

I Will Never Be Silenced

**Testimonies of Hope from
Colombian Women**



A report produced by the
American Friends Service Committee
and the Fellowship of Reconciliation



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Preface

By Piedad Morales

Colombian women. We find them scheming for dignified life and a social fabric of solidarity and sorority in the midst of the destructive frenzy of an armed conflict that has lasted nearly five decades. It has gradually taken over the countryside and cities, to the south and the north, in the west and the east. With their communities and others, Colombian women also build and defend their ancestral lands and watersheds, the jungles in the Amazon and Chocó province. They are not only mothers, but subjects with rights, and they demand an end to the sexual violations of women, youth and girls by the soldiers who make up all the warring armies: soldiers who have made the lives and bodies of women, youth and girls into scorched earth in the name of revenge, retaliation, and men's honor.

From victims and survivors of the violence and armed conflict, Colombian women make themselves conscious actors, responsible for caring for themselves and for life. They come together with others to defend and preserve the environment and planet. They become social and political agents generating peace, in spite of the tearing that the war causes in their daily lives and bodies, marking their long or short lives. Multiple violations of the most human of rights, the human rights of women; countless infractions of international humanitarian law; crimes against humanity, violence and political genocide, that mean for women: rape used as a weapon of war by all the groups, sexual abuse, and slavery. Forced displacement, disappearance, kidnapping, support for prostitution and trafficking of young women and girls from the poorest and most vul-

nerable populations. Forced recruitment to carry out work such as transporting weapons and drugs, supplying troops, and domestic slavery.

That is why many Colombian women become memory, custodians and secretaries of history: Some from the plough, with which they plant the bread of hope for harvest by future generations. Others from their kitchens and daily labor. Many from classrooms, blackboards, hospitals, factories: they teach, learn, soothe, produce. You find them active in strengthening peace communities, supporting life, work and dignity, in indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

You find them, too, in the streets, in the town plazas, in the church halls: demanding their disappeared ones, shouting that they want them alive, free and in peace. Showing their photos to remember them, and inviting the often indifferent

passersby: "*look, do something, say something, so it doesn't happen to you.*" Many and diverse, with stories to hear and tell, nourished by the experiences of Central American, Argentine, Chilean, Brazilian women, all of them confronting similar pain.

Colombian women who decided to fill the silence of impunity with their denouncing word, with their demand for the right to truth, justice, and reparations that are integrated and meaningful to the women. They resolved to remain neither silent nor still in the face of patriarchy, war, poverty, and violence.

Piedad Morales' is a poet and activist with the Women's Peaceful Path (Ruta Pacifica).

Mother with Broom and Child

You sweep from here to out there
Startling bloodsuckers
and troubled thoughts

A child climbs in and out of your arms
while you try to brush
the sorrow and forgettings
from the stoop of the fatherland

Introduction

By Elizabeth Lozano

This report produced by FOR and AFSC gives us a much needed and significant glimpse into the ways women as individuals and as members of collectivities of resistance experience and respond to the ongoing armed conflict in Colombia.

The voices recorded in this report are very important for several reasons. One, they vividly represent the varied attempts carried out throughout Colombia to respond to the armed conflict in non-violent ways. These non-violent responses are as multiple in Colombia as the conflict itself, and include organizations grouped around gender, ethnic, religious, political, and regional interests. Notable examples recognized nationally and internationally for their outstanding work, are the Popular Women's Organization (OFP), the Women's Peaceful Path (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres), the Association of Indigenous Townships of Northern Cauca (ACIN), and the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó. The latter two were nominated this year by the AFSC for the Nobel Peace Prize. Incidentally, the work of these Colombian groups would be made even more difficult if they did not have the practical and symbolic support of international peace organizations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the American Friends Service Committee, and Peace Brigades International.

Second, the testimonies gathered in this report allow us to listen to women as actors and agents of change, not only as victims of violence. The report reminds us that to have a voice is to have agency, and that to be silenced is a symptom, a condition and an outcome of terror. To speak up in the face of fear is a form of power that transforms both victim and aggressor.

Third, these testimonies invite us to reflect on the relationship between violence, gender, and nonviolent resistance. Both U.S. and Colombian cultures tend to glamorize violence as

cool (and masculine) and devalue non-violence as wimpy (and feminine), as rose-colored and far-fetched as romance novels. The winners of the last presidential elections in both countries reflect such a view.

There is much more we need to understand about the consequences of our cultural celebration of the will to win, conquer and control, over the will to cooperate, empathize and understand. Both the OFP and Ruta Pacífica dare speak of tenderness as a principle of action, usually a no-no posture if one intends to be treated seriously in a political context. The centrality of love in a struggle against violence is a sentiment often expressed by the testimonies gathered in this report. It takes guts (some would say "balls") to use the language of love in a context of war—and to practice it.

Fourth, the women in this report speak with memorable insight about their own living conditions and in so doing challenge us to reflect on our own. To reflect, that is, on the ways in which we are connected, the ways we remain separate, and the reasons we should not remain indifferent. Those of us who live in the United States may think of Colombia (or Iraq, for that matter) as a far-away place affected by conflicts unrelated to us. We may think the Colombian conflict is exclusively of the making of Colombian people, who are apparently very fond of self-destruction. But our daily actions in the United States carry implications. On an individual level, the kind of food, clothes, coffee and news we consume affect the livelihood of people elsewhere. We vote with our pockets and need to acknowledge that power. At a social level, the policies carried out by the U.S. government and its institutions profoundly influence other governments and citizens. We support democracy in principle, but may undermine it in practice (the existence of the School of Americas come to mind, as well as

the currently relaxed view of torture, if practiced against our “enemies”).

The voices collected in this report also resonate with my own experience as a Colombian woman, however different we may be in ethnic or social background. I experienced the threat of abduction at nine. I experienced the threat of rape and death at 18. I survived both by nothing more than sheer luck—and, in the latter case, by the surprising sprinter’s speed of my legs. I remained silent, overwhelmed by a profound sense of shame.

For all its personal impact, my experience pales before any and all of the stories lovingly collected here. These are the stories of peasants, displaced urbanites, lawyers and housewives; members of the Afro-Colombian community and of indigenous groups; young mothers and elderly feminists. Women of many backgrounds united by a common thread: Resistance illuminated by hope (and love).

One may believe that women and men are essentially different (women being more spiritual; men more aggressive), or that any gender difference is purely the outcome of social upbringing (and thus, fundamentally arbitrary). This nature vs. culture debate still persists in academic and political settings. What is most definitely undeniable, however, is that men and women are treated differently—at home, at work, in school, within the family, in the Church and on the streets. Their experience of peace and war thus differs and so do their responses to conflict and threat. They have different resources to confront injustice. Paradoxically, this overall situation of power inequality may support creative alternatives to violence. Alternatives grounded on tactics rather than strategy, lack rather than plenty, cooperation rather than competition, negotiation rather than intimidation. These are the alternatives embraced and illustrated by this report’s testimonies.



Photo: David Bacon

Colombia is a country of great contrasts and striking internal divisions, most notably among rural and urban settings, the wealthy minority and the impoverished majority, and its well-defined geographic regions. This plural Colombia suffers from a war that is multi-layered and multi-dimensional (more a compound of conflicts than a single war). A fifty year “protracted” war between the army and the insurgency exists side by side a so-called “war on drugs,” which in practice targets peasants, animals and land.

These conflicts produce a war on civilians—not to mention the ecosystem—who are caught between drug lords, army, paramilitaries, guerrillas, and opportunistic criminals. To paraphrase Uribe Alarcón and Pècaut, Colombia as a whole is being “held hostage” by forces of multiple and overlapping violence.¹

The statistics speak eloquently. From 1992 to 1999 there were 5,181 kidnappings in Colombia, the highest amount in the world.² Fifty

to seventy assassinations were reported daily in 2003; 16,797 were killed in 2002 alone.³ As of 2003, Colombia had three million internally displaced persons, the majority of whom are women and children.⁴

Many of the women interviewed for this report mention being “displaced.” This is a verb and noun of rare usage in the U.S. context—one would not casually drop it in daily conversation—and it is therefore hard to translate it in its

¹ Uribe Alarcón, M.V. (2004). *Antropología de la inhumanidad: Un ensayo interpretativo del terror en Colombia*. Bogotá: Norma.

² Crime statistics: Murders (per capita) by country. (2007, March 5). Nationmaster.com. Retrieved March 5, 2007, from http://www.nationmaster.com/graph-B/cr/mur_percap-crime-murde

³ Merks, J. & Francisco, E. (2003, May). Evaluation of UNHCR’s programme for internally displaced people in Colombia. [The UN High Commissioner for Refugees]. Retrieved May 5, 2007, from <http://www.notes.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/VID/6A82B55AE71E122F>

full force. In Colombia talk of the “displaced” has entered the daily lexicon in the same way that the “disposable” (a homeless person) did over two decades ago. A displaced person is forced to leave behind her land, her family, her roots, her source of income, and seek refuge in an inhospitable city that sees her as a burden. More often than not, she has suffered the violence of war first hand, witnessed loved ones being harassed or killed, and will face, as a displaced woman, a much higher chance of being sexually abused than those not displaced.

Like most contemporary wars across the world, our Colombian multi-layered version is an armed conflict between men. This may be self-evident but its implications are powerful. Women are typically neither the main perpetrators nor the direct targets in the Colombian armed conflict.⁵ They are often seen as an extension of the enemy, and damaged so to hurt the men behind them. Many times women are the surviving victims left to take care of shattered families from which male members have been taken.

In this context, the violence faced by women is not only inflicted by the machetes, guns, and landmines of the “enemy.” It is also carried out by “friendly” fire, so to speak, in the woman’s daily life. This is the normalized violence exercised without the weapons of war, and manifested in abusive marital relations, implicit or explicit threats of rape, absence of educational opportunities, lack of sexual education, and in the general expectation that her right place is the kitchen and the bedroom.⁶

Our Colombian daily discourse is pregnant (pun intended) with gendered aggression. Dis-

course may be “just” talk—but war makes it **literal**. For **example**, growing up I often heard **statements such as** *Las leyes, como las mujeres, se hicieron para violarlas* (Law, like women, is made to be raped) and *En caso de violación, relájese y disfrute* (in case of rape, relax and enjoy). These are meant to be witty statements, oozing with the leg-pulling (*mamagallismo*) dark humor that we so much love, and a certain disdain for laws and state authority. But they also speak blatantly of women’s assumed nature as a less human “Other,” and therefore, as something that is intrinsically less sacred and more rappable—like the “*enemy*.”

