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Forced Displacement and
Gender-based Sexual Violence

BUENAVENTURA, COLOMBIA: BRUTAL REALITIES

Norwegian Refugee Council – NRC

Supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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FOREWORD

The relationship existing between forced displacement and gender-based sexual violence within the framework of the armed conflict in Colombia has become ever more obvious. This document describes how sexual violence has become a habitual, frequent practice within the Colombian context. Through the viewpoints of survivors of this crime and the work experience of several women from Buenaventura (one of the cities most affected by the armed conflict), factors are explained which help to understand this common yet invisible practice that affects thousands of women in Colombia¹.

Please note that all photos throughout the report are for illustrative purposes.

Cover page photo: ©UNHCR/ Boris Heger

1. The report is based on secondary public information information and information from institutional sources, in addition field research was conducted in Buenaventura in August 2014, where Interviews, individual and focal groups were conducted with women victims of sexual violence. Information that reflects public policies was collected through interviews of public servants in Buenaventura. Due to protection concerns none of the interviewed victims and public servants can be identified.



1. INTRODUCTION

In Colombia, a complex, long-lasting humanitarian crisis persists. As the government moves forward on its peace negotiations with illegal armed groups, the impacts of the conflict on the civilian population continue. The armed violence caused by the actions of illegal armed groups, whether the traditional parties in the armed conflict (guerrillas) or the armed groups which arose after the process to demobilise paramilitary groups (2004), has created a devastating humanitarian impact and represent a threat to the protection of civil society. These actions take the form of numerous violations of Human Rights and infractions of International Humanitarian Law, including homicides, forced disappearances, forced displacement, acts of gender violence and, in particular, sexual violence, kidnapping, land theft, anti-personnel mines and torture.

Colombia is second in terms of the number of internally displaced persons at the worldwide level, behind Syria. At present in Colombia, there are 5.7 million displaced persons² included in the Unique Victims Register; this

means that one out of every ten people in Colombia has been displaced.

In 2013, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) documented 207 alleged infractions against International Humanitarian Law and other incidents in 39 urban areas within 14 departments. According to this entity: “as a result of the threats and violence, displacement has become one of the population’s scourges (...) in cities including Medellín, Tumaco and Buenaventura.” In Buenaventura alone, Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2014) reported the forced displacement of 13,000 people in the year 2013.

In Colombia, the conflict is concentrated disproportionately. According to the UNHCR, until the year 2007, 75% of all displacement was concentrated in a dispersed manner in 125 municipalities of Colombia, whereas in 2013, 60% of the displacements were concentrated in just 13 municipalities, including Buenaventura. The situation has not changed in 2014, and these populations’ degree of vulnerability (mainly Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples) is very high, requiring protection and constant emergency aid.

2. Figure reported by the Unit for Assistance and Full Reparations for Victims, or UARIV, at 1 August 2014, which is equivalent to 7,796,660 events. See: <http://rni.unidadvictimas.gov.co/?q=v-reportes>

TABLE NO. 1: PERCENTAGE OF VICTIMS BY OFFENCE AND GENDER. TOTALS FOR COLOMBIA

Offence	Women	Men	Other*	Total
Displacement	51,2 %	48,6 %	0,2 %	100 %
Homicide	45,9 %	52,3 %	1,8 %	100 %
Threats	51,4 %	47,5 %	1,1 %	100 %
Forced disappearance	45,9 %	52,4 %	1,7 %	100 %
Loss of real or personal property	37,5 %	38,5 %	24,0 %	100 %
Terrorist act/ attacks/ combat/ harassment	40,6 %	53,6 %	5,8 %	100 %
Kidnapping	20,7 %	77,4 %	1,9 %	100 %
Anti-personnel mines/unexploded ordnance/ explosive devices	9,1 %	89,9 %	1,0 %	100 %
Torture	36,2 %	61,4 %	2,4 %	100 %
Association of boys, girls and youth	31,4 %	65,8 %	2,9 %	100 %
Forced abandonment or land theft	23,9 %	23,9 %	52,2 %	100 %
Crimes against freedom and sexual integrity	86,0 %	10,8 %	3,1 %	100 %
No information available	26,9 %	73,1 %	0,0 %	100 %
TOTAL	49,9 %	49,2 %	0,9 %	100 %

Source: UARIV (Integral Reparation and Assistance for Victims, Colombia). Information as at 1 August 2014.

Accessed on 23 August 2014. <http://rni.unidadvictimas.gov.co/?q=node/107>

*Includes LGBTI population, people not providing information and undefined.

