and a source of inspiration for all of us women who want to contribute to the transformation of our reality with a special focus on human rights.

1. Camilo Torres died in his first combat against Colombian Army forces in the area of Patio Cemento, in the municipality of San Vicente de Chucuri (Santander), 15 February 1966.

The white dress

*On the edge of a cliff
garments were found
of a body that was
not breathing anymore.*

Erik Arellana Bautista



**In memory of Nydia Erika Bautista
1955 - 1987**



MY NAME IS YANETTE. AND WHAT I WILL TELL YOU ISN'T EXACTLY MY STORY, ALTHOUGH I AM PART OF IT, JUST LIKE THE WATER FROM A RIVER IS ALSO IN THE SEA.



MY PARENTS DOMI AND ALFONSO HAD SIX CHILDREN, AND I GREW UP SURROUNDED BY MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

AND IT WAS THE ELDEST, NYDIA ERIKA, WHO WOULD MARK OUR LIVES FOREVER.



WE ENJOYED BEING IN THE PATIO WITH TOBITA AND MUERGANO, THE PARROT THAT IMITATED MY MOTHER WHEN SHE COUGHED.



WE WOULD PLAY AT WHAT WE WOULD BE WHEN WE GREW UP. NYDIA WANTED TO HELP PEOPLE. I DREAMED OF MAKING SPEECHES.

ONE DAY MY FATHER TOOK HER TO BOLIVAR SQUARE.



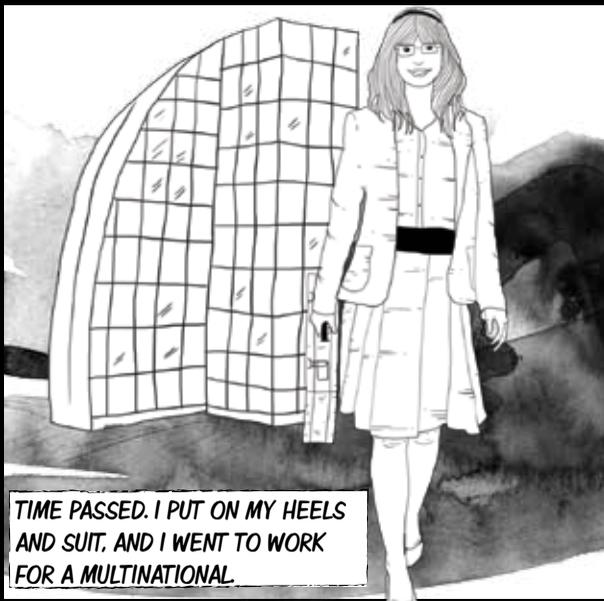
THEY TOOK THIS PICTURE WHERE HE IS HOLDING HER LIKE A BABY. SHE HAD BROUGHT SOMETHING OUT IN HIM. A LIBERAL MAN WITH POLITICAL IDEAS FOR THE PEOPLE. WHEN SHE GOT HOME, SHE TOLD ME:

WHEN I GROW UP
I WANT TO HELP
PEOPLE.

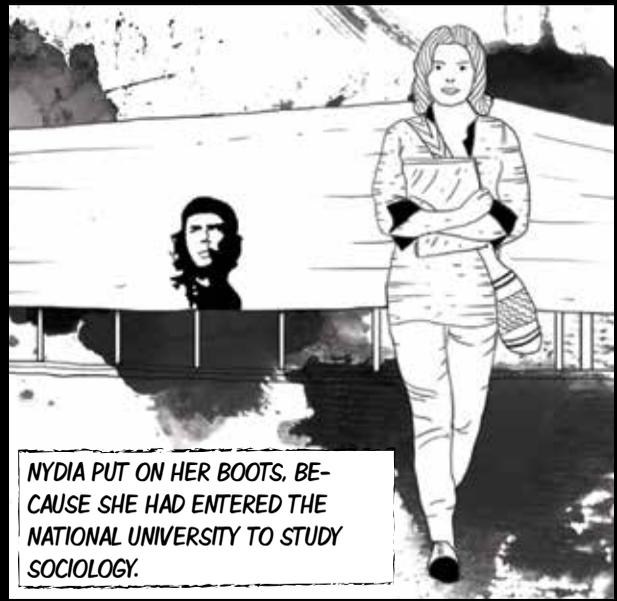
AND HOW?

I DON'T KNOW
YET.





TIME PASSED. I PUT ON MY HEELS AND SUIT, AND I WENT TO WORK FOR A MULTINATIONAL.



NYDIA PUT ON HER BOOTS, BECAUSE SHE HAD ENTERED THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY TO STUDY SOCIOLOGY.



GONE WERE OUR CHILDHOOD CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS WHEN SHE WOULD TALK TO MY COUSINS ABOUT POLITICS LIKE SHE WAS A GROWN WOMAN.



LATER CAME THE FIRST BOYFRIENDS IN OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD.



THE FIRST PARTIES WITH OUR FRIENDS.



TOGETHER WITH OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, WE BEGAN BUILDING OUR LIVES, BUT SOMETHING GOT STUCK IN THE WHEEL AND BROKE IT.



NYDIA HAD A SON: SHE NAMED HIM ERIK.



I HAD A DAUGHTER: I NAMED HER ANDREA.



BIRTHDAYS UNITED US AND WE WOULD CELEBRATE THEM TOGETHER.



ONE DAY SHE TOLD ME WHAT SHE HAD BEEN DOING, BUT I ALREADY KNEW DEEP DOWN.



YOU REMEMBER WHEN WE WERE GIRLS AND ONE DAY I TOLD YOU THAT WHEN I GREW UP I WANTED TO HELP PEOPLE?



I REMEMBER IT WAS BEDTIME.

WELL THE TIME HAS COME AND ONLY A REVOLUTION WILL WORK. WE HAVE TO CHANGE THE RULES OF POWER.





HERE IT'S ALWAYS BEEN THE RICH IN CHARGE. IT HAS TO CHANGE. THAT NIGHT I HAD A DREAM. IT MIGHT BE NAÏVE BUT IT KEEPS RECURRING TO THIS DAY.