Violence against women is manifested in language and in action, in public and in private. It is not caused by armed conflict but war does exacerbate it, at all levels, in the family, on the streets, and in the battleground. Because it precedes war, gendered violence may continue after war—unless it is directly addressed by individual and collective initiatives such as those exemplified in this report.

Because violence is practiced in language and in action, it must be addressed and deconstructed at both levels. We need to examine the ways we speak about men and women; the qualities we associate with feminine and masculine dispositions; and the strategies we use to fight injustice or repel aggression. Such examination needs to take place individually, locally, nationally, and internationally. What is happening in Colombia is intimately related to U.S. policies and initiatives. The future of both places requires self-examination and awareness of collective responsibility. Organizations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the American Friends Service Committee enthusiastically embrace such commitment to international responsibility and local action. Their initiatives need to be recognized, celebrated and emulated.

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⁴ *Colombian women call for active peace roles. (2004, May). Women waging peace. Retrieved January 19, 2005 from <http://www.womenwagingpeace.net/contents/articles>.*

⁵ *It is important to note, however, that women constitute 30% of the guerrillas’ membership.*

⁶ *See two Amnesty International reports: *Está en nuestras manos: No mas violencia contra las mujeres.* (2004) Madrid, España: Editorial Amnistía Internacional. And: *Scarred bodies, hidden crimes: Sexual violence against women in the armed conflict.* (2004). Report on Colombia. <http://www.web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGAMR230402004>*

'All women are leaders'

Tsabatsana Mama | Putumayo

Emerenciana Chicunque is an indigenous Kamtsa leader in Putumayo. Colombia's indigenous population is relatively small (three percent) but made important political gains when the new 1991 constitution recognized specific rights for indigenous people. Those gains, especially related to land tenancy, are now threatened by reforms introduced by the government of President Alvaro Uribe. According to the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), there are 82 indigenous peoples in Colombia, and 64 different languages spoken. In 1985, Putumayo's indigenous population was calculated at 11,900.



In the following testimony, Emerenciana speaks of her efforts leading the community's mobilization after a devastating flood in 2002. She has been a community activist for many years, primarily devoting herself to ensuring that girls continue their formal education beyond the second grade. She and her husband struggled to have a school built closer to a small, indigenous community that had no public services. This led Emerenciana to join the town council and eventually start a school where children learn to speak Kamtsa, do traditional craftwork, and research and learn about their indigenous identity.

Tsabatsana Mama (Mother Earth), the organization she currently leads, brings together women artisans so they can learn to make and sell traditional Kamtsa crafts.

Emerenciana Chicunque

We call our organization "Mother Earth." In Kamtsa, our indigenous language, we say Tsabatsana Mama, which for us means that the earth comes first, because if we are not connected to the earth, we wouldn't understand what it is to defend our identity. The earth is our mother, and we cannot trample, harass, or treat her however we want. This value we have for the earth is very concrete—we are each tied to our *chagra* (small farm). The *chagra* is the most sacred place for the Kamtsa. It is the sacred home. There the children start to learn, there we accompanied our parents to work, and when we were too young to work, we played by climbing the trees, and watching our baby siblings beneath the shade of the bean bushes.

But while we played these games, we got to see how our parents worked, planted, tended the trees, how far apart and during what phase of the moon they planted crops, and when it was time to pick things. We observed that there was an organized method to things—that

there was one crop that could be eaten and another for the seed. We didn't just cultivate food; we also planted trees whose wood we use for making crafts to sell, and also for making houses. From these same trees we also get the fibers to weave baskets and dyes.

I think the war and the armed conflict in Colombia have affected us in terms of the lack of support we receive for economic opportunities and projects. In Middle and Lower Putumayo, they receive more attention than we do here in Upper Putumayo. In those areas, there are coca crops, and so they have to be eliminated. We don't have coca crops, and we should be rewarded for this. If we wanted to, we could have planted poppies so that they would have also paid attention to our situation. But we haven't done this, and so in order to stay on our *chagras* as we should, our community works incredibly hard to raise corn, beans, and produce some milk.

At the same time, we see so much war, we receive many displaced people, and because of the poverty here



Emerenciana

we are also susceptible to violence and displacement. We are sending our children away to work where there is better pay, and we have no opportunity to sell the crafts we are working so hard to produce, so there is a lot of work to do.

In 2002, we had a huge flood. The river filled the houses, and when [the water went down], it left sand two or three meters deep in the houses. Some roofs caved in, and the houses were made uninhabitable. Before this happened, we had asked for sandbags to contain the river, but the municipality didn't answer our request quickly enough. After the flood, they removed the sediment from the downtown area, and they left. Well, it rained again and again our houses flooded.

We decided to put an end to this—we blocked the road so that [the county] would pay attention to us. At first it was just me, standing on the street alone in the afternoon. People began arriving that afternoon and night, and then there were 50 of us. And at dawn the students came with bread carts, and the town came and gave us meat and vegetables so we could stay out there resisting, and then people brought us blankets and stews. And I saw that if I were not out there for a valid reason, the people wouldn't have joined me.

After this blockade, the regional authorities began to pay attention to us and our needs for the first time. They put all of the remaining sand in the ravine and built bridges and eventually canals. After that, we needed to come together to fertilize the land, because

after the machines left there was sand everywhere. I am thankful to God because after a catastrophe of hunger and need, it made us join together. I was on the town council at the time and I was leading this blockade, and they accused me of being part of the armed conflict, of being a rebel and a revolutionary. I was forced to flee to Bogotá for three months because I received death threats. They said I had the capacity to incite revolution, but I wasn't trying to do this. I was working for the resolution of conflict, both in my community and on a national level.

Our survival as indigenous people is what inspires me to keep struggling. I want them to let us live as we are, to think and act freely, without compromising certain

principles, but free as God made us.

I conclude from all of this that in order to move forward, you have to be constant in your efforts and then give what you didn't think you had. We women keep working for change, but many times silently and behind the scenes. By knocking on doors and helping to avoid and prevent problems, we make things happen. We are more active, we talk less, but whatever we decide to do we make happen. While women aren't



Emerenciana and friend

'Another process has arrived, suggesting other possibilities'

Gloria Cuartas, former mayor of Apartadó

Gloria Cuartas Montoya exemplifies the courageous women who have dedicated their lives to public service, serving as mayor of Apartadó from 1995-1997.

In Colombia, progressive mayors have long been targeted for assassination by armed groups, especially in the hotly contested Urabá region that surrounds Apartadó. Despite this dangerous situation and repeated accusations that she was a guerrilla sympathizer, as the mayor of Apartadó, Gloria denounced injustices as people were killed, disappeared, and threatened by paramilitary, guerilla, and military forces. She also dedicated time and energy to supporting the nascent Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, and to this day remains a staunch ally in their project of nonviolent resistance and survival.



Gloria Cuartas Montoya

I have made the choice to live this life as a woman committed to the defense of human rights. This decision rests heavily in my transformative experience of liberation theology.

I am from Antioquia and have only lived these two years in Bogotá. My entire life has been, if I can use this word, a pilgrimage for my country. My motivations to take the paths I have in my life are many. My family always spoke of the significance of La Violencia and how it affected our family—the memory of death, of violence, of my grandparents being forced to leave their land, losing everything.

I was born and raised hearing about inequalities and about injustices and how to make ends meet while living without the means. This changed my life. As a young person I was in some of the most deteriorated and problematic slums of Medellín, and heard my high school teachers speak of displacement.

Growing up amidst this difficult reality transformed and influenced me; living with displaced people, knowing other hungry children and listening to the stories of domestic workers like my mother, I changed into a rebel, a woman who exists on the edges of this society. I recognize that for more than

40 years this country has experienced economic, social, and political violence, causing us to lose our consciousness as citizens with rights. As women, we have to look deep inside our guts and recognize who we are and what we are capable of in this conflict. This will change us as it has changed me.

My time as mayor in Apartadó was especially transformative. When I lived there more than 1,200 people were assassinated. I lived close to constant pain and witnessed crime—the sadness in people's eyes, their hunger and how [armed groups] destroyed families, how they destroyed women. This changed my priorities and has transformed my body, my thoughts, my sexuality, my ability to speak about what is normal and the way I process my emotions.

After so much suffering, death and pain, trying to come back and confront everyday life requires a lot of faith in order to not lose hope in our country. It's complicated, but to see other people resisting, holding on to hope after an assassination, a disappearance, or a rape and still having the desire to keep living gives me strength.

I am also inspired to continue fighting because of something that occurred when I was mayor in Apartadó

in 1996. I was visiting a school there when a young boy was decapitated in front of me [by paramilitaries]. Then they fell back and began to shoot at the school. I remember feeling so terrified, panicked, and guilty for inciting the attack by virtue of my presence. I was alone with the children in a room with no exit and we were just waiting for them to come in and kill us. All of the children were looking at me with their immense eyes and their covered mouths and I remember praying.

Then, and I will never forget this, a young girl named Victoria said to me, "Don't be scared. Come with us, we won't let them kill you." This young girl was my guide; I surrendered completely to her. It was surreal, and she led me out of the room before [the paramilitaries] entered and to this day I have still not forgotten Victoria and her words in that moment, "We won't let them kill you."

As Paulo Freire says, I have a body soaked through with memories and recollections of pain. Sometimes at night the images of those killed pass through my mind, but I remember Victoria. And I have had many teachers, Oscar Romero and Gustavo Gutierrez among them. [Their writings] introduced me to liberation theology, which is a feminist theology and one committed to human rights.

I am certain this country will not be neglected, thanks to the work of its women. We carry with us the memory of all those who have been lost—sons, daughters, companions, co-workers. In the midst of ultimate oppression, women are the bridge of hope. Women make hope possible. Women rise to the challenge of creating a new methodology of resistance and changing the relationship of power in this struggle.



Photo: Courtesy Gloria Cuartas Montoya

Gloria Cuartas Montoya

I ran for the Senate not because I see it as the critical platform for social change, but rather as a means toward change. To see the legislative body as a transformative place given today's realities is very difficult. However, the Senate chamber can be a place of political debate and a place to make visible and articulate the rights of women and the growing strength of grassroots civilian movements across the country.

We also must understand that we are talking

about a country that has armed conflict, substantial impunity, presidential reelections¹, a political crisis, and an entrenched practice of violating human rights. We also believe that paramilitarization is experiencing a resurgence in Colombian society, requiring us to make known the peaceful resistance we are creating here in Colombia. It is important that the international community recognize that another process has arrived, one suggesting other possibilities.