2. WOMEN AND ARMED CONFLICT

At the global level, the humanitarian consequences are more heavily placed upon groups with the highest vulnerability, such as ethnic minorities, children, elderly, disabled persons, and women (Eade, Macleod, 2011).

The effects suffered by women in armed conflicts are manifested in various ways, and as a result of gender-based sexual violence, separations and the loss of family members may occur, as well as physical and economic insecurity, death, forced displacement, kidnapping and forced recruitment (Lindsey, 2004). To these effects, one must add the loss of individual and cultural identity, the silencing of or disconnection from community spaces, the breakage of emotional ties and the transformation into violence of everyday dynamics in family and social relations (RPM, 2013).

In the case of Colombia (see table number 1), women amount to 51.2% of the total number of displaced. However, according to official sources, in terms of crimes against freedom and sexual integrity, women account for 86% of the total number of victims. These data explain the effects that women have suffered as a result of the armed conflict in Colombia. Because of their status of vulnerability, inequality, discrimination and the disproportionate effect of the armed conflict, displaced women have been defined as subject to special protection by the Constitutional Court. This status as subjects

of special protection imposed special duties of assistance and the safeguarding of women's fundamental rights upon the State authorities (as of 2008).

The most serious studies on the case of Colombia describe a conflict that focuses its most perverse effects on civilians. The First Survey on the Prevalence of "Sexual Violence Against Women Within the Context of the Colombian Armed Conflict," in the period from 2001-2009, shows that during the nine years in which this research project was carried out, 489,687 women were direct victims of sexual violence. This figure means that, on average annually, 54,410 women were direct victims of some type of sexual violence, 149 per day and 6 every hour³. Therefore, it is estimated that 2 out of every 10 women were displaced due to fleeing from this crime⁴.

The conflict has exacerbated the crime of gender-based

3. *First Survey on the Prevalence of "Sexual Violence Against Women Within the Context of the Colombian Armed Conflict," Oxfam, December 2010.*

4. "La violencia sexual en Colombia, un arma de guerra" ("Sexual Violence in Colombia, a Weapon of War"), 9 September 2009. *Intermón Oxfam. P. 3. Consulted at: http://www.intermonoxfam.org/UnidadesInformacion/anexos/11072/090909_Violencia_Colombia.pdf*

sexual violence; in at least nine of the most cruel massacres committed by paramilitaries, sexual violence took place (CH, 2013). The information gathered by different sources through the reports by Human Rights Watch, United Nations Agencies, the National Ombudsman and the rulings of the Constitutional Court point out acts of sexual violence perpetrated as a part of violent operations – such as massacres and the takeover and destruction of towns – committed against women by illegal armed groups. Likewise, the subjection of civilian women and female youths and children to rape, abuse and individual and collective sexual harassment do not appear to be an isolated event in the conflict, but rather are linked to the objective of the non-state group members' obtaining personal satisfaction. Cases have also been documented in which the deliberate acts of sexual violence form part of war strategies focused on breaking down populations, which in some cases have resulted in forced displacements. Obtaining information through kidnapping or sexual subjection, coercion for various purposes forming part of strategies for advancement by armed groups, and the retaliation against women was singled out as being collaborators or informants for some of the opposing armed groups, also form part of repeated and consistent testimonials filed by the victims or by organisations which promote their rights. As a result, sexual violence is considered to be a systematic, habitual and widespread practice within the framework of Colombia's armed conflict.

Their status as subjects of special protection, indicated by the Constitutional Court (2008), imposed special duties upon the State authorities to provide assistance and safeguard women's fundamental rights. Such a status as subjects of

special constitutional protection justifies the fact that affirmative action be taken with respect to displaced women, to provide assistance in accordance with their conditions of special weakness, vulnerability and defencelessness, and that, through preferential treatment, the effective enjoyment of their fundamental rights be materialised.

Similarly, in Colombia, the Law on Victims and the Restitution of Land includes specific measures providing reparations to women and girls who survive sexual violence. More recently, Act 1719 of June 2014 points out the channels through which the victims of sexual violence may gain access to justice.

Nevertheless, and despite the regulatory framework, in practice difficulties exist in filing cases and taking crimes of sexual violence to court. In Colombia, it is estimated that only about 18% of women report the crime, and there is no official system to compile data on sexual violence within the context of Colombia's armed conflict (ABC Colombia, et al., 2013).

