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Gender and sexuality in the Colombian armed conflict: from patriarchal oppression to feminist resistance

Płciowość i seksualność w kolumbijskim konflikcie zbrojnym: od ucisku patriarchy do feministyczne ruchy wyzwolenia

https://doi.org/10.25312/2391-5145.18/2023_06cmv

Abstract

This article explores the impact of the Colombian armed conflict on gender and sexuality, focusing on the resistance of women who were victims of sexual violence. The conflict, which lasted from 1954 to 2016, had nearly nine million victims. Most were victims of forced displacement. And it also led to various forms of violence, including sexual violence, with women and LGBT people being particularly vulnerable. This article highlights the centrality of gender and sexuality in the conflict and the impact of militarization on the gendered social landscape in Colombia. It examines how women who were victims of sexual violence became important social leaders, utilizing their experience to resist the war and transform cultural norms around gender and violence. Through collective action, these women challenged traditional gender roles and power dynamics. The article emphasizes the importance of recognizing and amplifying the voices of women who have experienced violence in conflict settings and highlights the Colombian armed conflict as a case study of the intersectionality of gender, violence, and resistance.

Keywords: Colombian armed conflict, gender and sexuality, women's resistance

Abstrakt

Artykuł przedstawia badanie wpływu kolumbijskiego konfliktu zbrojnego na płęć i seksualność, skupiając się w szczególności na działaniach kobiet, które były ofiarami przemocy seksualnej. Konflikt, który trwał od 1954 do 2016 roku, przyczynił się do blisko dziesięciu milionów ofiar, głównie w wyniku przymusowych wysiedleń. Wiązał się ponadto z występowaniem różnych form przemocy – w tym seksualnej, na którą narażone były szczególnie kobiety, ale także osoby reprezentujące mniejszość LGBT. Artykuł podkreśla centralną rolę płci i seksualności w konflikcie oraz wpływ militaryzacji na płciowy krajobraz społeczny w Kolumbii. Autorka bada, jak doszło do tego, że kobiety, które były ofiarami przemocy seksualnej, stały się ważnymi przywódcami społecznymi, wykorzystując swoje doświadczenie do stawiania oporu wojnie i zmiany norm kulturowych dotyczących płci i przemocy. Dzięki zbiorowym działaniom kobiety te rzuciły wyzwanie tradycyjnym rolom płciowym i praktykom władzy. W artykule podkreślono znaczenie dostrzegania i wzmacniania głosów kobiet, które doświadczyły przemocy w sytuacjach konfliktowych. Ukazano konflikt zbrojny w Kolumbii jako studium przypadku zażębiania się różnych kategorii: płci, przemocy i oporu.

Słowa kluczowe: kolumbijski konflikt zbrojny, płęć i seksualność, opór kobiet

Introduction

The Colombian armed conflict, which took place between 1954 and 2016, was one of the largest violent confrontations in the world. The parties involved in the conflict were the Colombian government, paramilitary groups, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the oldest guerrilla group in the world at that time. As a result, our country has nearly nine million victims, most of whom are victims of forced displacement. This aggression has mainly affected women but there have also been other types of violence such as enforced disappearances (80.000 victims¹), sexual violence (30.086 victims²), with women and LGBT people being the most vulnerable groups.

This essay is divided into two parts. In the first part, I begin by discussing the centrality of gender and sexuality and how they were used as a strategy of war during the Colombian armed conflict. I use empirical data from official sources and feminist literature on the analysis of wars. I also explore the meanings and impact of militarization on the gendered social landscape in Colombia.

In the second part of the essay, I examine the ways in which women who were victims of sexual violence in the context of the armed conflict strategically used that experience

¹ Memory and Conflict Observatory, n.d., <https://micrositios.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/observatorio/portal-de-datos/el-conflicto-en-cifras/> [access: 18.12.2022].

² S. Mujer, *En 2021 no es hora de callar: por la erradicación de la violencia sexual contra las mujeres en el marco del conflicto armado*, 2022, p. 2, <https://www.sismamujer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Boletin-25M-2021.pdf> [access: 18.12.2022].

to declare themselves survivors of violence, resist the war, and become important social leaders in the country. This analysis demonstrates that gender and women's experiences can also be strategically utilized to respond to armed conflict. Finally, I present the conclusions and main ideas of the essay, highlighting the resistance of women and the transformation of gender roles during the Colombian armed conflict.

Weaponization of gender-based violence during the armed conflict

Gender and sexuality were used as tools of war by all the groups involved in the Colombian armed conflict. In this section, I analyze their distinct uses through three dimensions: (i) sexual violence as a strategy and practice, (ii) gender-based violence during armed conflict from an intersectional perspective, and (iii) the intensification of patriarchy within the social landscape through the reproduction of gender-based violence. According to Sisma Mujer and the National Victims Office in Colombia, 34,079 people have been registered as victims of crimes against freedom and sexual integrity in the context of the armed conflict. Of these, 30,700 cases relate to women (90,08%), 2,843 to men (8,34%), and 535 to the LGBT population (1,57%)³. In Colombia, sexual violence was used as a strategic mechanism to control certain territories, spread terror among certain populations, particularly indigenous and peasant groups, and silence women's leadership⁴.

1.1. Sexual violence as a strategy and as a practice

As the Colombian Constitutional Court has noted: "sexual violence against women is a crime perpetrated by all armed actors in the Colombian conflict, and it has been used as a habitual, extensive, systematic, and invisible **practice**"⁵. I emphasize the word "practice" because, unlike other human rights violations such as assassinations and kidnappings, sexual violence is not typically recognized by any armed actor. This is because doing so would bring them into greater social reproach, call their manhood into question, and undermine the legitimacy of the cause they are supposedly defending. As Elisabeth Wood has pointed out, rape as a practice includes both instances where rape is an explicit organizational strategy, as well as in other instances:

A form of violence that is driven from "below" and tolerated from "above," rather than purposefully adopted as policy. When rape is a practice, commanders do not order,

³ S. Mujer, *¡La lucha feminista no se detiene! Comportamiento de las violencias contra las mujeres en Colombia durante 2020 y 2021*, 2021, p. 35, <https://www.sismamujer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/%C2%A1La-lucha-feminista-no-se-detiene.pdf> [access: 18.12.2022].