I want to speak to the women of the United States who are also committed to nurturing life, committed to defending human rights: Come to this country, to the sites of major crisis so we can have a dialogue about generating new relationships of sisterhood between our countries. We can create a large movement of women raising their voices to nourish life all over the world. I ask that these women hear my voice, that we join our efforts because together we can believe in something new, in new relationships of citizen diplomacy between women. And I believe that together we can transform this political reality.

¹ In 2005 the Colombian Supreme court handed down an assenting decision changing the Colombian Constitution to allow for an additional four-year presidential term. This was a petition brought to the court by the current President Alvaro Uribe Vélez. Uribe easily won victory in his second presidential election in May 2006.

'Women contribute another vision, more tender'

The Nasa Project | Toribio, Cauca

Because of the continuous abuse of indigenous and campesino [rural farmer] communities since the arrival of the Spanish in 1553, the Nasa have developed their organizational strength to ensure that their rights are respected.

With a population of more than 138,000, the Nasa make up a large part of the population of the southwestern department of Cauca. The Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC) was formed by the Nasa in 1971 to recover and enlarge their reservations (known as *resguardos*); strengthen indigenous councils (or *cabildos*); educate others about laws protecting indigenous rights; defend indigenous history, language, and customs; and train indigenous teachers who are familiar with their language and culture.

The consciousness-raising work of the CRIC and the inspiration of the indigenous Catholic priest, Father Álvaro Ulcué Chocué, led to the creation of seven large community projects in northern Cauca. (In 1985, Father Álvaro was killed for his work with the Nasa.) Perhaps the most famous of these projects, the Nasa Project, was started in 1980 and was centered in the *cabildos* of Toribío, San Francisco, and Tacueyó.

The project intended to unify the indigenous people of these municipalities who were then divided, and to help them carry on their customs and traditions. In the Páez language, Nasa means "people;" therefore, this project is regarded as one of the people. The success of the Nasa Project earned it the 2004 Equator Prize, awarded by the United Nations Development Program for outstanding local efforts to reduce poverty.



Maria Victoria Alvarado

I am from Palmera, in the department of Valle del Cauca. My family is ordinary and humble: materially poor, but rich in principles and values. My upbringing and my high school education were based on the philosophy of liberation. Ever since high school I've been working with groups such as youth, the disabled, campesinos, and Afro-Colombians. I have been working with the indigenous population for seven years. I've worked in different roles within the Nasa organization, first as a contractor with the municipality of Toribio, then as the head of (urban) planning, and currently as the Planning and Development Advisor of the Nasa Project.

The Colombian conflict has its own dynamic in Cauca: about 75 percent of the general Colombian

population lives in cities, whereas in Cauca, 75 percent of the population lives in the countryside. This department has the largest concentration of indigenous people in Colombia. There is intense pressure on rural lands here because in other regions property is owned individually, whereas land here is collectively owned and it is easier to affect an individual rather than an entire group. Northern Cauca is known globally for its biodiversity. This land is also a strategic corridor that connects the departments of Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Huila, Tolima, and Caqueta. All of these reasons contribute to making this department a focal point of the conflict. The situation is also more complicated compared to other parts of the country because the indigenous people here [are] autonomous. They choose to maintain their identity



Nasa indigenous women leaders

as indigenous people and remain near their ancestral lands instead of aligning themselves with the [political] Left or Right. Within the conflict, greater pressure is put on the indigenous population precisely because of their autonomous stance. Armed groups have tried to win them over many times and enormous external pressure is felt from all sides.

Here, in this job, it's never easy. There have been difficult moments, feeling that my life is in danger, with the invasions, attacks, and being watched. Everyone here is conscious that each day could be our last. Despite the difficulties, we have to fight to make this country a better place.

The experience of learning about governmental corruption is what brought me into this work. I've been affected by the corruption I witnessed working as a contractor for the state. The sense that we're building something with many people, not individually, and the possibility of change is what inspires me to keep struggling. What makes me most happy about doing my work is witnessing how women, men, and children grow prouder of being indigenous, being themselves, being less silent and more open. The construction of alternatives and dreaming of a life with dignity for all is possible!

Challenges have evolved over time in the sense that the national and international context has changed. Before, the focus was on improving the external situation from the inside, but now it's about changing on the inside, with all of the same pressures from the

outside. This work has changed me in terms of my outlook. I believe it's important that the individualism of mestizos¹ or Western culture be diluted and permanently confronted. When this happens, the communal spirit begins to grow. Westerners tend to have a big ego as a result of their education, putting the self before everyone else. Here our education changes us in the sense that we become more communally oriented.

The women's movement lives within the dream of the Nasa Project. By raising people's consciousness, we decided to forge a path that spoke to the dreams and necessities of the Nasa and not one tied to any traditional political scheme. I believe it's important that women get involved in the struggle for peace in Colombia because they contribute another vision: more human and more tender. The contributions of women have been very important for the Nasa. During the recovery of lands that were carried out in the 1970s and '80s, women were at their partners' sides, preparing the land. In the recovery of lands carried out this year, women have also been involved, as part of the Indigenous Guard,² in the health programs, in the family programs, and in the women's program. They are here, arm-in-arm, recovering territory, and defending their rights.

¹ Descendants of mixed European and indigenous ancestry who today comprise the majority of the Colombian population.

² A group of 7,000 unarmed men and women who volunteer as a peaceful defense force for the Nasa communities.

'The pain needs to be spilled out'

Mothers of the Candelaria, Paths of Hope | Medellín

In 1999, Mothers of the Candelaria was formed in the city of Medellín by the families and loved ones of those who have been disappeared in Colombia's war. The group aims to find family members who have been disappeared; provide a network of support for those dealing with the loss of a loved one; advocate for policy and agreements that promote truth, justice, and reparations; and demonstrate to the public that their loved ones are not forgotten and should not be ignored by the state.

Mothers of the Candelaria, made up mainly of women whose children have been disappeared, also includes other male and female family members of disappeared people. Group members have gathered every Wednesday in front of the Candelaria church in Medellín for the past eight years. They hold up pictures and banners of their loved ones, chanting "we want them alive, free, and in peace."

In September 2006, Teresita Gaviria (profiled below) met with the demobilized paramilitary boss Diego Fernando Murillo Bejarano (a.k.a. "Don Berna") in search of the truth about the locations of those who have been disappeared. In November 2006, the group was awarded the prestigious Colombian Peace Prize.



Anabel¹

[She begins by showing a picture of her son] When he was taken, his daughter was a baby and now she is in school and is very beautiful, intelligent, and has not forgotten that her father is Juan Diego. His son is now 13 years old, smart and tall.

My son has been disappeared now for five years. I only have one request for the state and the armed groups that are supposedly being demobilized: tell us what they've done with the people they took away. Why don't they give them back to us? Supposedly when the paramilitaries are being demobilized, they are supposed to turn in a list of who they have taken, what they've done with them, and, if they've killed them, where they put their bodies. I miss my son so much. We all need to die one day and the day that my son dies I want them to tell me where he is so I can go there and identify the body to see if it is my son or not.

Being part of Mothers of the Candelaria is very important to me because as families of the disappeared,

we get help from no one. So we console each other and we are there for each other for support and comfort on important days, like the anniversaries of our loved ones' disappearances or their birthdays. It is very important to know we have friends and a space to meet every week because at home we do not cry, so as not to distress our family that is still alive and present with us. We don't want to make them feel they are not as important to us as those who have been taken. Therefore, it is important for me to have this space in which we can express and show our grief.

Having someone disappeared is worse than knowing if they are actually dead. If they were to call me right now and tell me my son was dead and is in such-and-such place, then the pain would stop. But with disappearances, it is this never-ending uncertainty, never knowing where he is, who took him, why they took him. When they disappear someone in a family, the family falls apart. Life keeps going, but it's not the same. It is the worst thing that can happen.

¹ Not her real name.

Raquel

On August 14, 2001, I had to go to a notary. My daughter had no business there, so I was surprised to see her arrive. She said an acquaintance, Juan, had told her to come. Then a car pulled up and a man came inside and said "the skinny one."

An armed man standing next to us pointed to someone and said "this one?"

"No," the man in the car replied.

They did this back and forth until he got to my daughter and the man in the car replied, "Yes."

The armed man said that they had a warrant for her arrest. My daughter asked what for, to which he replied, "They'll tell you why when you get there."

When she got in the car, she realized what they were going to do to her, and she cried out of the car window

"MAMA!!!" in a voice that I will never forget. I said I was going with her, but a man told me I couldn't and threw me aside. We had never seen these men before, but the woman from the notary office told me they were paramilitaries.

No one helped me, and when they took away my daughter I was alone. There were many people around when this happened but nobody did anything. It's been four and a half years since, and I still don't know where she could be. I'm waiting for death to come for me, because I am old, but I hope that God will give me a few more years so that I can see my daughter before I die. I wait and hope for her every day as I hope to be able to continue to care for my granddaughter, her daughter.

Teresita Gaviria

My name is Teresita Gaviria, mother of Christian Camilo Gaviria. He was only fifteen and a half when he was disappeared on January 5, 1998. I had organized large marches in Medellín for the liberation of Dr. Francisco Santos.¹ There were rivers of people dressed in white demanding his release, and since that time we've asked why he isn't more accountable to all of the disappeared people. After these marches, with the help of friends from Redepaz [a peace network], we formed "Mothers of the Candelaria, Paths of Hope." A long name, but one very significant to us as mothers. We use "Paths" in reference to the efforts we make when we go into neighborhoods to look for our disappeared family members in the counties of Antioquia. And we use "hope" because we haven't lost hope that our children are still alive. We, the family members, are living with the pain of forced disappearances, yet the responsibility lies with all Colombians as well other countries to help us ensure that they are released.

We have been meeting here [in front of the Candelaria church in Medellín] every Wednesday for the past seven years. People that pass by us sometimes insult us and throw rocks but we are indifferent to this because often that same person will come back weeks later, seeking forgiveness with their heart in their hands, saying they want to support us, that they have thought of us and think that the work we do is amazing. We have been threatened, but the pain of a mother does not

¹ Santos, the current vice president of Colombia, was kidnapped in 1990 and held for eight months by Pablo Escobar.



Madres de la candelaria

cease hoping or crying or moving forward, and for me, threats help me to gather more strength to continue this work. We are a small group of women saturated with pain and anguish and full of hope.

It helps so much that people are listening to us because we cannot continue to hold this pain here in Antioquia. I cannot keep holding onto this pain in my heart. The pain needs to be spilled out so other people can hear our voices because if I continue to hold it, I will die of sadness. For they have taken away the most precious thing in my life, a loved one, a human being—my child.