However, such gaps in information have been considered a universal situation, as was stated by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC, 2013); in the case of Colombia, survivors' lack of trust towards institutions and the judicial system, shame, fear of being singled out, stigmatisation, a lack of coordination between the entities responsible for providing assistance, the lack of guarantees when filing a report, the delays in investigating cases and the high rate of impunity are cited as factors propitiating the crime's invisibility and resulting in a low rate of complaints filed by survivors (MSA, 2013).



3. BUENAVENTURA

Buenaventura⁵, located on the Pacific coast of Colombia, is a territory under constant dispute by illegal armed groups, and at present forced displacement is occurring with greater frequency in the urban zone, where most of the population is Afro-Colombian.

Buenaventura is a territory with natural riches and potential for mining in the subsoil. Of the merchandise that enters or exits in the country, 60% travels through this port (Codhes, 2013b). Due to its strategic position, its commercial activity and the different river access routes, Buenaventura constitutes a mobility corridor for contraband of goods and the trafficking and micro-trafficking of arms and drugs.

At the same time, the low level of effectiveness of the civil State's presence in these territories makes them the ideal place for illegal activities, as their inhabitants suffer the highest vulnerability rates in the country (see Table 2). Very frequently, displacements take place in these zones. On certain occasions, they are not recorded, nor are they subject to an adequate humanitarian response.

The FARC-EP have a presence in the rural zone of Buenaventura, whereas the groups which are heirs to the paramilitaries operate within the urban core. They are known as "Los Urabeños" and "La Empresa," or "The Company" (SJR, 2013). The Human Rights violations committed by these illegal armed groups include murders, extreme physical violence, forced disappearances, threats against people's lives and physical

integrity, gender-based violence, especially sexual violence against women, youths and girls, the recruitment and use of boys, girls and adolescents, extortion, kidnapping and limitations on access to humanitarian aid. These crimes lead to the forced displacement of people and families and keep long-lasting solutions from being achieved.

The violence is manifested in different ways, putting the inhabitants of Buenaventura at risk. The National Ombudsman, through the Early Alerts System⁶, reported 187 homicides in 2013, several of which were carried out in the so-called "killing houses," properties in which the people are dismembered and butchered in order to throw their bodies into the ocean afterwards⁷.

Confrontations between groups (La Empresa and Urabeños) continue to cause forced displacements. From January to November 2013, it was reported that 1,303 families were displaced in the rural and urban areas of Buenaventura.

Citing data from the National Register of Disappearances, the National Ombudsman reports 78 cases of disappearances in 2013. Due to the deficient state response, families have chosen to organise themselves into associations such as "Entretejiendo Voces" ("Weaving Voices") to look for their family members and draw the attention of institutions to this serious situation.

5. 12 communes in the urban zone (105 neighbourhoods), 12 Communal Action Boards, 9 co-regimens in the rural zone, 19 Community Councils and 22 indigenous communities. <http://www.buenaventura.gov.co/secciones/2/1/1914/comunas-de-buenaventura>

6. In follow-up note No. 001 of 2014.

7. <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/renacen-casas-de-pique-buenaventura-artic>. La guerra entre Urabeños y la Empresa. Renacen las casas de pique en Buenaventura (The war between the Urabeños and La Empresa. The killing houses of Buenaventura return). 5 March 2014.

TABLE NO. 2: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC INDICATORS

Indicators	Colombia	Buenaventura
Total population 2014*	47 661 787	392 054
Women (%)*	50,6 %	51,4 %
Population of African descent (%)*	10,6 %	86,5 %
Unemployed**	9,6 %	63 %
Poverty line***	34,1 %	66,3 %
Victims of armed conflict, total****	6 739 978	187 542
Victims of displacement****	5 782 092	166 704
Displaced population (%)	12,1 %	42,5 %
Victims of sexual violence****	5 997	122

*DANE (National Administrative Department for Statistics, Colombia), Population projection. Last update: May 2011.

**DANE (National Administrative Department for Statistics, Colombia), as at December 2013 and Chamber of Commerce of Buenaventura.

***DNP (National Planning Department, Colombia).

****UARIV (Integral Reparation and Assistance for Victims, Colombia), as at 1 August 2014.



The groups which are heirs to the paramilitaries are responsible for the disappearance of a large number – possibly hundreds– of Buenaventura residents in recent years. These groups dismember their victims and throw the human remains into the bay or the mangroves stretching along its shores, or they bury them in clandestine graves, as has been pointed out by residents and civil servants.