I DREAMED THAT PEOPLE COULD FLY AND WERE FREE. THEY FLEW LIKE BIRDS.



SHAME IT'S ONLY DREAM, NYDIA.



YOU NEVER THINK THE VIOLENCE WILL REACH YOU.



NYDIA WAS A PROFESSIONAL WOMAN. SHE STARTED A SECOND DEGREE IN ECONOMICS IN 1982.



AND LIKE IT ALWAYS IS WITH TRAGEDY, THE DAY WE LEAST EXPECTED IT, IT CAME KNOCKING ON OUR DOOR.



IT WAS 30TH AUGUST 1987, DURING ERIK AND ANDREA'S FIRST COMMUNION.



MUM I WANT MORE CAKE!

WAIT 'TIL EVERYONE HAS EATEN, THEN YOU CAN HAVE SECONDS.

NYDIA I HAVE TO GO, IT'S GETTING LATE.

I'LL WALK HER TO THE BUS, MERCEDES









MINUTES PASSED, HOURS, DAYS, WEEKS, MONTHS, YEARS AND WE HAD NO NEWS OF NYDIA. THERE'S NOTHING MORE HORRIBLE THAN NOT KNOWING WHAT'S HAPPENED TO SOMEONE.

SEE HER DISAPPEAR. HOW CRUSHED YOU FEEL WHEN YOU UNDERSTAND THAT YESTERDAY SHE WAS WITH YOU, BUT NOT TODAY. TO NEVER SEE HER FACE, HER SMILE AGAIN.

NOT HEAR HER VOICE. HER WORDS. NEVER SEE HER AGAIN. HOW CAN THIS HAPPEN IN A DEMOCRACY?

I DREAM OF HER IN THE WHITE DRESS SHE DISAPPEARED IN AND I HEAR HER TELLING ME: "I SHINE WITH MY OWN LIGHT"

WE TOOK TO THE STREETS TO SHOUT FOR THEM TO BRING HER BACK ALIVE, BUT THEY HAD ALREADY KILLED HER. AFTERWARDS I DIDN'T HAVE THE SAME STRENGTH TO SHOUT ANYMORE.

BUT WE WEREN'T GOING TO LET HER DISAPPEAR. WE WERE GOING TO LOOK FOR HER UNTIL WE FOUND HER.

THEY GAVE US A BLACK BAG WITH HER REMAINS. WITH HER WHITE DRESS, TORN AND FILTHY. THAT'S WHAT THEY GAVE US OF NYDIA.



MY FATHER CARRIED HER REMAINS, AND OUR FAMILY GAVE HER A DIGNIFIED BURIAL.



THE ALLEGED KILLERS, AN ARMY GENERAL AND OTHER SOLDIERS, WERE SACKED.



BUT WE CONTINUE TO ASK FOR A VERDICT OF DISAPPEARANCE, WHICH HASN'T BEEN GIVEN.



WE GOT DEATH THREATS AND HAD TO FLEE THE COUNTRY. ANDREA AND ERIK GREW UP ABROAD. I GREW OLD HERE, BUT THEY COULDN'T KEEP US QUIET. WE CONTINUED TO DENOUNCE NYDIA'S FORCED DISAPPEARANCE AND THOSE OF HUNDREDS OF OTHERS WHO MET THE SAME FATE. I ONLY THINK ABOUT ONE THING: FOR THERE TO BE JUSTICE AND, GODWILLING, FOR NYDIA ERIKA'S DREAM TO BECOME REALITY.

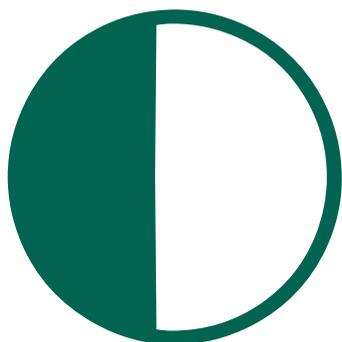




Between the jungle and the city







n the shores of the River San Juan near a dense jungle that links the Valle del Cauca and Choco, there is a small Wounaan Nonam indigenous village, called Santa Rosa de Guayacan. Here, in a house built on stilts, made of rustic wooden planks and a zinc roof

(the characteristic housing in these lands anchored to the Colombian Pacific), Marcia Mejia Chirimia was born 28 years ago.¹

As a girl she spent her time playing with her friends in the stream; when she grew up she fell in love and had two children. As soon as the mist that envelops the jungle each morning lifted, she would go in her canoe to her farmlands in the mountain where she grew bananas, Chinese potato, corn, cassava and sugarcane. In the afternoon, she carried big buckets of water to her house. It was a peaceful and happy life. Marcia never left her land and talked almost only in her Wounaan mother tongue, a language which she shares with 9,000 other people on the Pacific coast.² Women are responsible for protecting and transmitting the community's knowledge.

Everything changed in 2010: the violence and threats against leaders had become unbearable, hooded men were seen around the village and no-one dared go to the farmlands to tend their crops, to the rivers to fish, or to the forest to hunt.

The villagers found themselves confined and started to go hungry. The women were afraid for their children.

In despair, they abandoned their village and sought refuge in the city. They packed a few belongings, abandoned their chickens and geese and left via the River San Juan towards Buenaventura, one of Colombia's biggest ports. There they set up in a warehouse, (converted to a refuge, in an industrial area), and they lived there for eleven months. This was a nightmarish time for Marcia. 24 families, men, women, boys and girls, lived, slept and cooked in one overcrowded space covered in mattresses, bundles of food and cooking implements.

"We had a very, very bad life in Buenaventura; we had no electricity, no water, nothing," she remembers. "The children did not want to eat because what we received through humanitarian aid was food that they had never eaten. They were not used to the flavour...It was a very frightening thing, and sometimes I wish I never had to remember those times".



Marcia Mejia Chirimia is a recognised leader in her Wounaan Nonam community.