For whom do we fight? For whom do we say it's worth living? It is for our children that they have taken away from us. Until the last of our disappeared is returned, we will not abandon our fight.

'We can't just be absent'

Antioquia Peasant Association

The Antioquia Peasant Association (ACA), founded in 1994, guides, supports, and accompanies grassroots organizing efforts in rural communities and among peasant farmers who have been forcibly displaced. ACA builds on the knowledge that rural communities already possess and works toward more sustainable agricultural practices, preventing displacement caused by war, poverty, or lack of opportunity, and advocating for better public policy. Though it's a fairly small organization, ACA has produced educational materials that have been widely distributed in Colombia and abroad. The materials clearly delineate how misguided government policies have contributed to Colombia's problems and point out what steps can be taken toward undoing the damage and ending the violence.



ACA strives to heal and rebuild the broken social structures that are a result of the violence that has torn through rural Colombia. Political violence in Colombia has had a serious impact on, and continues to affect, rural communities disproportionately more than cities. ACA's programs focus on:

- the promotion, education, and defense of human rights;
- organization and communication;
- promotion of preventive and alternative health strategies;
- sports and cultural activities; and
- development of economies of solidarity and resistance.

ACA's programs are designed to empower rural communities to resist displacement, as well as to prepare displaced people to return to their land. Martha Lopez has worked for ACA for eight years, first in communications, now in the areas of community organizing and human rights. She is ACA's legal representative.

Martha Lopez

We believe that the Colombian internal armed conflict exists at both an institutional and personal level. You see its effects at all levels of life—in the economy, politics, and society. At the political level we are facing a difficult situation because of the virtual legalization of paramilitaries. At an institutional level [ACA has] tried to strengthen the work we are doing in communities, partly to bring attention to what is happening. We've connected the human rights crisis with the fact that paramilitaries continue to exercise control in all areas of life and in the communities. We believe that this is part of a policy of the state.

Our biggest challenge is working with victims, bringing attention to their situation, challenging

impunity, and working with the victims' movement at a national level. These difficulties have forced us to develop new organizing strategies to deal with questions such as: How do we work with leaders who want to maintain a low profile? If we can't go out and march, how do we make our presence felt?

The war has affected me on many levels. Sometimes the most difficult thing is feeling convinced that what you're doing is right. Also, you often feel powerless. You find yourself in an existential struggle because of the fear generated by the security situation, the loss of close friends, and knowing people who have had to leave the country. There are many things you would like to say

and do, but in this country it's not possible. These restrictions affect freedom of expression, the possibility of organizing, and your sense of safety. It's as if you constantly need to be ultra-alert, and this can make daily life tense.

One of my most difficult periods was when we were accompanying communities in 2002 and 2003. There were mass detentions and leaders were forced to flee. We were giving human rights workshops and there was a moment when many of the workshop leaders were arrested. I felt so impotent, knowing there were people being held for no reason at all. Another difficult time was when two friends were disappeared who had been part of a support group for families of the disappeared. I've gotten through these difficult moments by surrounding myself with people who share my vision for social change. It helps to know that there are people out there who believe in the same things that we do, who are in solidarity with us, and who share our dreams for another world.

The thing that gives me the most pride and joy about this work is feeling useful. Knowing that communities are waiting for us and watching our presence creates an incentive for them to keep going as the work moves forward little by little. It is important to see that we are building something and that our work is not in vain.

I feel that this work has changed me in several ways and challenged me to be more self-reflective and to think more about my own life. The risks implied

in my work have also raised my own consciousness. I believe we are here for a reason and that we can't just be absent and let life pass us by without paying attention.

One thing that attracts me to this work and motivates me to keep going is the opportunity to meet people and build friendships. I've met people who've facilitated connections with other organizations and have stimulated me to look at my life and my actions in a different way.

It's important that women in Colombia get involved in the struggle for peace because we have been some of the war's biggest victims. I believe that if you have personally lived with war and are a conscious person, then you must also work for change. For this reason I think we need to be protagonists in our own future and in our own work. Women in Colombia have played an important role, not necessarily because they have been inspired by feminism, but as social subjects who also have ideas and proposals that they've implemented.

Finally, I would like to add that in Colombia, there is not only war, but also initiatives that deserve more attention. There are people here who want to build alternatives.

I want to share a quote with you from a friend of mine, "Fear united with hunger and poverty destroys all human feeling, making us warriors in moments of despair. Solidarity is the best antidote against fear and the desire for war."



Photo: J. Gallagher

'If I can't continue struggling, what will happen in the next generation?'

Proceso de Comunidades Negras (The Black Communities Process) | Buenaventura

PCN is a coalition of more than 80 organizations formed in 1989. It works to reclaim and protect the rights of Afro-Colombians in Colombia. These organizations are primarily located in the departments that border the Pacific and Caribbean Oceans. They have five principles that guide their work:

- recognition as Afro-Colombians;
- access to land for their communities;
- autonomy for their people;
- the right to wellbeing; and
- to work in solidarity with the struggle of other groups looking to reclaim their rights in other parts of the world.



PCN educates Afro-Colombians about their rights and teaches conflict mediation and nonviolent solutions to conflict. The Buenaventura branch of PCN, which granted these interviews, is working to recover native seeds and fruits from the region in order to maintain the biodiversity of their land.

Maria Miyela Riascos

The rural river basin where I live is lovely, really lovely—the nature, the people, the biodiversity. But in 1998 the armed conflict entered the region and we had many massacres, which caused the displacement of many people—75 percent of the population was forced to flee from the outlying villages to the town center of Buenaventura. Just imagine leaving your home and going to a place where you have no job, and often with many children to provide for, and so after a while, people started to return. But since then there have been two more massacres in which the paramilitaries entered and community leaders were killed. The first time the paramilitaries entered in three cars. They went around to people's homes scaring them, and then they began selectively killing people and forcing everyone else to watch saying that those they selected were guerrillas and that this was what happened to you when you got involved with the guerrillas.

In addition to the massacres that we have lived through there have been many selective killings and many people have been disappeared. Because of this

the people in my village don't live in peace. People hear a car coming along the road and they run into the mountains, or if they live on the land next to the river, they hear a boat coming at night and they throw themselves onto the floor. They aren't at peace; psychologically they aren't well.

I am still displaced, and live in the urban center of Buenaventura. It is hard to understand why this is happening to us. Why have we been forced to displace, why have I lost my job, my house including my animals, why did the projects we were beginning—of teaching ourselves artisan crafts and how to make and use traditional medicines—why did all of this have to end?

I go back to the rural area a lot to give trainings to youth there. A school has been set up to train community members to work for peace and democracy, and I am convinced that education opens the door to liberation. We teach conflict mediation, we look at peaceful ways to transform the conflict, and we also provide needed psychological services to the people living there. We

also go about changing the opinion that women were born to cook and take care of children. Women also have the right to reclaim our sexualities – and if we don't want to be with our husbands sexually, we can tell them “no.” And the women when they hear this say, “Ahhhh..really?,” because for them this is interesting, really interesting.

What I want to emphasize is that even though we are displaced, we can still have dignity and we can still achieve things. My dad is from the mountains and one day the military entered and accused him of being a

guerrilla. When my dad told them that he had never had anything to do with the guerrillas, the soldiers began to beat him and damaged his hip so badly that he needed to have it replaced. This operation was expensive, and I feared he would die because we didn't have the money to pay for it. Instead of giving up I sued the government to cover this operation and several others he had to have because of this same incident, and I managed to get all of these costs covered. For me this is an example that shows that if we use the tools that are available to us we can recover our rights.

Mary Cruz Renteria Mina

I am 23 years old, and I remember when I was ten, women were much more distant from politics, more hidden. Now, we are more organized, we are struggling and saying that we reject the conflict and the war. As a result, however, we see more women are being killed every day. In 2005 alone in this region 30 women were killed. But it is important for women to be involved in this process of change in order to break the historic cycle of non-participation. We need to ask, from the children to the elders, why aren't women involved in this process? We need to make sure they have the capacity to participate and to break the pattern in which women are only in the home.

One of the things that made me believe in the struggle was the progress we made in 1993 represented by Law 70¹. The struggle for Law 70 was a struggle for the legal recognition of the various black communities that have been here in the Pacific region for more than 500 years. If the black community had not struggled for this law, this would have been a closed book. If we hadn't joined together, the state would have attacked from one side and then the other because this is what the state does. If we hadn't organized ourselves, the megaprojects that are planned would have rolled forward. This would have meant removing black people from their land, so that armed groups, legal and illegal,

¹ Colombia granted traditional territory rights to Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities in its 1991 constitution through Law 70. This law states that traditional territory belonging to Afro-Colombians cannot be legally sold, appropriated, or bought.



Representatives of Proceso de Comunidades Negras

could have this territory for themselves. The knowledge of the success that we have had brought me into this struggle.

It worries us that other countries are “helping” in this conflict, giving money to groups that are on the margin of the law. They give them money, but they don't understand what it does. The groups

use this money to buy weapons. And nearly all of the victims of these weapons are innocent—they are our cousins, brothers, uncles, people that really have nothing to do with this war.

So, it is necessary to show the world that Colombia isn't like what Uribe says it is when he asks for support to fight the terrorists. It is gratifying when we mobilize ourselves, when we make public denouncements and other organizations listen to us and support us. It helps us so much when we have an emergency, and people call us from distant parts of the world. I am proud of being in this struggle, of being a woman, and a young woman at that, no?

Something that helps me to keep struggling is knowing that, historically, during the time of slavery, our ancestors couldn't struggle. But if there hadn't been people that were able to liberate us, we would still be slaves. So if I, as a person, as a woman, can't continue struggling, what will happen in the next generation? I want to be part of building something for the next generation.

'This is our home'

**Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó:
Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado**

Urabá, Antioquia

In the heart of the banana-growing region of Urabá, where land is fertile and lush, lies some of the most disputed terrain in Colombia. For many years, the FARC controlled these low mountains near the Gulf of Urabá and the peasant farmers lived in relative peace. Eventually, the strategic geographic location, combined with its commercial production potential, caused paramilitary and military forces to wage campaigns to wrest control from rebel forces.

Amid consistent and heavy combat, peasant farmers have continued to live and work in these lands they call home, often enduring displacement and targeted killings against them. In 1997, one of these communities made the decision to declare themselves and their lands neutral among the armed groups and formed the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó. Since taking this bold stand, the community of less than 1,200 inhabitants has paid for their nonviolent resistance with the lives of more than 165 men, women, and children. According to the community, the FARC has been responsible for 23 of these violent deaths, and the paramilitary and military for the remaining 142.