In several of the neighborhoods, the residents denounce that there are “killing houses,” where the groups dismember their victims. Various residents with whom we spoke indicated that they have heard people screaming and begging for clemency as they were dismembered alive. In March of 2014, after court investors found blood stains in two alleged “killing houses” in the city, the Police stated that they had identified several places where victims were likely to have been dismembered alive before their remains were thrown into the sea.”

*The Crisis in Buenaventura
Human Rights Watch 2014*

Extortion affects the economy of Buenaventura. It is one of the most widespread crimes and affects the entire population: merchants, public transportation, travelling salespeople, shop keepers. Business owners are extorted and must pay fees in cash to be able to make sales. In exchange, the

illegal armed groups offer them “security.” This practice is not new. Collecting this tax from wholesale and retail distributors was one of the manners of financing and control that was used by the Pacific block of the Self-defence as of 2003 until it was demobilised in 2005 (FESCOL, IDEA, 2012).

The recruitment and illicit use of boys, girls and adolescents is a frequent practice. The children are used as “bell-ringers” (lookouts who warn if any people enter or exit the area), as “messengers” (responsible for taking messages between the members of the illegal armed groups), to transport drugs and weapons, to provide sexual favours, to exercise prostitution and, in some cases, these children become victims of sexual violence.

From May to October 2013, only 15 cases of sexual violence against women were reported. On occasion, this practice occurs prior to murder⁸. The survivors rarely report the crime, due to their intense fear or threats by the perpetrators, who, on some occasions, the aggressors live in the same neighbourhoods amongst the civilian population.

3.1 SEXUAL VIOLENCE, ITS ROOTS

In Buenaventura, sexual violence is an open secret. Most of its inhabitants are aware of this violence, but almost nobody talks about it. United Nations data on sexual and gender-based violence for 2013 indicate⁹ that the women and girls of Afro-Colombian descent were affected disproportionately

8. <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/buenaventura-sadismo-muerte-abuso-contra-la-....> 23 May 2014.

9. http://www.elcolombiano.com/BancoConocimiento/OI/onu_preocupada_por_violencia_sexual_en_zonas_de_conflicto_en_colombia/onu_preocupada_por_violencia_sexual_en_zonas_de_conflicto_en_colombia.asp

within the framework of the armed conflict in Colombia. In a public statement made in April of 2014, United Nations Organisations expressed major concern about the sexual exploitation of women and girls in areas under the influence of illegal armed groups emerging after the demobilisation of paramilitary organisations, as is the case in Buenaventura. The United Nations states that the incidents indicate that this sexual violence is perpetrated as a strategy to ensure territorial control, to intimidate women leaders and human rights defenders and to intimidate the civilian population as a method of social control. Likewise, the United Nations sustain¹⁰ that some survivors claim to have been displaced and raped repeatedly.

Aggression against women is a form of control, used by illegal armed groups to demonstrate their superiority, and above all is used as a strategy for the appropriation of territory, given that, in general, victims of sexual violence are forcibly displaced. The women in Buenaventura may be more prone to becoming victims of sexual violence due to the combination of a patriarchal culture, gender, racism, poverty and armed conflict.

Forced displacement can also increase the risk of suffering sexual violence, especially for those women who reach Buenaventura from this district's rural zone, as well as those who come from other parts of the Colombian Pacific, displaced as a result of the armed conflict. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights states that sexual violence continues during displacement; 52% of the women suffered some type of physical abuse after forced displacement and 36% have been forced by strangers to have sexual relations (RPM, Sisma Mujer, 2009)

In order to avoid being stigmatised, and to protect themselves from further retaliation from the perpetrator the women who are victims of sexual violence and their families are forced to leave Buenaventura, and frequently displaced to other urban centres.. Moreover, only in bigger cities victims can access professional support. This occurs with those who have the greatest access to economic resources or who have a support network at their destination. The possibility of reporting the crime increases in such cases, because the victim feels somewhat safer in a new location and also has greater access to orientation and to the institutional channels of assistance.

Those who are unable to leave the municipality are displaced from one neighbourhood to the next, but there is a great possibility that they will run into the aggressor(s) again due to the presence and surveillance of members of illegal armed groups in urban areas.

“...one night, while we were sleeping, a member of an illegal armed group who is a “very good friend” of my husband, came in with a weapon and raped me. He threatened to kill my husband and my children. He returned on many occasions and forced me to be with him, with threats against my children. It was horrific to have to sleep with someone I didn’t want to, but it was a matter of life and death.

“...I couldn’t take it anymore, so I went to live in another neighbourhood. A while back, I saw him again in the neighbourhood where I am living now. He lives there, too. He moved in with an acquaintance, and I am terrified... Sometimes I say hello to him just to show him that I’m not afraid of him anymore.”