**“WE HAD A VERY, VERY BAD LIFE
IN BUENAVENTURA; WE HAD
NO ELECTRICITY, NO WATER,
NOTHING”**

The worst thing was the lack of water; very nearby there was a dry creek, contaminated by black water and waste from the industrial plants. The children bathed there and had constant rashes, and the women washed clothes there. “It caused a lot of illness”.

With a sense of great powerlessness, Marci remembers how they were treated by the authorities. No-one knew how to ask for what they were entitled to, they started knocking on the doors of all the Government institutions to get support. Marcia remembers that the officials had “very nice words, very polished,” but that they always came away without any

actions to improve their situation. They were demoralised, “everything was going badly.” Finally, they decided to go back to their lands, knowing that the men with the guns would still be there.

Coming back was hard; their houses had been ransacked in their absence, the jungle had grown over much of the village, and the wooden planks in their houses were rotting from lack of maintenance. The women set down their loads, cleaned the land and looked for seeds to sow food.

During their displacement they had met members of the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP), who had talked to them about humanitarian zones that exist in other rural areas in Colombia. They learned about their experiences and mechanisms for resisting in the midst of the armed conflict.

When they came back they created a humanitarian refuge, the women painted big fences and with brightly coloured letters painted “Humanitarian and Biodiversity Reserve, exclusively for the Civilian



When the Wounaan Nonam families returned to their lands they created a humanitarian reserve and forbade the entrance of armed actors to their village.

Population". From then on the fences have marked the territory and warn the armed actors that they cannot enter. Marcia feels a little more tranquil knowing the Inter-Church Commission denounces the presence of armed actors on their land. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted them precautionary protection measures due to their vulnerable situation.

However, because of fear of fighting between neo-paramilitaries, guerrillas and the Army, they often stop going into the jungle, and stop fishing and hunting. They have seen waves of neighbouring villagers

**BECAUSE OF FEAR OF
FIGHTING BETWEEN
NEO-PARAMILITARIES,
GUERRILLAS AND THE
ARMY, THEY OFTEN STOP
GOING INTO THE JUNGLE,
AND STOP FISHING AND
HUNTING**



Santa Rosa de Guayacan has 120 inhabitants.

coming down the river, fleeing the violence.

Coming back to Santa Rosa de Guayacan, Marcia decided to get actively involved in claiming the rights of her indigenous people. Since then, her life has changed completely, now she lives in Buenaventura again and is the very visible face of her community before the authorities. Every Saturday, she gets up early in the morning, gets on the chiva bus and then a boat to travel three hours from Buenaventura to Santa Rosa de Guayacan. When she gets there, she changes her city clothes for a brightly coloured short skirt and a bead

necklace and enjoys the weekend with her family. On Mondays she returns to Buenaventura.

It is a big sacrifice to be separated from her family, from her partner, her two children (who are seven and nine) and the peaceful life of the country, and she misses waking up early with the birdsong. "For me it's very hard, as a mother, to be far from my children." When they ask her "Mama, why don't you come, when are you coming?" Marcia tells them the story of the Spanish conquest, a history of blood, resistance and survival, she tells them of the sacrifices

of their ancestors and the need to keep fighting for the survival of their people. She tells them about the study of the Colombian Constitutional Court that tells her that hers is one of the 34 indigenous groups in Colombia who are at risk of disappearing.³

Luckily, she has the unconditional support of her family who admire her for the work that she does. When she speaks in public, people listen with interest and admiration. Her dream is to be an advocate, not just for her community, but for all the indigenous people of Colombia. "If I stay quiet, who is going to hear us?" She encourages other women to get involved in leadership, but the potential dangers, like the threats, discourage many of them. Maria is also afraid of the risks that it implies, but until people in Colombia know what is really happening in the rural communities, she will not give up.

And, how does Marcia imagine peace in Colombia? "Oh God!" she cries, "they're only putting down some weapons, but peace, really, is still a long way off"

A very strong effort is needed for peace to come to lands like hers. She sees that a peace that she calls "whole" is still far away. It is unimaginable that there can be "peace with hunger, without education, without health, without shelter, without land, without water," and that continues to be the reality that her community is living.

1. Text based on an interview with Marcia Mejia Chirimia, January 2016

2. Ministry of the Interior: Plan de salvaguardia étnica, 2012

3. Constitutional Court: Auto 004, 26 January 2009

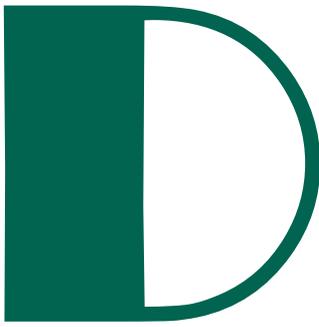






Hannah Matthews, a British volunteer (on the left) poses with Doña Irene Ramirez (on the right).

From a commitment to small-scale farmers to political leadership



Doña Irene Ramirez represents one of the largest organisations of “campesinos” (small-scale farmers), an organisation that works for the integral defence of the human rights of campesinos in Magdalena Medio. Irene began her work with the Peasant Farmer

Association of the Cimitarra River Valley (ACVC) in 2008, after being involved in the farming community’s struggle since she was a child.

Although she did not study, her parents always taught her the importance of the countryside for Colombians, and the need to demand recognition for the rights of farmers. Irene is a humble person and conscious of the reality around her, everything she does, is for the communities of people who have suffered so much from the extreme violence the country has lived through, and continues to experience.

Irene tells us how in 2003, paramilitaries killed her brother when he was just 32 years old, in southern Bolivar, he was a leader in the farming community. Since then, Irene has been involved in the Community Action Boards’ search for a more dignified life for the farmers and a way out of the vicious cycles of violence.

The change of lifestyle from the peaceful farming communities of Puerto Matilde to the noise and chaos of Barrancabermeja, has been hard for Irene. Her commitment to farmers motivated her to take an active role in the political and social struggle to defend their land and build peace from the grassroots up.

Irene compares the regions where the ACVC works to schools for learning, where knowledge can be shared, organisational processes are strengthened and where people who live from the land can seek a dignified life.