La Unión is one of the three villages that make up the Peace Community. It is home to about 140 people. The repeated violence, massacres, threats, and the proximity of armed groups have forced the people to displace from their lands numerous times, and many have chosen to never return.

The community has sought out the consciousness, solidarity, and support of the international community. Its various villages have had permanent accompaniment from the Fellowship of Reconciliation and other international organizations to strengthen their security. In addition, the Peace Community and all of its members are protected by measures handed down by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The massacre of eight men, women and children in February 2005 brought further international attention to the community. Charges that the Army was responsible were one of the main reasons the United States temporarily blocked a portion of its military aid to Colombia.

While threats and killings persist, families continue to live and work in the village of La Unión and the surrounding area. In early 2007, the American Friends Service Committee nominated the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó for the Nobel Peace Prize.



Gelita

I know that we came to La Unión 42 years ago because we arrived when my oldest son was five. My entire family came from Dabeiba [a nearby town in the Urabá region] looking for a piece of land to farm. When we arrived, this was all jungle and mountain. There was only one other house and it was abandoned. At that

time, only one of my seven children was born, he was five then. We lived here for years without a problem as my sons cut down the jungle and we planted crops. More families arrived from nearby areas. People woke early to go hunting and farming far away like they do today and didn't find anyone out there—not military,

not guerrilla, no one. Years went by before these groups began to come. About 25 years ago the armed groups began to have a presence here, walking around. Over time they came closer and closer until they reached the village center. We would see them around, going up and down the mountain. They scared us, but we continued to live our daily lives.

The military would come up and ask us, "And where's the guerrilla?" When we didn't know they would be angry with us. But they didn't abuse anyone back then. They began to be hard on us when we displaced in 1996.

We were forced to flee La Unión in 1996 because the paramilitary ordered us to leave. They said, "We are coming back in five days and if anyone is still here, we'll finish them off. If you don't want to die, you'd better leave." They told us they wouldn't rest until they saw this village in ashes and a pile of dead guerrillas. So everyone left and many of us stayed in the town center of San José until it seemed safe to return to La Unión. We left behind our homes along with beans, corn, and cacao that were ready to be harvested.

The idea of forming a Peace Community, an unarmed community, sounded really good to us. We liked the idea of not having weapons. We have machetes to work, but not to fight. And liquor brings problems, too, so we made a rule to have no alcohol in the Community. The idea of having work groups arose because at times people found that it was dangerous to work alone. The armed groups could easily kidnap or kill someone working alone and no one would even know. It makes a lot of sense to work together in groups. So we



Photo: FOR

Gelita

officially formed the community in 1997. We're happy here in the community, so we stay. I feel good and with accompaniment I feel better because without it we feel more alone and more in danger.

We resist and continue to live here because this is our home. We have a house here so we can go out and work on our land and come back to it. If we move somewhere else, what do we have? We wouldn't have work; we wouldn't have money to pay rent. So even though we have been forced to leave many

times, we keep coming back and it makes our resistance stronger. Life would be good if it wasn't for the war. I wouldn't worry about anything. Of course, we have our own problems within the community, but we talk about them and we solve them. We never solve them with fighting but through dialogue.

The war has impacted my life a great deal. Three of my nephews have been killed and four of my children have left because they are too afraid. Ave Maria! When I know that armed groups are close by, I don't feel safe, I feel very afraid. When there are two armed groups on either side of the community firing at each other and we are here in the middle, it's horrible. Often we see the boot prints of the soldiers when they've passed by. Since the guerrillas have pretty much fled, the army is on the trail of their supporters, but it is only civilians going up and down now.

The hope we have here is that the armed groups will leave us alone so that we may simply live on our land. We hope that they don't force us to displace again. I am old, I could die, but I know that the youth will continue this struggle for survival. I have hope for my grandchildren.

'We don't want to be consumers of war'

The Youth Artisan Movement of Life | Putumayo

Putumayo is a Colombian department thick with rain forests that is about the size of Maryland. It is located in southern Colombia and borders both Ecuador and Peru.

Putumayo has been a primary focus of the U.S.-funded Plan Colombia since the aid package's inception in 2000. At that time, the region was producing more cocaine than any other in Colombia. Since then, despite the hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars spent on fumigating crops and encouraging alternative development, Putumayo remains among the top four (of 11) coca-producing departments.

Paramilitaries and guerrillas operate in the area and the region's approximately 350,000 residents are continually caught in the crossfire between these groups. Both armed groups vie for control of the lucrative coca trade. They involve the local populations in the conflict by recruiting young people to fight, establishing blockades that destroy local infrastructure, and using torture, disappearances, and intimidation to control the people.

The following testimony comes from a young woman who has stayed in Putumayo despite the deeply embedded violence, ensuing poverty, fumigation, and other obstacles to living there. Ana Maria Silva works in the Youth Artisan Movement for Life, a group of youth in Putumayo who focus on a wide variety of projects, including trainings in dance, theater, artisan crafts, cooperative games, and journalism. It also organizes youth to do sustainable gardening, organize counter-recruitment, support the right to conscientious objection, advocate for public policy that supports and involves youth, and advocate for human rights, especially the rights of women.



Ana Maria Silva

The work I do with The Youth Artisan Movement of Life has changed me because I know now that I have rights, and that in order to have [those rights] respected, I need to exercise them. Before, I was enchanted by everything that had to do with the armed groups—even the police seemed like an attractive option to me. But I have realized that it's not worth it to be involved with any armed group. I changed my way of seeing things. I know now that I shouldn't feed the war in any way if tomorrow I want a better future for myself and those around me.

The situation with respect to the conflict is hard in this region because Putumayo is one of the departments with the most confrontations between armed groups. These groups recruit many underage children. You never know who you can talk to

because the majority of people you come across are paramilitaries or guerrillas, even the police and soldiers. Many of them investigate people, they follow you, they know every move you make, and you can't relax at all.

The armed groups commit thousands of human rights abuses against the civilian community: torturing, killing, threatening, and stigmatizing. Whenever they want, the guerrillas topple the electric towers, leaving the majority of the county without electricity. Besides this, the paramilitaries keep cutting off our communication and transport routes, and they don't allow food to be exported. This means the producers lose a lot of money and there are constantly more people forced to leave because they have no work. More and more children are not going to school, and they are living in sub-human conditions.



Photo: Heberthine González, AFSC

Ana Maria Silva (center) with friends.

The war affects us when we least expect it. My friend Ingrid and I prepared to go to the World Youth Festival in Caracas, Venezuela, and we had to go to Bogotá to get our passports. That day, while returning to Mocoa¹ from Bogotá, [we discovered that] the guerrillas had destroyed the bridge leading to Mocoa. They boarded the bus we were on and told the passengers that we would have to return to Bogotá. In that moment, we didn't know what to do because we didn't have money or clothes, but we had to go back to Bogotá anyway. At first, we just cried, more for what was happening in our town than for ourselves—the guerrillas now had an armed blockade on the road into the town, and weren't allowing food, cars, or any people to enter or leave the county. All of this worried us. And our desire to be at home upset us even more.

Despite these hardships, I am inspired to keep going because there are boys and girls who want to play freely. Later on they will want to make something of their lives, but in this situation, they can't. Because of this, we need to unite our efforts and little by little make change for a better life and better future.

¹ Mocoa is the capital of the department of Putumayo.

We decided to organize ourselves into The Youth Artisan Movement of Life in order to have some nonviolent activities and to show the other face of this area, because we are sick of living in the middle of a war and of seeing war and violence everywhere. Our guiding principles are unity and our desire to not be part of the war that is hurting us all. We don't want to keep being consumers of the war or allow the war to just happen around us. My greatest pride is that I work in support of conscientious objection in an area inundated with many armed groups that target us, threaten us, and stigmatize us.

It's especially important that women are involved in struggling for peace in this country because women have their feet on the ground, and in the crucial moments, we can be calmer and more peaceful. Women bring strength, ideas, and knowledge to the peace movement. Besides this, it is we women who bear the children who, unfortunately, will continue fighting this war. We, together with our children, exist in the midst of this conflict and are the most affected by it.

'It comes from my soul'

The Way'uu People | Guajira

The Way'uu are the largest of 82 indigenous peoples in Colombia struggling to stay on their pre-Columbian ancestral lands in northern Colombia. The 1991 reform of the Colombian constitution afforded groundbreaking rights to indigenous groups, but the struggle to enforce those rights and keep transnational mega-projects and armed groups off their lands continues to this day.

Débora Barros Fince is a lawyer and community leader of the Way'uu from Guajira Department in the north of Colombia. In April 2004, 12 people were killed and 20 were disappeared during a brutal massacre in her community. After the massacre, more than 200 members of the Way'uu indigenous group fled the region and now live across the border in nearby Venezuela. Deborah lost two aunts and her cousin in the massacre, and she took a public role in pressing for criminal charges against the paramilitary groups who the Way'uu believe were responsible. Like many others, she has had to leave the region of her birth because of threats to her life. She now lives in Bogota. Deborah has organized a yearly pilgrimage to the massacre site on its anniversary. In 2006, more than 100 people from all over Colombia and various other countries gathered for the pilgrimage, accompanied by many of the Way'uu refugees.



Débora Barros Fince

We are living in a situation of war here in the Guajira. My people, the Way'uu, live in the north of Colombia. Of the 82 indigenous peoples in the country, we are the most numerous. In 2004 there was a massacre of our people in the village of Bahia Portete. It was the paramilitaries who committed this awful act against our community, in which they killed women and children. Now, two years after the massacre, the conflict continues here because the paramilitaries have not demobilized from the Upper Guajira area, which has affected not only those who live in Bahia Portete, but people in other parts of the country as well. We are being selectively killed. Nothing has changed for us. We continue to be threatened.

I came to this work after the massacre of 2004 because members of my family were killed. The loss of my aunt pained my soul and pains me still as strongly as on that first day. Whenever I needed anything, she made sacrifices to get it for me. The little that she collected from her shop she used to pay for my education. I owe my career to her. I owe many things to her, all the

things that she provided for me when I was a child, my clothes—everything.

Because of this pain, I made the decision to involve myself in this work. I didn't think through the consequences. I now have to travel with bodyguards; I never have peace of mind; I have had to put my son into hiding and constantly change his location because I don't want anything to happen to him; and I am always a little bit nervous because I know that I am now involved in this struggle and there is no turning back until it is over. And if I have to give my life so that our struggle goes on, I'll do it, because I am not going to keep quiet. I will never be silenced but will keep denouncing not only what is happening to the Way'uu people, but what is happening all over Colombia to social organizations, trade unionists, and non-governmental organizations. We will support them, hand in hand, so that one day we will achieve peace in Colombia.