*Victim of sexual violence in
Buenaventura*

Moreover, the perpetrator sometimes sends precise instructions to the victim and her family not to leave the house, thereby restricting their movement and controlling various aspects of their life with death threats.

Forced displacement is also used as a preventive measure against threats of sexual violence. When women are harassed and/or warned of an event, they may choose to flee to protect themselves. They must do so in a clandestine manner, leaving all of their property behind, which impacts their standard of living and the means they have to survive.

“...yesterday, I went to the Assistance and Orientation Unit. There was a woman there who had a girl and a 9-month-old boy. She told me she had to leave her neighbourhood, first of all to get her kids out, and then she had to send someone to get her things, because the local gang leader harassed her and would call her so that she would have relations with him.”

Testimony from the Community

10. http://www.elcolombiano.com/BancoConocimiento/O/ onu_preocupada_por_violencia_sexual_en_zonas_de_conflicto_en_colombia/ onu_preocupada_por_violencia_sexual_en_zonas_de_conflicto_en_colombia.asp



“...in our neighbourhood, a teacher was sexually assaulted, forced to leave her home and became displaced. She had to leave her things behind so as not to raise suspicion and keep them from knowing she was leaving. When those in the group found out she had left, they climbed onto the roof of the house and destroyed it.”

Testimony from the Community

Sexual violence is also a way of forcing women to join illegal armed groups, or initially on a voluntary basis by seducing them. Once they become the love interest of an illegal armed group member, they may be informed of the illicit activities performed by the group and must work as informants, wash clothing, cook for the illegal armed group and become subject to different forms of abuse.

“they got the adolescents to fall in love by giving them cell phones, pretty clothes, five-dollar bills; they become the girlfriends or partners of the armed group members and then they are forced to practice prostitution or they are sexually abused.”

Member of the Community

“...I know the case of a very pretty 15-year-old girl who fell in love and went to live with her boyfriend. Once they started to live together, he showed her a video in which he was murdering someone. She tried to run away several times, but this was impossible. She became a victim of sexual violence. She was beaten up constantly and forced to work for the group.”

Member of the Community

At the same time, acts of vengeance amongst members of illegal armed groups have cost the lives of their partners or family members. There are “Chains of Vengeance” in accordance with which youths enter an armed group to get payback for the death of a family member or acquaintance. (FESCOL, IDEA, 2012)

“...they took a girl I know out of her house (her husband was in jail, and now he is outside of the country). Some armed men raped her as the two children watched... they didn’t run for help out of fear. They dismembered the girl and she was found in a black trash bag.”

Testimony from the Community

Sexual violence is a tool used to cause terror, to persuade the community in general and leaders, or as a way to strike fear into the population to get them to comply with the rules established by the illegal armed groups. In the second half of 2014, the Public Prosecutor’s Office became aware of a situation taking place at a school, where the members of criminal gangs took six girls and threatened to abuse them and dismember them in retaliation against their parents for being leaders in the community. The aforementioned is supported by a study completed by the Centre of Historical Memory (CMH) and Department for Social Prosperity (DPS) in 2013, which documents cases of sexual violence against women in the Guajira and Putumayo regions for work on projects for organisation and leadership in their communities.

Behaviours considered inappropriate by the illegal armed groups, such as wearing “improper” garments, are punishable for men, who must pay US\$50, and for women, with crimes of sexual violence. There is total control over the community, its behaviour, the use of free time, timetables, the places they can visit, and their emotional and social relationships (MTMCA, 2012)

“...it is common to find pamphlets in which women who go around being “rebellious” (in the street without permission, in public places like bars and discos) that they will be receiving corrective measures by the illegal armed groups present in the city.”

Community Member

3.2 THE DIFFERENT MANIFESTATIONS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

The sexual violence in Buenaventura is perpetrated by all of the illegal armed groups present in the municipality. All of the communes are at high risk, and all women are potential victims; there is no specific profile which is the focus of this type of violence. The most frequent cases involve girls who



are forced to perform sexual work commercially and who, according to ABC Colombia (et al., 2013), reach numbers of more than 35,000 girls in Colombia.

Sexual assault is the most commonly recurring incident. The members belonging to illegal armed groups enter homes in groups of 2, 3, 4, and up to 7 men. Silence is the predominant characteristic amongst the victims. There is no charge filed due to the great fear of retaliation against the victim and her family, a mistrust of institutions, high rates of impunity and the fact that it is impossible to leave the territory. The psychological impact of an act of sexual violence is so strong that the victims are unable to speak about the occurrence for a long time.