The ACVC is preparing itself for the new post-conflict era in Colombia and considering what it will really mean for

farmers in Magdalena Medio. Irene believes that the ACVC will have an important role when peace is signed, in demanding the fulfilment of the peace agreements by the Government and promoting models for peace in rural areas.

The ACVC has created productive projects in rural areas, which represent genuine alternatives to the neoliberal economic model imposed by the Colombian State and the rest of the world, Irene comments. “These projects are implemented in the Family Farmers’ Reservation Zone of Magdalena Medio, a legal entity which protects the land and the farmers so they can live their lives without threats from megaprojects or large single-owned estates”. Some of these projects include the innovative buffalo project and a national-scale cooperative for farmers to receive a fair price for their products.

Irene is a strong example of a woman who, in spite of the machismo of the countryside, has reached an important position in the social movement in Colombia. She hopes that she can be an inspiration to her female colleagues in the countryside so they recognise that they too are capable, and without their input, a true and sustainable peace will not be possible.

Irene emphasises the importance of education in rural areas. She recognises that before getting involved with the social movement and the ACVC, she neither knew what her rights were, nor demanded their enforcement. It is fundamental that all those who live in rural areas take ownership of their rights to carry on their struggle and keep building peace in Colombia.



Iris is one of the only women's voices to be heard in the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights.

The sacrifices of a leader, wife and mother



ris has only been working with the Regional Corporation for Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS) for a year. Before that, she worked for 14 years with the Association of Displaced Persons Living in Barrancabermeja Municipality (ASODESAMUBA), and has also taken part as coordinator and vice-president of several

regional and national victims' round-tables.

Iris is a victim of forced displacement, due to violence, from the area of La Esperanza in Cantagallo municipality (southern Bolivar). She arrived in Barrancabermeja in 2000 with her family and began organising humanitarian assistance for the 70 families who were displaced alongside her. Here she started to develop her commitment to the victims of the armed conflict in Colombia.

Iris' work as a human rights defender in Barrancabermeja has brought her death threats and defamation at regional and also national levels. Because she has been targeted with threats and has suffered persecution, she has had to learn ways and strategies for overcoming fear and continuing with her work. This had an impact on her husband's life and those of her six children, who are very aware of the risk that comes with this kind of work and the sacrifices that she makes as a wife and mother. Despite the risks, Iris remains committed to working for justice for victims around the country, with the support of her family that is so important to her. As Iris says "you have to turn and face the wind because nothing comes for free!"

Her experience of being displaced trained her in the need to fight for human rights. The displacement also showed her that gender roles are not as rigid as she had been taught as a child in typical chauvinist

environments. When her family was displaced she went to find work in the city, and her husband stayed at home to look after the children.

Iris' voice is one of the only women's voices to be heard in CREDHOS. She recognises that being a woman has meant overcoming various obstacles during her career, especially the impact of her workload on her family. But she feels comfortable and happy working with the men at CREDHOS, who recognise the significant knowledge and capacity she possesses. She says that even though changes and advances on the subject of gender have taken place within social organisations, State institutions do not apply a differential focus to women, particularly on the issue of victims, so it is still very important to continue demanding recognition.

On the issue of the peace process and negotiations in Havana, Iris expressed her concern for the lack of guarantees that will genuinely protect civil society. She believes that this will be a year when a lot will happen, because it will be the "year of peace", and social organisations need to be ready for what is to come.

The real peace process has only just begun in the country and Iris is certain that it will not be an easy road, but we have to keep up the struggle.



Doña Blanca, a Wayuu woman from the department of Guajira, accompanies victims in the search for justice.

**“The struggle has
made me strong...
it fills me with life”**



lanca Nubia Diaz has spent over 30 years working for justice and truth for the victims of the armed conflict in Colombia. She has known PBI since 2002, and always brings energy and happiness when she stops by the organisation's house in Bogota.

She was born in Cousepa (Guajira), and her trajectory in human rights was indirect to start, because she knew nothing of the armed groups in the country, although she had heard about threats and killings in her region. She began her career as a nurse and worked in indigenous communities in many different parts of the country, including Antioquia, Putumayo, Choco and Cesar. Conditions were very hard, with very long days when she would be up before dawn and walk 15km to reach the rural areas where she worked.

She cultivated people's trust, and learnt a lot about traditional knowledge, customs, dances, arts and herbal remedies of the indigenous people. But she also became very conscious of the discrimination and poverty: "I saw the injustice there is in the country, for the small-scale farmers as well as the indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. Seeing them, I suffered as if they were my own family". That is how she started talking to the authorities about health problems and malnutrition in the communities and bringing people to urban centres for medical attention.

As the years went by, Blanca distinguished herself in her community as a person who knows about people's rights and needs, and they started to come to ask for her accompaniment during property transactions, land registration and medical appointments. Because there was so much discrimination against indigenous people, Afro-Colombians and women, Blanca's role was to ensure that their rights were respected and that they were not misled. In 1986 she joined the Association of Indigenous Family Farmer and Black Women of Colombia (ANMUCIC)

The struggle has not been without pain or fear: "I am one more victim of the conflict in this country, of the illegal armed groups"; Blanca says. ANMUCIC has also been the target of threats.

Her husband and other members of her family died in the armed conflict, and in 2001, her daughter Irina del Carmen Villero Diaz, was raped, tortured and killed by paramilitaries in Guajira. Blanca was forced to leave her community and move to Bogota.

She values her struggle as something fundamental in her life, her time with ANMUCIC was an empowering experience, like "a diploma where we women learned to speak up, be brave and face up to the State about our rights and our land".

In 2005, Blanca became one of the founding members of the Bogota Chapter of the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE). Through this organisation she continues to accompany victims and communities in their search for justice.

She explains that there is still a lot of fear about speaking out about the violence from the armed actors, and victims' families need to receive practical and moral support.

Encouraging people to bring their pain before justice, to take part in meetings and tell their story also gives her energy: "the path of my work has been beautiful. It's been useful for me. What's helped, I have recorded... I've suffered, but all this has helped me to build something strong". Above all she emphasises the importance of sharing the struggle with the next generation, so that they can continue calling for truth, justice and peace.