One thing I'm especially proud of is that my friends and family see that all I do, I am not doing it out of personal interest, but because this work gives me

life, and because it comes from my soul. After two years, we still have this sadness, but we are also happy because we have wonderful people here accompanying us and we feel solidarity with them. And with their presence and the work we do, we are not letting the deaths of our loved ones be erased, and we are making it so that this event is alive in the minds of Colombians and the international community.

I believe that it is important that we, the women, are involved in this because we are the people who also seek reconciliation and peace. I want us to work together with other organizations to achieve peace, but I know that achieving peace in Colombia is still very far away with this paramilitary government that we have, a government in which President Alvaro Uribe Velez has done whatever has struck his fancy, such as in the case of the Justice and



Photo: P. Abbott

Débora in Guajira

Peace law, which is so sad. How is it possible that there could be impunity in Colombia with all the crimes against humanity that have been committed here?

We, the women, need to create networks of women. Even though we are being forced to leave things that we love, it is worth it because peace can be achieved with lots of sacrifice and lots of work. What we need to remember is that we are all equal, even if it appears we were born in different worlds, and we share the same values. We have to remind ourselves that there are no borders between people, that we all have the same thoughts—and that we all have the same needs. We are all born from the womb of our mother, and we need to be in solidarity with each other.

'The Network opened up a space for me to really question'

Red Juvenil de Medellín (Youth Network of Medellín)

The Medellín Youth Network uses active nonviolence and civil disobedience to contribute to social, political, and cultural transformation. The network was formed at the end of the 1980s in the context of generalized violence and the emergence of narco-trafficking in Medellín, which caused a profound social and political crisis. During this crisis, the lack of education and employment opportunities for youth, together with the persuasive recruitment tactics utilized by all the armed groups, converted the city's youth into protagonists in the war. Women provide most of the Network's leadership in a non-oppressive structure where decisions are made by consensus.



Olga Patricia Llanos Obando

I initially became involved with the Youth Network through a workshop that was given in my neighborhood. Afterward I was invited to become part of the Network but decided to continue working directly with other youth in my neighborhood as we had much to accomplish. However, I did begin attending a nonviolence study group—based on the [Youth Network] workshop—in which we discussed different themes related to violence, how it crosses into our lives, and if it is worth the effort, in this context of war, to choose and live out an alternative. Slowly I began to feel pulled to the Network and now find myself completely wrapped up in this work in which we confront the many problems of this world and create alternatives.

I now have about six years with the Network. Currently I'm part of the team working to analyze everything that has to do with politics, which is the work we do with human rights, conscientious objection, peace communities, and the rights of the youth in the city of Medellín.

Before working with the Network, I had been working with the Colombian Attorney General's office. I would have continued with these people except that the network came into my life and changed it completely.

Everything that I had studied and known was within the context of the war; it was part of who I was. I believed in the rule of law, in the politics of government, in the armed forces, and I rejected any alternative way of life as something outside the legal limits of life.

Then the Network came and knocked down my life as I knew it. I began to rethink the moral values that had hung over me, instilled by the patriarchy of the church and the state. The Youth Network opened up a space for me to really question these structures and allowed me to grow as an individual who places the highest moral value on how my actions affect others.

The network is a space for all youth to have the liberty to question these structures. And it has changed me immensely, personally and also within my family. My family said that the Youth Network was a group of guerrillas and revolutionaries even though I had been involved with youth groups in my neighborhood all of my life. And these challenges are large for us, as this new form of consciousness must take over our entire selves as we struggle with the ultimate challenge: to be truly free.

I don't know if things are getting better or worse here in Medellín. The only thing I do know is that every day our path is more difficult and every day you must feel



RED JUVENIL Medellín - Colombia



Member of the Youth Network of Medellín

more indignation at the daily struggle for humanity. In fact, the youth of Medellín feel more threatened by the paramilitarization¹ of the city, by the army recruitment practices of the state² and by the lack of open and safe space to practice free speech against these realities. This

¹ In many cities and towns, the paramilitary power structure has become the dominant form of control, much like when the mafia controlled US cities. Taxes are imposed on necessities like water and only those aligned with the paramilitary are allowed to serve on governing bodies, thus creating total paramilitary control of entire areas.

² In Colombia, military service is compulsory and determined by a lottery in which all men over 18 must participate. The lottery determines assignment to the Army, the National Police or exemption from obligatory service. Once the year and a half service is completed, men receive their libreta militar (military notebook) confirming that they have fulfilled their duty to the state. Without this proof of service or exemption men cannot legally enroll in higher education or find a job within the formal economy. The state does not yet recognize conscientious objection as a valid exemption.

has been the situation for a long time in Medellín, but I would say that it has become more intense, due to the president that we have, the military that we have, and the corruption that is worse each day. But we continue struggling and fighting because we have chosen a difficult path and this is our challenge. Personally, I am inspired to keep fighting because I am in love with life, in love with the possibility of transformation and in love with the dream that another world is possible.

The role of women in this struggle is vital because we are the ones who are raising awareness about the patriarchal structures that rule this society—and that it must be knocked down. We are demanding freedom. In this organization we work in a very equal way. Men and women come together to build our alternative vision.

For me personally, I find strength thinking about the long history of struggles that women have fought and the many that we have won. We need only to continue in this history and recognize that when we are open and impassioned we allow transformation to take place.

En calma transcurrieron las acciones realizadas el día 9 de marzo por activistas y objetores de conciencia de la Red Juvenil y amigos/as de otras organizaciones (Incorporación Jurídica, Colectivo de Derechos Humanos Semillas de Libertad³ CODENSEL) en la ciudad de Medellín.

Como se había acordado a partir de las 4 pm, se ocuparon de manera pacífica la acera de la Avenida Oriental con la Playa (enfrente del camino real) la Plaza de Berrío, y la Plazoleta San Ignacio.

Con volantes y una pancarta donde se denunciaban los responsables de la masacre: "EL 21 de febrero del presente año, la brigada 17 del ejército Nacional perpetró esta masacre a la comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó" se realizó un acto simbólico que representaba el duelo de sus familias frente a las 8 personas cruelmente asesinadas, el acto duró aproximadamente 20 minutos en cada lugar.



'Afro-Colombians can have the dignity they deserve'

Pastoral Afro-Colombiana

Afro-Colombians, whose ancestors were victims of the American slave trade, make up 21 percent of Colombia's population. They are represented disproportionately in the country's displaced and impoverished populations, and are often the targets of government, guerrilla, and paramilitary violence.

Pastoral Afro-Colombiana is a faith-based organization formed in 1994 to address the cultural rights and defend the lives of Afro-Colombians at the regional and national level. The organization has established youth leadership training programs in predominantly Afro-Colombian communities. These programs aim to make young people conscious of the dynamics of the war in Colombia. Pastoral Afro-Colombiana also follows Nelson Mandela's strategy of training the people so they themselves can reclaim their rights. They also document and publicize the economic, social, and political situation of Afro-Colombians in Colombia.



Betzayda Dominguez Morino

I am from the Chocó, which we call "Little Africa." I am from a small, beautiful village along the San Juan River called Noamama del Choco. I have seven brothers and sisters with my parents, and eight step-siblings, so we are 16 in all.

Like most Afro-Colombian women in Colombia, most of my sisters work as housekeepers, which is the job that the lower classes do. They have chosen to do this work, which is important, since choice is the only thing we've had since they brought us over from Africa, and having even made this choice is important to our dignity and our rights. Afro-Colombian women do this work with a higher vision because they know their rights, and they know that they don't want their children to go through what they have. They aspire to have their children go to college, but it's hard because in Colombia racism is very much alive, and this is a hard thing to fight. It is not something right in front of you that you can defend against. It is a strategy that is hidden and hard to confront.

I came to this work [with Pastoral Afro-Colombiana] during the year and a half when we were living in a displaced community on the outskirts of Medellín,

when I saw the miserable and dangerous conditions people lived in. After this, I returned to the Chocó, where the massacres of young people have hit me hard. They are trying to kill off the young people in our communities, which I have seen while doing this work in all the different Afro-Colombian communities. The strategy is to do away with the young because if you do this you are killing off the future of our people. They do this in a way that people can justify these deaths. They say, "Well, of these young people that were killed, many were delinquents."

But what causes a young person to be delinquent? If you have no opportunity to study and no prospect for work, where does that leave you? But they, those that have had privilege and opportunity for a dignified life, silence these questions, justify their actions, and can't imagine (the options open) to this vulnerable population. They see the black population as dogs or parasites, even though they wouldn't even give their dogs the lives that we have. And it is threatening when we start to claim our rights.

The worst violence in the country is being experienced on the lands of Afro-Colombians. We think

this is because of the rich land we live on and have conserved. Because we have taken care of this land, they want it for themselves. And they use many strategies, dirty strategies to do this—war, paramilitaries coming to the land and throwing people off of it, displacing people to the city, even though there is so much misery there.

And we know that another smart strategy they are using is saying that we are selling coca. This is smart because then they plant coca on our lands, and then, they accuse us of selling coca, and begin to kill us. This is business, and those that end up losing are the black communities.

Sometimes this is all too much. To think that if you get involved in this struggle, you will end up being a victim. To know that you have to do this work in silence, in a way, and that this has a long-term effect on you. To realize a colleague has been killed for no reason, that your community lives in the worst conditions, this affects me intensely and saps my strength.

And at times I feel alone, because there are so few people who want to work in defense of human rights, because the war is so dirty and money is controlling everything. If you posit yourself against money, there is the possibility that at any moment they will kill you. This has affected my health, my expectations, and at times made me feel helpless.

Despite all this, I keep struggling, as God has asked me to. I am religious, and this motivates me in my work because you can be religious from two points of view—you can be religious for the good of the institution or for the good of the community. I consider my religious life as a service to the community. A committed religious person can open many doors for the people because

the armed groups still respect us. I have matured a lot doing this work, and changed my mission in life. I know now that I will struggle until I die.

One day they were scolding me in my house, and telling me to stop doing this work, because I was going to be killed, and I said if they kill me, write on my gravestone, "She died for the cause of black communities, and she died doing what she loved."

I have a dream now to meet people not just in my region, but all over the world, [people] who want to make a better world for black people. Feeling and knowing myself as a black woman is amazing. And I feel the most wonderful pride when I see other people who I have helped bring to consciousness and see that they now have the desire to duplicate and [pass along] all they have learned. This has been my pride—to believe in people and see that they too believe in me.