There was the case of a youth leader who the illegal armed groups attempted to persuade to leave her home, and because she did not, she was sexually abused by a group of men who went into her house in the middle of the night.

Case told by a civil servant from an institution in Buenaventura

There is also a relationship between the sexual violence and murders of women in Buenaventura. The media report

cases of women who are sexually abused and then murdered. The victims range in age from 12 to 35 years¹¹. If a woman is wooed by the member of an illegal armed group and does not accede to his demands, she may be raped by him or by people who he sends to do so. These women may also be subjected to major personal injuries by being hit and stabbed.

“One schoolgirl suffered 14 lacerations on her face and was stabbed 27 times on her body, and all just because she didn’t want to fall in love with the paramilitary leader. She missed the whole school year, and the family had to remain silent, because if they let the news out, it would be worse. They also wanted her sister to prostitute herself and the boys to join their ranks, because if they didn’t, they would be considered enemies.”

Member of the Community

11. The magazine *Semana* made reference to a report by *Insight Crime*, which reported on nine women murdered in Buenaventura in May 2014, due to the armed conflict. Sadism, death and abuse in Buenaventura. *Semana* magazine. 23 May 2014. So far this year, several reports on this topic have been published in the newspaper *El País*. <http://www.elpais.com.co/elpais/judicial/noticias/encontran-mujer-descuartizada-playas-b>



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There is a dangerous absence of opportunities for education, employment and personal development, as well as social and recreational activities, for the community of Buenaventura, especially for girls, teenagers and women, so that they may have protected spaces where they can find opportunities to think and create a life project which distances them from the armed conflict.

Due to the sexual assault and abuse of women and girls in their homes or in public places, such as stores and on the way to school, women live in a state of fear. Mothers are afraid to let their daughters out alone. In Buenaventura, there is a sustained collective fear that undermines the community's social welfare.

“When the girls go to the store to buy something, the members of the group touch their body parts. I have a 15-year-old daughter who lives hidden. She is very afraid.”

Member of the Community

The psychological effects on the victim, her family and the entire community are in some cases very profound. Sexual violence destroys the family's core, relationships between couples and the community's peace of mind. Women's productivity, safety and development are majorly reduced, and even more so when most of the victims neither seek nor receive any professional psychological assistance.

“Eight months ago, they detected that I have a disease. I get dizzy. I get convulsions. My joints hurt. I have respiratory deficiency: perhaps it's because of what happened to me. I start to think about it all the time. I hear voices. I hear men speaking to me. I can't report it, because there is no protection. Doctors Without Borders helped me with psychological therapies, but I just went twice and didn't return.”

*Victim of sexual violence
in Buenaventura*

“We are all victims in a collective sense. What happens to my neighbour happens to me, too, and to my whole community. Armed violence in general and sexual violence did away with traditional family and cultural practices. People no longer sit at the door of their house to talk and share, to play bingo. Nor do they talk with their neighbours for fear of retaliation. Sexual violence decreased my safety and my ability to relate with others. I became quiet and untrusting.”

Member of the Community

The women who are victims of sexual violence can be subjected to stigmatisation, discrimination and public scorn. Other people in the community single them out as being guilty of what happened because of the way they dress or their behaviour.

Naturally, physical health is impacted in various ways due to the sexual violence itself, sexually transmitted infections and diseases, and cases of unwanted pregnancy.

Many of the diseases are not detected, because the women do not go to the doctor for fear of being found out and then being forced to denounce what happened, because it is the responsibility of the hospital and medical staff to investigate the case.

Sexually transmitted diseases are more difficult to detect. Their symptoms can take time to appear and require a specialised medical examination to confirm their existence. There is a clear relationship between sexually transmitted diseases and sexual violence, according to Mejia, UNHCR consultancy (2014) "in environments in which sexual violence is very widespread, the rate of the epidemic increases by 10%." In Buenaventura, 43 cases of HIV were detected in 2013 and 21 so far in 2014, according to information from the Health Secretariat on 15 August 2014.

There is talk of pregnancies resulting from sexual violence, especially amongst adolescents. It is, however, not possible to establish a clear link between sexual violence and pregnancies. Most cases of sexual violence go unreported and social stigma can deter women and girls from speaking openly about unwanted pregnancies resulting from such abuse.

3.3 INVISIBILITY, WHAT THE FIGURES CONCEAL

The physical, psychological and emotional impact, and the intense pain and fear experienced by the victim, keep the aggression to which she was subjected from being made public.