Ruby is one of several young people who are gaining an ever greater role in the Peace Community.

“As a woman who has suffered and lived the war face on, you learn how to build peace”



uby is a young woman who grew up with the San Jose de Apartado Peace Community. She is currently a member of the Internal Council, which is the body that manages the community on a day to day basis. She surprises us when she tells us that she does not

have more responsibility now than before. The main difference she sees is that the work she does is more visible, but the whole community has commitments and takes part in the collective work.

The Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado is a small-scale farmer initiative to create a neutral space in which to live

that, quite simply, they're negotiating how they're going to pay someone because they killed a relative, or how they can get in on the political scene... right?"³ And she asks rhetorically where in this war the poor population is going to be included. "I can see that things for us are still going to be tight, tight..."

BEING PART OF THE COMMUNITY MEANS RESPECTING PRINCIPLES LIKE NOT COLLABORATING WITH ANY ARMED ACTOR, TAKING PART IN COLLECTIVE WORK, AND HAVING A STRONG STANCE ON HOW TO UNDERSTAND JUSTICE AND ESTABLISH THE TRUTH

in the midst of war, known on a national and international level, but that has had an especially big impact at a local level and on the lives of its members. Being part of the Community means respecting principles like not collaborating with any armed actor either directly or indirectly, taking part in collective work, and having a strong stance on how to understand justice and establish the truth.¹

The fight against impunity, after all that has happened in the Peace Community, is so entrenched that they have given up claiming compensation or humanitarian aid from the State.² Ruby mistrusts the peace being discussed in Havana and says: "we can see

Ruby does not just talk for the sake of it. Her involvement in the Peace Community is marked by a fact that cuts across her life, that of her family and of the community itself: the assassination of her uncle Luis Eduardo Guerra and her little cousin Deyner Andres, in 2005. These killings and those of another family are known as the massacre of Mulatos and La Resbalosa.⁴ Ruby's family was displaced from area of Mulatos to the town of Apartado and the end of 1990s, when the paramilitary violence was unleashed in the area.

It was her uncle who, a few years after the displacement, had encouraged Ruby's mother to return and join the Community.

Luis Eduardo was the visible and charismatic face for others in the project. Ruby, who was a little girl when they returned, especially remembers his kisses, his hugs and his smile. "My uncle taught us a lot about the Community", she tell us, and then shares the story of one the hardest events of her life, something that also moves her but in a positive way, "the support that we had from the Community was very great, in the form of the strength that we would get through this, that we would carry on our project and this struggle for the rest of our lives".

And if mutual support has been fundamental for the 18 years and more of the Peace Community's existence, the women have been essential to it. This is what Ruby tells us; she says that although "they have also killed a lot of women in the violence", (and women are affected by it often) "to keep on going because there are children and the land that you are working on, and that's when a women must face the conflict head on". She considers that "the women will always end up suffering more". Nonetheless, Ruby sees how they have always tried to support these women in the Peace Community and how "women faced with tough situations are always searching for the creativity and joy to keep going. They give love. To social projects, women give their lives".

Ruby is one of several young people who are gaining an ever greater role in the Peace Community, and that demonstrate through their daily actions that the project is still valid, and as she says herself, "as a women who has suffered and come face to face with war I have learnt how to build peace, how to work in a project that is different".



1. Reglamento Interno de la Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó
2. Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission: Carta de la Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartado ante perdón del presidente Santos, 17 December 2013
3. Interview made in February 2016
4. Semana: Diez años de la masacre de San José de Apartadó, 21 February 2015

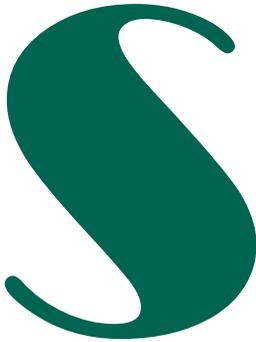


One of the events that most impacted the Peace Community was the massacre of 21 February 2005. That day, eight people were murdered and dismembered in the rural areas of Mulatos and La Resbalosa. Photo: Damien Fellous / Libre arbitre



Sirly, a young leader of the Peace Community.

**“You’ve got
to step up”**



Sirly Cerpa was neither born nor raised in Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado, nor in San Jose, but this does not stop her from being one of the eight members of the Community's Internal Council. She is from Tierralta (Cordoba) and her family was originally from the coast.

In Upper Joaquin, (a hamlet and surrounding area that is part of the Peace Community and is two days' walk from the Community's main settlement), the paramilitary violence at the end of the 1990s provoked the displacement of the Cerpa family to an urban area. Sirly was a child at the time, but remembers those years. "The hardest have always been the attacks by the army against the civilian population", she tells us, and goes on to remember: "and when the paramilitaries came to the area, they took people away, they tied them up, and people were killed". Sirly keeps alive the memory of a cousin killed at the hands of the paramilitaries.

In the Peace Community they found the support of other people and a place where her and her family were welcomed. She remembers with emotion the moments in which the Peace Community has called for solidarity to support its members or neighbouring farmers.

She tells us about how in 2013, when neo-paramilitaries from the Gaitanista Self-Defence group kidnapped a young man called Buenaventura,¹ a sizeable group of people from the Peace Community got together and went looking for him. Sirly tells how the river had swelled and she was asking herself "with so much current, will the river let us cross?". But it did not set them back and they continued in good spirits

in their search for the young person who had been kidnapped. She recognised that "whenever you are faced with situations like that, which make you afraid; you don't want to be in those shoes, but you have to live it anyway". This is the collective strength that being part of the Peace Community gives them, as she says herself: "this struggle gives you a lot of strength, you feel the companionship of one towards another. It's very beautiful".

Being elected to the Internal Council was a surprise for Sirly, but she took on the responsibility when she saw the trust that people put in her. She believes that there are fewer women in the Council because "women are very timid, although we realise that in the end we end up supporting everything". According to Sirly, there are many women working in the organisation, but not in the visible part. Being in the Internal Council obliges her to "step up, take on responsibilities and show that women can do it too, that we are a force". In her role she tries to encourage other women "to live it in the way that I do, we don't want any woman to live in hiding, but to stand and be counted".

1. Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado Complicidad, cooperación y protección al crimen: la 'democracia' que tenemos, 11 September 2013



Sergio De Leo (PBI) and Olga Silva: "All the cases are very painful!"

The human side of defending victims



Without doubt, Olga Silva is a dedicated social fighter, with a genuine conviction for defending human rights. In her eyes and her actions she reflects a desire and motivation to take part in building a country where full

guarantees are possible and peace can be built with social justice. She is a person who expresses herself firmly and clearly in court, speaking for the victims and representing them with a feeling of empathy that is truly admirable. Outside the courts, Olga is approachable, interested in the issues people bring to her, showing a human side with a warm and affectionate way of dealing with people.

in different areas of the country and the reason for which Humanidad Vigente was initially created.

For Olga, coming from a childhood in the countryside where there were different situations of state abandonment and where basic needs were left unmet, meant getting to know a context which profoundly marked her life. Acting on that motivation, she found an academic position in the National

“EVERY CASE IS PAINFUL, EVERY CASE IS A TRAGEDY AND BEHIND EVERY ONE OF THEM THERE ARE MORE TRAGEDIES”

She is Olga Silva, a Colombian woman whose vocation is to defend human rights. She is a lawyer by profession, and the current director of the organisation Humanidad Vigente. The human rights organisation’s main work is the fight against impunity, with a particular emphasis on children, women and the defence of land, which includes a lot of work with small-scale farmers and indigenous people living in rural parts of Colombia. They are sectors of the population that have suffered from displacement to an undeniable extent

University, and built on the experience she gained as an academic working with low income families in literacy programmes.

The work she does requires a close and careful approach to cases of human rights violations, where the pain is more present than ever and where the social fabric is extremely damaged, which has created a series of consequences for the lawyer on an emotional level. In her words:

“Every case is painful, every case is a tragedy and behind every one of them there are more tragedies”

Without doubt, one of the most significant cases in national terms, because of the nature of the facts (not just for Olga Silvia and Humanidad Vigente), was the sentence of 60 years given to an Army Lieutenant for the case known as 'The children of Tame'.¹ The sentence was issued in 2012, confirmed in 2013 and ratified in August 2014.²

The Lieutenant was condemned for raping 13 and 14 year old girls and for killing one of them along with her two brothers, aged 9 and 6 years old. The facts occurred in October 2010, in a rural part of Tame municipality (Arauca).

For Olga, the impact of this case is due to different factors. First is the calculated brutality of what happened, second is her situation as a mother and the natural empathy this generates; and third, the serious threats that she suffered throughout the case, the purpose of which was to attack the integrity and dignity of women:

"There were situations of threats, like the assassination of the judge who had been due to start the trial. As part of that, as a lawyer and defender I got death threats to my phone where they said they were going to sexually assault me and I believe that, sure, all of this generates many situations which destabilise you emotionally..."

This case was, and continues to be, of great importance at a national and international level, as well as being emblematic. This is particularly so in a country where there is 98% of impunity for cases of sexual violence against women.³

It is a job that without doubt carries with it a high risk, but that does not stop the work done by human rights defenders, like Olga Silva.⁴



1. Maximum sentence in Colombia and the second time it had been applied.

2. El Tiempo: En firme, condena a teniente (r) Muñoz por crimen de niños de Tame, 12 August 2014

3. Contagio Radio: Ante la CIDH se denunció 98% de impunidad en casos de violencia sexual en Colombia, 22 October 2015

4. To find out more about Olga Silva, watch the interview made by PBI Colombia in: PBI Colombia: "Detrás de cada caso hay más tragedias". 03 March 2015



Photo: Adrian Johanson

A holistic view of women in the armed conflict







women, indigenous, Afro-Colombians, girls, teenagers, adults, elderly, those who have just been born, those who have already left... in sum, all women in countries like Colombia have been on the receiving end of some sort

of violence. This historical and structural violence has left its marks and scars on women; for many it is normal, invisible even today to those around her, and a natural part of daily life. Women have always defended life, that of their children, their partners, their families.

A colleague from Cauca told me how her mother, when the illegal armed groups were there, would hide her children or any child that was with her in the clay oven to protect them, exposing herself to risk in order to shield the children; the men would ask for coffee, they would ask for food, she prepared it all and nothing mattered to her except that the children stay alive, and that is how, thirty years later, she can be here to tell us the story. Today she recognises that her mother was the first person she knew who defended life, and defended their rights.

Being a woman in the context of war comes with the burden of different kinds of aggression, and those women whose lives are devoted to activism are

continually attacked not just for defending human rights, but also for being women. This significantly differentiates the level of risk, and the level of physical, mental and emotional impact for them, day after day, compared to their male colleagues who defend human rights.

The risks for women are also higher because of their sociocultural characteristics. "The IACHR corroborated that the situation of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian women is particularly critical, as they are victims of multiple forms of discrimination on the basis of their race, ethnic background and their condition as women, a situation aggravated within the armed conflict." ¹ The Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities have historically been the victims in society's power relationships, and the women in these communities have suffered from their integrity being devalued because their identity.

And so it is not the same being a woman, black, indigenous, mestiza or white, and if we move into other areas,

in a country with different social strata, we find discrimination even in the small spaces where women have a particular sociocultural characteristic. In any event, in all these spaces, women are victims of a violence that is exacerbated in the context of conflict and war.

The women's stories reveal how violence is used in the conflict as a form of control that destroys their physical, psychological and sexual integrity. Inflicting this suffering is apparently an expression of power and absolute domination over women and girls wielded by the armed actors in all parties in the conflict.²

expression of strength and power by the paramilitary groups. Their dominance was demonstrated through actions of this nature, where the denigration of their bodies and the humiliation of women's dignity are materialised⁴.