In Pastoral Afro-Colombiana, we are creating networks of youth who are reflecting on questions such as: Why are the armed groups arming the people and pitting one youth against another? Why are they choosing to recruit and arm Afro-Colombian youth? Is it because they have such dim prospects for the future?

So we say, if they can recruit these youth to kill each other, we can recruit them away from violence. But we don't do this with money, army, power, or weapons. We do this as an effort from our conscience and out of love. Our principles and goals are firm—we think we can have a different life, that Afro-Colombians can have the dignity they deserve. We are here and doing this work in honor of those who have given us the opportunity to be here, and because of a God that believes in and wants justice.



Photo: P. Abbott

View from Betzayda's window

'No one has to carry the suffering all alone'

The Women's Association of Eastern Antioquia (AMOR, Asociación de Mujeres del Oriente)

The Women's Association of Eastern Antioquia (AMOR) is made up of women from the 23 counties of eastern Antioquia who have organized around their shared understanding of the destructive effects of war on women. These women work throughout the region on various projects, including educating women about their constitutional rights, providing psychological support for women who have lost family members to the war and to those who have been sexually or physically abused, accessing educational and professional advancement opportunities for women, and training women to adapt to the role of being the sole provider for their families.

AMOR uses an innovative organizing model, training women as "promoters of life and mental health" who organize and lead their own support groups that address their emotional, financial, and physical well-being. AMOR also focuses on reconciliation and has facilitated dialogue between men and women, and former combatants and victims in the region.

In August 2006, AMOR was profiled in the weekly Colombian magazine *Semana*. The article emphasized AMOR's work with female victims of violence in eastern Antioquia. Their organizing strategy is now being adopted and expanded in other areas of Colombia.



Lucia¹

I come from a family of 11 brothers and sisters. My father abused my mother and because of this I left my home in Santa Fe and moved in with my grandparents in Guatape, a nearby county. I stayed there until I finished my first year of high school. Because we were so poor, I had to quit school and get married. I didn't know how to cook or clean before I got married, but I learned quickly. After only 20 days of being married, my husband began to abuse me. I had a child every year. The worst part was that my children began to be abused by their father as well, and because I was so afraid, I didn't say anything. We endured this for seven years. I couldn't leave because I had been taught that marriage was for life.

Finally the day came when we were so poor that my husband needed to look for more work outside of the county. He left and told me to look for work, too. So I was responsible for taking care of the home with five children under nine years old. I also worked at a

roadside café so I could give our children some rice and panela². Not long after, I was offered a job in a spa, where I had dreamed of working. I began and things went very well and I was able to buy food and clothing for my children. When my children left for school, I was very lonely, so I joined a group of volunteer firefighters in order to be more involved in the community. There I learned to use my whole body in the work of fighting fires and I also began to talk with the other volunteers about the abuse we had endured at home.

In 1995, there was a meeting of people from all over eastern Antioquia. I'm not sure why, but the county administration sent me as one of its five representatives. I was also offered the chance to go back to school. About four months after starting school, one of my classmates invited me to be part of starting a regional women's association. AMOR was born from this group. I finally finished my high school degree in 1996 and

¹ Name has been changed at "Lucia"'s request.

² Panela is boiled down sugar cane juice which is a staple of the Colombian diet.

also learned new skills and grew personally within the newly-formed AMOR.

In 2000, I was part of the City Council. This was a beautiful experience for me, and as a result AMOR had the idea to train more women in citizen participation and democracy.

At the same time, the killings and repression from the armed groups began in the county and things became more difficult. My husband also returned during this time. We had been separated for nine years but he came back anyway and I became pregnant once again. I gave birth to a baby girl, and when she was four months old, my husband began to be abusive again. This time I didn't accept this abuse and finally ended our marriage. Soon after, one of my daughters was killed in the violence of the conflict and a son was forced to flee. I have suffered very much, but little by little, with the support of AMOR, I have overcome the difficulties and my situation has improved, and now, thank God, we find ourselves in a stable situation, living with dignity.

Our organization, AMOR, is fundamentally based in reconciliation as a thread that binds brothers and sisters together, accepting and coexisting with people who are giving up violence. We don't share the policy of the government, which is shamelessly supporting the [paramilitary] groups in the region. [The government] is practically rewarding the harm these groups cause by returning them to the community without demanding that they meet certain conditions.

My biggest challenge has been dealing with the psychological aspect of living with violence. Raising our

children only to give them over to the paramilitaries or the guerrillas is a form of persecution. We have had to unite to stand against these groups who want to take away our children.

The blows we are dealt in our lives are what transform us and force us to think about and accept and appreciate each other more. When we began to organize ourselves, I realized that I was not the only one suffering, that I am not alone and that we can create a space to share our stories and our pain. Here in eastern Antioquia there are thousands and thousands of women suffering through the same situation that I was living in.

I am proud to know that in this moment we have found each other and can offer one another a hand, embrace each other and are able to feel the other's anguish and suffering. We share the suffering between all of us so no one has to carry it all alone.

I am inspired to stay with our struggle even though it will take time. We want peace, but peace does not come quickly. We will not see it, perhaps our children will not see it, but hopefully our children's children will be able to experience the peace and the tranquility that we wish for.

I believe that if we do not begin to plant these seeds of peace now, we will never achieve our dream. We are involved in a movement, not a fight, a great movement where everyone, men and women, must join together. If we join hands, join efforts, and unite we will succeed. If we have faith, if we trust that we one day will achieve all that we want, I don't believe we can possibly fail.



Photo: J. Gallagher

*'We don't want a war that is killing us,
nor a peace that oppresses us'*

The Women's Peaceful Path | Putumayo & Cali

La Ruta Pácifica de la Mujer (The Women's Peaceful Path), often simply called *La Ruta*, or the Path, is a movement that seeks to strengthen nonviolent action by women against war. There are intricate shades of meaning in this title. *Ruta* is literally a way for women to reach places where other women are living the horrific realities of war and war's ensuing cruelties, and accompany them in body and spirit. *Ruta* is also a course of action; it calls for women to take the step beyond being victims of war to being social and political actors in a struggle for nonviolent change.

La Ruta Pácifica is fundamentally pacifist and feminist, advocates for a negotiated solution to Colombia's armed conflict, and focuses on making the war's effects on women's lives more visible.

The *Ruta* was born in 1995 as a response to the widespread violence that Colombian women experience in urban and rural conflict zones. The group has more than 315 local chapters in eight departments of Colombia. This large base has enabled *Ruta* to initiate nationwide mobilizations. In 2003, the *Ruta* mobilized more than 3,000 Colombian women to go to Putumayo to protest the dangerous and counter-productive government practice of aerial fumigation. In 2005, *Ruta* organized a caravan to northern Cauca after indigenous communities there suffered from devastating combat between guerrilla and army units.

In 2001, The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the British organization International Alert awarded the Millennium Peace Prize for Women to the *Ruta Pax Pácifica* in recognition of its struggle for peace, justice and equality.

Amanda Lucia Camilo (Putumayo)

My family is from various counties in Putumayo and like most families from this department, we have had to live with the horrors of war and militarism, while trying to defend our rights through our nonviolent and pacifist stance. We are terribly affected by the glyphosate chemicals used in fumigation as well as by the armed actors, and we are fearful for our lives and tortured in our souls by the situation.

It is important to recognize that in Colombia, yes we live, but we live lives pierced through with armed conflict. Women, youth, and children are feeling this in a direct manner and are the most affected by what is a tangible violation of human rights. What's more, [the conflict] is deteriorating the social fabric and causing the loss of social welfare for all Colombians. Here, in

Putumayo, the armed conflict has been the principle cause of displacement, the militarization of civilian life, and the worsening levels of poverty, misery, and loss. We live and feel the conflict in our personal, social, political, and work lives—it manifests itself as increased domestic, sexual, physical, and emotional violence.

For the *Ruta Pácifica*, feminism is a political, pacifist, anti-war, nonviolent ethic that demands change in the public and private spheres, and which builds peace and justice in the country. We are a popular movement made up of people from all walks of life. What we have in common is that we have all decided to break the silence and cycle of fear that produces war.

The international gathering in November 2003 to commemorate the International Day of Nonviolence



against Women, with the theme of "Fumigation = Misery," was a great accomplishment for us. I have an ever-growing desire to research, understand, and publicize the effects of this conflict on the bodies of women and children and to work to change policies to defend our rights. And one strong desire I now have is to find resources and ways to work with the most vulnerable populations.

I am inspired to continue in this struggle by my desire to defend our individual and collective dignity. I am inspired by the peaceful resistance of women and feel a personal obligation to make it possible for future generations to live free from fear and violence, to not have to give their children up to the war. As women we are able to love and act from the heart while still being grounded in reason. We dedicate our work, our abilities, our art, and our hearts and minds to this struggle for peace.



Photo: Valentina Gonzalez, AFSC

Amanda Lucia Camilo

Maria Teresa (Cali)

I have been bound to feminist work since my youth and now I am an old woman of 71 years. My family has always been involved in the politics of this country and I am descended from both Liberals and Conservatives¹, meaning that my entire family is a product of contradictions. My father was a reporter and a born philosopher and our house was full of books waiting for me to explore.

At a very young age, through conversations with my father and frequent reading, I began to learn about the problems women face. I was enrolled in an elementary school run by feminists where I became more aware of our political problems. I then matriculated to the Valle de Cauca's first high school for women, where I continued studying the politics of Colombia and was able to analyze, discuss, write, and share with others what I was learning. I then worked as a Mathematics Professor at the Valle de Cauca University, then as a director for my city, and later at the church in my village, which served as a center for all those marginalized by the violence.

¹ Colombia's traditional parties. Violence between the parties erupted with the assassination of Liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitan in 1948, resulting in the period of civil war known as "La Violencia" (The Violence).

At the church, we started to address the issue of children's health, which led us to look at the effects of war. We held more than 800 community forums that were attended by more than 3,000 people, and people spoke of their families, war, and of domestic violence. Out of these forums I drew the material for a book about violence against women. The suggestions I made in this book led to the creation of the position of Colombian Commissioner of Families, the first in this country and only the third in Latin America. I continued to participate in more meetings with women discussing violence and they kept saying, "Let's do it, let us unite and work toward peace." From this, in 1995, arose the *Ruta*. I have been working with the *Ruta* since its birth and it has helped in my growth as a citizen, which is also the work of creating peace.

Women carry the burden of this war. True, 96 percent of those killed here in the Valle de Cauca are men, but these men leave behind women. These women become solely responsible for supporting their families and 80 percent of the displaced are women and children.