The disproportionate impact of forced displacement on women and the different violations of rights, above all sexual violence, are characterised by the problem's invisibility, especially at the official level. This invisibility is translated into the non-existence of specific responses of an effective nature.

There is no psychological assistance available, and that which is provided through Health Promotion Institutions (IPS) is not appropriate. Months can go by before receiving an appointment. The women who receive profes-





nal psychological assistance or help from their support network manage to talk about the problem with time (generally years).

The appointments to see a psychologist in the health system (Health Promoter Company, or EPS) suffer from great delays. It takes more than 15 days to assign them, and when involving a crisis caused by sexual violence, the situation gives no hope. The foundations are faster. They give appointments for the next day, and the assistance is good. However, when the psychologist is a man, the female victims do not attend the therapy.

District Public Prosecutor's Office

The women who are victims of sexual violence are intimidated by their aggressors so that they will not make the crime public. They fear that if they tell what happened, they and their family members will suffer major consequences.

“When I was 13 years old, I was sexually abused by a man who I didn't know. He told me not to tell or my grandmother would suffer the consequences. He went looking for me at my house all the time, and I would hide at the neighbours or in my backyard. One day, a neighbour woman told me that the man had announced what he was going to do to me... and that everyone knew because he was the boss of an illegal armed group and had decided that I was his personal property.”

*Victim of Sexual Violence in
Buenaventura*

The institutional assistance on offer does not meet the victims' needs, in terms of scheduling, services or appropriateness and, above all, the results of court cases do not end with a punishment against the perpetrator.

“There are not enough public prosecutors to move ahead with investigations. It may take a long time and, in the end, there is no punishment. Impunity prevails. This causes the victims not to believe in the system.”

Akina Zaji Souda Foundation

“...I know the case of a woman who lives with a member of the group. He beats her all the time and manhandles her in the street. At weekends, he comes home drunk and forces her to be with him, even if she doesn't feel like it. The woman has to do whatever the husband says, because otherwise she may wake up dismembered in a bag.”

Member of the Community

An effort to make the problem more visible and increase sensitivity about its prevention and assistance was first made in 2012, through the System for Management of Data on Gender-based Violence, or GBVIMS¹². This response management system records cases of survivors who receive some sort of assistance, and the information is entered by institutions which are responsible for providing that assistance (UNHCR, UNFPA, 2012).

3.4 LEGAL VOIDS IN THE PROTECTION FOR VICTIMS

In Colombia, there is a regulatory framework for providing assistance to victims of the armed conflict. The Law foresees legal assistance, shelter, medical and psychological care for victims and the establishment of a road map for assistance. However, in practice, there are barriers to gaining access to this offering set down in the Law, due to factors such as:

- A lack of knowledge about the rights, regulations and institutional offerings. Public institutions do not name personnel for the purposes of orientation, and this work has had to be taken on by international entities and local non-governmental organisations.

12. System implemented by the UNHCR and UNFPA as of October 2011 in 3 of the country's municipalities: Barrancabermeja, Medellín and Apartadó, and as of June 2012 another 4 municipalities: Arauca, Buenaventura, Tumaco and Villavicencio.

- Despite the existence of a broad regulatory framework in the country, in practice institutions do not provide the required assistance in a proper manner and under the conditions needed by the victims. The limited or insufficient coordination among territorial entities weakens the rendering of health services and the assistance provided to survivors. The lack of funding and projects to facilitate access to services and assistance by the state limits the access to the survivors' entitlements, and in many cases they do not have the economic means to travel to the places where assistance and orientation are provided.
- The assistance is not appropriate. In some institutions there is no assistance at weekends or during the night, critical times when acts of sexual violence take place. Added to this is the fact that key aspects in assistance are under going a consolidation process; for instance, the responsibility of providing shelter to victims was assigned to the Health Care Entities, but normally their administrative offices are not located in Buenaventura, and this keeps the victim from being able to access the service, because these entities have no presence there.

The law has established that an emergency kit be given to victims of sexual violence, immediately after such an event occurs, for the prevention of Sexually Transmitted Diseases, HIV, syphilis; it also includes emergency birth control. There is a kit for girls and another for women. We have many questions, such as the fact that the Ministry states that the kit should include 30 pills, but in Buenaventura only 2 are being given out.