Rape implies a violent access to a personal, physical and emotional space that seeks to find pleasure in the suffering of another person, who loses control over herself and her self-worth in the face of an act of victimisation of such magnitude. "The feeling of the body being sullied is often coupled with the desire to end one's life, which reflects the impact this has on

"THE THREATS DIRECTED AGAINST CHILDREN ARE A MEANS OF USING MATERNITY TO GENERATE COMPLIANCE AND FEAR"

Terror will always be the most commonly used strategy; based on fear, the same fear that the men are facing. But the fear is different, there is a direct threat to women's family nucleus, and in that sense alludes directly to one of the roles in society that women have by imposition or choice: maternity is used as a mechanism of control. "The threats directed against children are a means of using maternity to generate compliance and fear"³

Attacks against the body which are physical, verbal or subjective, or the value judgements that are made about it, are other ways of perpetuating the objectification of women, and enter the realm of human rights violations. This attack is once again invisible, because for it to be "important" means that it is necessarily extreme, and must leave visible and reportable injuries or it's as if it never happened, but it does exist, it is real, it is violent.

Sexual violence, as a weapon of domination and humiliation, has been one more strategy used to attack the dignity of women, and gain access to their bodies, their territory: "Rape was an

their own dignity for many women. While this is the most obvious effect, it is actually the deliberate aim pursued in the policy of undermining women."⁵

The impact is also evident in difficulties in talking about what happened. Remembering the attack and verbalising it implies, in some public and private contexts, re-victimisation, casting doubt on what happened or accepting the normalisation of the facts by taking away the responsibility of the authors.

There are many ways in which this sexual violence has become established in women's lives, and the invasion of the sacred through the physical is constant, as women are proprietary objects of one or other illegal armed group.

"Sexual violence constitutes the most extreme manifestation of that violence, it is consumed in it and shows itself flagrantly, the central nucleus of the patriarchal relationship; the subjugation of women that reduces them to a body-thing, available, susceptible to being damaged and destroyed for masculine pleasure and domination"⁶



Threats made against children are a way of using motherhood to generate compliance and fear.

WOMEN AFTER THE VIOLENCE

In the midst of conflict, women have organised themselves in many ways to defend the land they live on, search for loved ones, defend their bodies, protect their families, prevent their sons from being recruited and their daughters from being raped.

It bothers the parties to the conflict that women have achieved some level of organisation. The autonomy of people who defend human rights is a blow to them; but the autonomy and organisation of women is not just a blow, it is also an offense. Threats

are very common against women because they belong to and precisely because they are members of organisations dedicated to protecting their rights. The right of women to associate and participate is not tolerated by the non-state armed groups, including the new generations of paramilitary organisations.⁷

And still, the women have stayed on in different ways, some choosing a profile that enables them to continue protecting their lives and those of their loved ones in their day to day lives. In these silent struggles, that have no name, they are present because defending women in any of their spheres is



The situation of indigenous and Afro-Colombian women is particularly critical because they are the victims of multiple forms of discrimination. Photo: Marcia Valverde

to defend life, not just theirs but the lives of everyone, men and women.

Other colleagues have chosen to get organised, articulate and empowered in visible public and political spheres; be they women's organisations, mixed organisations or community building, and they have stepped up to become part of a collective struggle to dignify life through the defence of fundamental rights.

Two kinds of organisation have emerged, not just advocacy and legal strategies to denounce what happened, but also emotional strategies which are

adapted to the context, protected by popular wisdom, and rooted in the recuperation of customs and rituals. All these strategies point to women gaining dignity from a broad, just and humane perspective. No justice or reparation is possible when there are deeper wounds than those we can see on the physical body. Justice and reparation for women means the possibility of being able to walk peacefully around the community, to be able to speak, complain, not fear for their bodies, nor fear for their sexual intimacy, nor for their emotions, their life or their freedom.

For all these reasons women have created bonds of sisterhood that have enabled them to cry and heal themselves collectively, never forgetting, because there are marks on the soul; but transforming, building, listening to stories, giving testimony about what has happened to clamour and demand that it never happens again.

ACCOMPANYING WOMEN EMOTIONALLY

For Peace Brigades International (PBI), the challenge never ends, because PBI seeks ways to pass on methods of protection that have a differential focus, that enable the recognition of the different ways that women have chosen to continue resisting from the standpoint of the socio-cultural sphere they identify themselves with.

PBI's psychosocial team works with protection tools and methodologies that take a holistic view of the protection and self-protection of women, on the basis that protecting our bodies also means protecting our emotions and aspirations.

Through workshops and other interactions, PBI has met women with different social and cultural characteristics, and provided individual emotional support, as well as collective psychosocial accompaniment; for example, in Buenaventura, Cali, Popayan and Santa Rosa de Guayacan they shared painful but also dignifying experiences of their day to day lives, of building a different community,

recognising their abilities and joining efforts to search for better living conditions, not just for them but also for communities in general.

In 2015, PBI organised a meeting of women defenders in Bogota from different organisations that PBI accompanies, with the objective of strengthening the social fabric that binds the defenders together and building together some means of self-protection.

The gathering was shaped by the participation of women of different ages, socio-economic origins and experiences. It generated the first in a series of exchanges that take an introspective look to identify internal elements and bring them together for the common purpose of defenders, always mindful of being conscientious and exercising self-care as a fundamental element in the resistance they exercise and consistent with the defence of a dignified life.

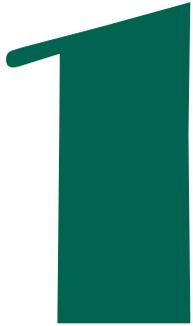
1. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR): Violence and discrimination against women in the armed conflict in Colombia
2. Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres: La verdad de las mujeres en el conflicto armado Summary report, 2014, page 50
3. Ibid., Tomo II, page 94
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5. Ibid., Tomo I, page 253
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**Women in
peace and
human rights:
many gains,
much work still
left to be done**



5 years ago, the UN Security Council adopted landmark resolution 1325 establishing the “Women, Peace and Security Agenda”, recognising women as active agents of change in conflict prevention and resolution, acknowledging the different impact of conflict on women

and men, and underlining the need to include women in all aspects of peace processes.