The Constitutional Court has said that displacement is a violation of human rights and the government must respond to this violation now. At the *Ruta Pacifica*

support center for victims of violence [here in Valle de Cauca], women arrive desperate, not only from their economic situation but also from domestic violence, which is made worse by the agony of living with political violence. Violence engenders more violence. It has been said, "women are the face of poverty," and poverty is at the root of all this violence. Poverty increases every day: there is no money to send children to school, and there is no money for food.

There are moments when I lose the strength to work, when no one is helping, when NGOs are labeled as terrorists and contracts we have are then revoked. At times, it seems as if the situation is worsening every day and if the Free Trade Agreement goes through it will only add to the poverty. I have received serious threats but we are all threatened. We can be sure that we woke up this morning, but we can't be sure we will live to see the day's end.

But we continue. We are educating the people to make change possible! My proudest and happiest moments are when we go to a place where women are suffering and we embrace them and they feel our accompaniment, our solidarity. In 2000, we organized one of the biggest marches in Colombia: more than 140,000 people took to the streets of Bogotá. The energy was incredible. I never tired. I was full of energy and joy and went without sitting down for five hours. Everyone was very happy and supportive. It was beautiful.



Women are capable of envisioning the world in a different form, of feeling and thinking about it in a different form. Women must be part of the peace process. As we say in the *Ruta*, we don't want a war that is killing us, nor a peace that oppresses us. We must continue down the path of truth, of justice, of reconciliation. We must learn to crawl inside each others' skin. We must learn to recover the things of worth that we have lost in the rage of conflict. Only by loving others can we realize that we are not living life as it should be.

Voices of Colombian Women for Peace: An Appeal to Build Solidarity

By Amanda Romero Medina

The testimonies in this publication reflect the voices of Colombian women who suffer from human rights violations and the impacts of the civil war. Old women, middle-aged women, and young women beginning their lives, who know that they were born in a country where the cycles of violence that harm them, their families and their communities have not stopped.

They speak of being a different woman, converted into victim, tinged by the pain they were pushed into by violent circumstances, as they lived their lives in poverty and limitations, but with the warmth of their homes, be they in rural areas, cities, or towns.

These testimonies should be read, as the women themselves say, from a place of hope. Despite feeling desolation, rage and impotence from facing, at times, an indifferent public that did not respond to the forced disappearances of their loved ones, torn from their very hands, or to the murders of their children, arbitrary arrests, and most of all the constant threats and risk to their own lives, they pulled strength from the depth of their hearts. They decided to take the lead in the struggle to transform suffering into hope, the rush to war into proposals and actions for peace.

The Colombian people have suffered immense emotional damage. Women bear this damage most dramatically, given that those who most often disappear, die in combat, or are arrested are males, and it is women that have to take on the roles of sustaining their families, consoling those who have lost everything, searching for their loved ones in the morgues, hospitals, hidden cemeteries... But women themselves also

bear the violence in their own bodies, since they are recruited and used by the armed groups, suffer sexual harassment, rape, arrest, torture and death from the parties to the conflict. Women not only suffer political violence indirectly, but increasingly have been targeted by those who make war.

One such case are the women and teenage girls who have been killed by legal and illegal armed groups simply for having relationships with members of the adversary. No one listened to them, they were asked nothing. They were simply silenced.

What is more, the war and political violence also play out in the heart of Colombian homes. Domestic violence is exacerbated by the loss of values of respect and a moral compass, and by the tearing of the social fabric that has come from armed violence. Members of the family who see no answers to so much barbarism and cruelty take refuge in alcohol and self-absorption that prevent them from restoring trust and dialogue with those closest to them, their own family.

The cycles of violence against spouses and children repeat, worsen and aggravate the country's generalized violence, cause thousands of additional deaths, moral and physical injuries, and increase the crime of a patriarchal society. It is not only the violence of war, but also daily violence that affect our countries.

One response to this senselessness of violence, abuse of power, and armed conflict is the creation of networks of mutual support. The women who have told their stories in this booklet manage to get out of the isolation of their homes and find relationships with other victims

such as themselves, with women who have not lost their sensitivity to local or national pain and tragedy. They are united by their relationships of affection, ethnic identities, religious faith, and a conviction that it is necessary to stand up against injustice and make their voices heard. They establish alliances with diverse people and organizations that allow them to overcome the psychological and economic impact of trauma caused by violence.

Massive street marches, vigils in the atriums of churches, fasts, religious masses and ceremonies, trips to remote areas to undertake dialogue with illegal armed groups to rescue members, sons, daughters, or acquaintances; visits to injured or sick people, conducting studies, workshops and public debates, the organization of self-education groups for new work skills, the entrance into political arenas to propose new perspectives on national reality, active listening and timely dialogue to bring consolation, or the preparation of ceremonies to say good-bye to those who have lost their lives. All of these and more are the way that these women put their nonviolent perspectives into practice.

* * *

Activism on Colombia is framed by the serious impacts of the U.S. government's policy, known as Plan Colombia. Many of you have participated (or have thought of doing so) in actions directed at your representatives in Congress to stop aerial fumigation and funding for war. Some even sincerely think that what the U.S. government should do is divide military aid and development aid equally to prevent the negative effects of the former. But they do not see the human impact this would imply: no aid from one country to another in the world should include a military component if it is to be called "aid." And no development aid should be based on selfish or predatory interests that aim to use up the planet's resources and wealth.

U.S. military aid has perverse effects on the Colombian population in the areas where the war is experienced. Its aerial fumigation destroys not only the tropical jungle environment, con-

taminating sources of water, killing animals and plants, while doing away with coca crops, but also—and mainly—it destroys the health of any living being, especially people, and ruins food crops. Through equipment, weapons, planes, helicopters and military training, U.S. policy—implemented by its ally the Colombian government—sows distrust among civilians not involved in the war, because they are the primary victims of the armed conflict.

Faced with this situation, indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and peasant women, housewives in cities, laborers, domestic workers, and professionals interested in changing this situation have begun by arguing that the war has invaded the private sphere. They will make their voices heard in the public sphere to recover their dignity. In this way, they not only will put their lives back together—lives which have been trampled by dehumanizing socio-economic conditions—but also because as they exercise their rights as women, as they learn to know themselves, they offer the humanity and tenderness they carry within.

Building on the international recognition of the global advances made by feminism and pacifism, this booklet is a call to act and bring an end to the war in Colombia.

You can add your voice in solidarity with the women of Colombia:

- Pass on these testimonies and talk about them with others in your community;
- Seek ways to support Colombian women's efforts for social and emotional reconstruction of their communities and families affected by war;
- Inform yourself and protest against the harmful effects of U.S. military aid to Colombia;
- Study other sources of information on the negative impacts of development aid that is part and parcel of the U.S. military package for Colombia and the Andean region;
- Make visits or have a long-term presence in these women's communities, getting in con-

tact with organizations in the United States that seek to make a difference through a focus on aid based on respect and solidarity;

- Host representatives of the organizations of the women who have told their stories on solidarity visits and tours in the United States;
- Share and study reports by human rights and aid organizations, such as Amnesty International, on the situation in Colombia;
- Urge feminist and women's groups, university women and think tanks that study women's conditions in the contemporary world to include the case of Colombian women and generate awareness of, and action more responsive to, Colombia;
- Commemorate the International Day Against Violence Against Women (November 25) by putting the situation of Colombian women affected by war at the center of the debate;

- Organize informal conversations and dialogues among immigrant and refugee women and war survivors from other regions and connect them with Colombian women so they can share their experiences and strategies of struggle;
- Learn from the strength, perseverance, and determination of these women as a way of beginning to change the internal politics of the current U.S. government, with the aim of basing relationships with the rest of the world on mutual respect and on the legacy of hundreds of thousands of men and women who struggle for dignity and equal rights for all members of the human family.

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About FOR and AFSC

The Fellowship of Reconciliation Task Force on Latin America seeks 1) to strengthen communication and collaboration between North and Latin American non-violent movements; 2) to help FOR members become actively engaged in Latin American and Caribbean issues; 3) to promote demilitarization and justice in U.S. policy toward the region through public education, collaboration with other North American groups, and advocacy

The goals of the FOR Colombia Program are to support Colombian grassroots initiatives for peace and justice that use active nonviolence, and to inform and involve concerned U.S. citizens about the conflict in Colombia, U.S. policy towards it, and about nonviolent alternatives to the war and political violence.

FOR Colombia Program

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The American Friends Service Committee's Latin America/Caribbean Peacebuilding Program builds and supports a well informed, broad-based US constituency that works to shape a just U.S. policy toward the region; and in solidarity with Latin American and Caribbean civil society as they build just and peaceful societies.

The AFSC's Colombia work in the United States focuses on military, human rights, political issues and the local impact of free trade agreements. Our work has been defined by our partnership and solidarity with Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities living in peaceful resistance.

AFSC Latin America and Caribbean Program

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For more information

Antioquia Peasant Association (ACA)

www.acantioquia.org (Spanish)
www.forcolombia.org/colombiapartners/aca (English)

AMOR

"Asociación de Mujeres enfrenta las consecuencias de la guerra con 'A.M.O.R.'" (Spanish, 2003)
www.orientevirtual.org/?2,584,es

Madres de la Candelaria

"Madres de la Candelaria receives UNDP grant and national support" (English, 2007) www.undp.org/bcpr/newsletters/2007_4/article5.htm

"Nuestra lucha será hasta que aparezca el último secuestrado y el último desaparecido" (Spanish, 2006)
http://www.redepaz.org.co/Nuestra-lucha-sera-hasta-que

Nasa

www.nacinacin.net (Spanish)
afsc.org/colombia

The Process of Black Communities (PCN)

www.renacientes.org (Spanish)
www.afsc.org/colombia

Pastoral Afro Colombiana

http://axe-cali.tripod.com/cepac/ (Spanish)

Medellín Youth Network

www.redjuvenil.org (Spanish)
www.forcolombia.org/colombiapartners/medellinyouthnetwork (English)

Ruta Pacífica de la Mujer

www.rutapacifico.org.co/ (Spanish)

Peace Community of San José de Apartadó

www.cdpsanjose.org (Spanish)
www.forcolombia.org/peacecommunity (English)

Way'uu

"It Seems Impossible To Believe: A Survivor Describes the Massacre that Destroyed Her Wayuu Community," *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, December 15, 2004
www.cs.org/publications/csq/csq-article.cfm?id=1816

Catalina Rojas, *In the Midst of War: Women's Contributions to Peace in Colombia*, Washington: Women Waging Peace Policy Commission, 2004.
www.womenwagingpeace.net



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www.afsc.org

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www.forusa.org