Information provided by the Health Secretariat, Office for Women and Gender, and District Personnel Office for Children and Adolescents

Given the institutional deficiencies, the Inter-institutional Board for Prevention and Response Against Gender-based Sexual Violence was created, with participation by 40 institutions of different types¹³. The objective of the board is to increase visibility of the situation by presenting and discussing specific cases, promoting institutional coordination, effecting improvements on

13. 3 Institutions of the Public Prosecutor's Office: National Ombudsman, District Personnel Office and Attorney's Office, 4 international entities: UNHCR, SJR, MSF, ICRC; 11 grassroots social organisations and 12 state organisations: the District Mayor's Office, with its different secretariats, the Family Commission, House of Justice, Public Prosecutor's Office, Legal Medicine, ICBF, EPS, Police for Children and Adolescents, SIJIN.

assistance, fomenting institutional offerings and spreading information about the channels for receiving this form of assistance.

The board has become institutionalised and has reached agreements related with the naming of specialised staff, including a public prosecutor for gender. However, there are constantly delays due to setbacks in hiring personnel, paying salaries and other internal administrative tasks at the entities concerned.

Though there is a broad regulatory framework and interest by the national government in making the problem more visible, in practice institutional assistance is characterised by huge deficiencies, a lack of skills among the personnel, a lack of interest and inadequate treatment for victims.

Given the limitations and gaps in the response provided by local institutions, in order to guarantee the protection of and access to the rights of the survivors of the crime of sexual violence, grassroots social organisations, such as the Butterflies with New Wings Building a Future Network, have become a vital point of reference for the victims of this crime. The women volunteers who make up the network become mentors who work with and for their own communities. Their profound knowledge about their environment, culture and needs, as well as their own personal experiences within the armed conflict, allow them to assume a role in prevention and self-care.

This grass roots approach has achieved greater empowerment of those who take part in its processes, specific results in prevention and assistance for gender violence victims, increased visibility of the problem and the strengthening of a community organisation with prospects of future sustainability and continuity; within this scenario of Buenaventura, they represent the only opportunity for the survivors of the crime of sexual violence.

Self-care and the successful response by this grassroots organisation are based on work "amongst peers," between women from the same community, with the same customs, problems and needs. This network is made up of 120 women, who work on orientation and training (awareness days, orientation, rights of the victims of the crime of Gender-based Sexual Violence), accompaniment of victims (psycho-social interventions through traditional practices), references to channels for assistance and contact with institutions.

"Being fellow mothers means respect, union, solidarity...it is a pact, we are all fellow mothers who have the obligation to take care of each other and add to what we learn in the network...it is an effort to break the cycle of fear and recover our customs."

Member of the "Butterflies with New Wings Building a Future" Network



4. FINAL THOUGHTS

The internal armed conflict existing in Colombia has had and continues to have profound humanitarian consequences on the civilian population. Attacks, homicides, disappearances, torture, forced displacement and sexual violence form part of a long list of violations of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights by all of the illegal armed perpetrators present within this context.

The figures tell a story of 5.7 million displaced persons, this being the factor of greatest visibility forming part of Colombia's armed conflict. On the contrary, the cases of sexual violence tend to be concealed due to the difficulty in gathering and consolidating information, and a lack of assistance and institutional interest in this serious problem that affects women.

In Buenaventura, illegal armed groups are present which fight with each other, as well as committing violations against the community. Within this context, women have become the target of aggression, mainly in the form of forced displacement and sexual violence, used as a strategy of conflict to destabilise and control the population.

Sexual violence is characterised by its concealment, due to the widespread fear amongst victims, the impact of the aggression, the lack of denunciation, the improper gathering of information to demonstrate that the violence is linked to the armed conflict and that these are not cases of internal

domestic violence or gender violence. To this one must add the lack of credibility in institutions and the court system's low efficiency in punishing aggressors.

Forced displacement and sexual violence affect women's physical and emotional integrity. The psychological after-effects are evident and aggravated by the lack of proper professional assistance of quality. Moreover, the physical effects are suffered in silence or treated using traditional medicine.

In practice, institutions do not deliver the required assistance in an appropriate manner or under the conditions necessary for the victims. Limited or insufficient coordination amongst the territorial entities weakens the health care service and grass roots organisations, which works in an arduous, committed and constant manner in favour of women victims and the prevention of this type of crimes. It is fundamental that these voluntary civil society support organisations be strengthened and protected within the framework of the conflict.

It is important to improve the State's response to the situation being lived by women and survivors in Colombia, in terms of the armed conflict, and above all in Buenaventura. Women are attacked systematically, repeatedly and intensely. The State's intervention is urgent to put a stop to these practices and ensure the protection of the life and integrity of women and their families.

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