The momentum and attention created by the resolution, as well as follow-up resolution 2242 of 2015, was surely instrumental in the role that women and gender issues have played in the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC. For example, the creation of a Gender sub-commission has provided an important and necessary setting for debates and agreements on issues such as sexual and gender based violence during the conflict, and the differential experience of women combatants, among other issues.

However, critics have argued that more could certainly have been done, for example, to include women as chief negotiators in both of the negotiating teams. On a global scale, despite the rhetoric and repeated commitments surrounding resolutions 1325 and the new 2242, women’s organisations argue that the Women, Peace and Security

Agenda has a long way to go before achieving comprehensive implementation in policy and practice by Member States and the UN system.

Full implementation of the Agenda would require implementation across all of its “pillars”: conflict prevention; participation; protection, relief and recovery. These organisations argue that progress has been piecemeal. For example, although there has been some progress in recognising and addressing the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls, women’s leadership and their full and equal participation in all efforts to establish international peace and security, and the promotion and respect of their human rights, have received less attention, but are equally imperative to prevent or resolve conflicts and build peace.¹

The rationale behind the Women, Peace and Security Agenda is that, whether via initiatives aimed at countering armed



Women performing in Plaza Bolivar in Bogota, to raise awareness about the pain of forced disappearance.

violence or the brokering of a peace accord, peace and security processes will not be effective if half the population – women – are left on the side lines.

The recognition of the value of the unique perspectives and experiences of women has also continued to increase with regard to the issues facing human rights defenders. In 2002, the Special Rapporteur of the then-new UN mandate on human rights defenders dedicated an entire section of her annual report to the particular risks facing women human rights defenders.²

Soon thereafter, women defenders from around the world joined forces to form the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRD IC), of which PBI is a member. For the WHRD IC, the focus on women defenders is necessary because, as written in its 2012 global report, “the patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies shape the diverse and often inter-woven contexts in which WHRDs work... [both of which] have contributed to

the development of social structures and institutions, cultural and religious beliefs and norms, laws, policies and other forms of public discourses that have resulted in the perpetuation of gender discrimination and inequality.”³

This gender discrimination and inequality, in turn, create situations in which women defenders often face additional obstacles on top of the threats and attacks that human rights face in general.

In 2014, PBI participated in the research and writing of a report on holistic security for women human rights defenders from around the world. During that process, researchers uncovered many concrete examples of these additional obstacles. As a Mexican defender recounted:

“I am a single mother and had to leave my home with my daughter and be relocated. I had to look for a job in my new place of residence and could not take care of my daughter, so I requested that the state cover these expenses as part of the

relocation scheme. But the state did not understand that this should be part of the protection measures.”⁴

Another woman defender interviewed for the research explained that when they were negotiating with the government to cover certain expenses related to education and health under the protection measure, the Mexican government responded that the goal of their protection measures was not to eradicate poverty.⁵

These examples—as well as the many others that are included in the publication—help illustrate the complex situations that women human rights defenders face when they are threatened with violence because of their work. They are targeted because of what they do to defend human rights, but also because, as women who do this work, they are often perceived as challenging social and cultural norms, traditions and stereotypes about femininity, sexual orientation, and the role and status of women in society- their work is often seen as challenging ‘traditional’ notions of the family.⁶

The different risks and aggressions that women defenders face underscore the need for differential support and gender-specific protection measures that take into

account the specific contexts in which they live and work and are also sensitive to other conditions or identities present within the diversity of human rights defenders. Women defenders interviewed for the publication emphasised the need to advance a holistic concept of security that takes into account the historical, cultural, political and social contexts in which they live. In other words, a concept of protection that takes into account how women defenders experience human rights violations differently because of their gender and other economic, social, and cultural factors.

1. WILPF: Report on the Fifteenth Anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, October 2015
2. Hina Jilani, “Report submitted by Ms. Hina Jilani, Special Representative of Secretary-General on human rights defenders,” E/CN.4/2002/106, 27 February 2002
3. WHRD IC: Global Report on the Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders, January 2012, pg. vi.
4. Interview with Valentina Rosendo Cantú and Centro de Tlachinollan, Mexico. In: AWID and the WHRD IC: Our Right To Safety: Women Human Rights Defenders’ Holistic Approach To Protection, March 2014
5. Ibid.
6. Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, A/HRC/16/44 (20 December 2010), para 23



Recommendations

PBI asks the international community to urge the Colombian State to:

- » Improve the mechanisms for investigating and prosecuting gender violence and, in particular, sexual violence committed by all the armed actors in the conflict.
- » Investigate those responsible in all parties and at every level in the chain of command for crimes of sexual violence related to the Colombian armed conflict, by analysing the patterns and the trends in the violence.
- » Publicly recognise the importance and legitimacy of women defenders and their work, and explicitly reject attacks against them.
- » Insist on progress in the investigations of attacks against women defenders and the punishment of those responsible, taking into account specific patterns in the attacks.
- » Formulate public policies on prevention and protection, with gender and differential focuses, that seek to eliminate the structural causes of the violence against women human rights defenders. Extend protection schemes to their family members, including physical, political and psychosocial measures.
- » Focus on strengthening civil society organisations in relation to women's rights in public policy.
- » Ensure that public officials, particularly members of the judicial branch and the police, receive training on the differential risks facing women defenders, their specific differential needs, the contexts they work in and the obstacles to justice that they face.
- » Implement the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights through the National Action Plan - Business and Human Rights, with a special focus on the risks for women defenders in the context of human rights violations by economic interests.
- » As part of integral measures of protection, guarantee that women in indigenous, afro-descendent and family farmer communities can achieve their goals in life and have access to dignified housing, higher education and basic services such as sewerage and drinking water.



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Making space for peace in Colombia

Peace Brigades International is a non-governmental organisation recognised by the United Nations, which has maintained a team of international observers/accompaniers in Colombia on an ongoing basis since 1994. PBI's mission is to protect the working environment of human rights defenders, who face repression due to their nonviolent human rights activities.

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