⁴ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *La Guerra inscrita en el cuerpo*, Informe Nacional de violencia sexual en el conflicto armado, 2017, <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/la-guerra-inscrita-en-el-cuerpo/> [access: 17.12.2022].

⁵ Colombian Constitutional Court, *Ruling T-025/2004*, <https://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/T-025-04/AUTOS%202008/91.%20Auto%20del%2014-04-2008.%20Auto%20092.%20Protecci%C3%B3n%20mujeres%20v%C3%ADctimas%20del%20desplazamiento.pdf> [access: 17.12.2022].

authorize, or otherwise promote it – but neither do they effectively prohibit it⁶. It's the violence that has not been explicitly adopted as organization policy but is nonetheless tolerated by commanders.

One example from the armed conflict in Colombia that allows us to understand femicide and sexual violence as a patriarchal strategy of territorial domination and reproduction of women's subordination, is the case of the Bahía Portete massacre in the department of La Guajira. In this territory, four Wayuu indigenous women who were social leaders were sexually abused, mutilated in their sexual organs, and murdered by paramilitary groups. The perpetrators later left graffiti on the women's houses threatening the other women in the community and recalling the acts of rape and mutilation they had committed against the Wayuu women leaders⁷.

From a feminist perspective, we can analyze the weaponization of sexual violence against indigenous social leaders in this case. As Rita Laura Segato has argued, sexual violence is often committed as punishment or revenge against a woman who “stepped out of her place”. For Segato, “rape is perceived as a disciplining and avenging act against a woman who is generically targeted”⁸. In this case, the consequences for the community were forced displacement, abandonment of the territory, and the destruction of the community fabric built up over decades.

1.2. Gender-based violence during arm conflict from an intersectional approach

Wars and armed conflicts have different impacts depending on the socio-cultural context, the material conditions of the populations, and the matrix of domination characterized by intersectional oppressions⁹ rooted in class, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. In this section, I will highlight two dimensions of intersectionality, in which the armed conflict disproportionately and differently affected two specific groups of women due to their ethnic and racial identities or their sexual orientation and gender identity. By doing so, I demonstrate the multiple layers of gender-based violence, which does not affect all women in the same way but is significantly more intense for women from historically discriminated groups.

According to the Survey on the Prevalence of Sexual Violence Against Women in the Context of the Colombian Armed Conflict (SPSVAW), black and Afro-Colombian women suffered the highest levels of sexual violence during the war. The report states that “black

⁶ E.J.Wood, *Rape as a Practice of War: Toward a Typology of Political Violence*, “Politics & Society” 2018, Vol. 46(4), p. 515.

⁷ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica – Grupo Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *La masacre de Bahía Portete: mujeres wayuu en la mira*, 2010, <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/la-masacre-de-bahia-portete-mujeres-wayuu-en-la-mira/> [access: 18.12.2022].

⁸ R.L. Segato, *La estructura de género y el mandato de la violación. Las estructuras elementales de la violencia. Ensayos sobre género entre la antropología, el psicoanálisis y los derechos humanos*, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Argentina 2003, p. 31.

⁹ P. Collins Hill, S. Bilge, *Intersectionality (Key concepts)*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2016.

women between the ages of 15 and 24 and belonging to socio-economic status 1 are more likely to be victims of sexual violence than women of other ethnic origins, age ranges, and socio-economic status”¹⁰. These disturbing statistics demonstrate how racism, sexism, and classism characterize Colombian society, in which the bodies and lives of Afro-Colombian women are seen as less important than those of mestiza or white women. The lack of social rejection of this violence is a significant contributor to the culture of impunity that allows perpetrators to continue committing these crimes against black women in Colombia.

Analyzing another layer of oppression linked to sexual orientation and gender identity, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people have experienced patriarchal violence during the armed conflict, as well as lesbophobia and transphobia from armed groups and their own communities. For example, lesbian women have suffered violence due to prejudice, and armed groups such as the FARC and paramilitary groups have carried out sexual violence against lesbian women in rural areas with the intention, according to their patriarchal ideologies, of “correcting” their sexual orientation. Another example is the sexual violence perpetrated against trans men, as demonstrated in the testimony of a trans man from Tumaco, in the department of Nariño who was a victim of sexual violence and, as a result, suffered a forced pregnancy. As the testimony relates, “during the rape they always told me that I was not a man, that they could do to me what they did to any woman, that the man had a penis and where was my penis?”¹¹.

During the conflict in Colombia, armies used sexual orientation and gender identity to attack and target people with LGBT identities in Colombia. In this way, cis-hetero norms are maintained in Colombian society, and anyone who can be seen as otherness or the other is punished, creating an internal enemy, which in most cases were civilians. Despite the different groups having different political, ideological, and economic interests, patriarchal violence against specific discriminated populations was common to all the violent actors.

1.3. Patriarchal intensification during armed conflict and social landscape

As Jennifer Turpin has pointed out, there is a dialectical relationship between militarism and patriarchy: “militarism relies on patriarchal patterns, and patriarchy relies on militarization”¹². In the Colombian armed conflict, the culture of militarization as a way to solve sociopolitical conflicts has transformed social norms, leading to an intensification of traditional forms of patriarchy and an increase in violence against women. This is

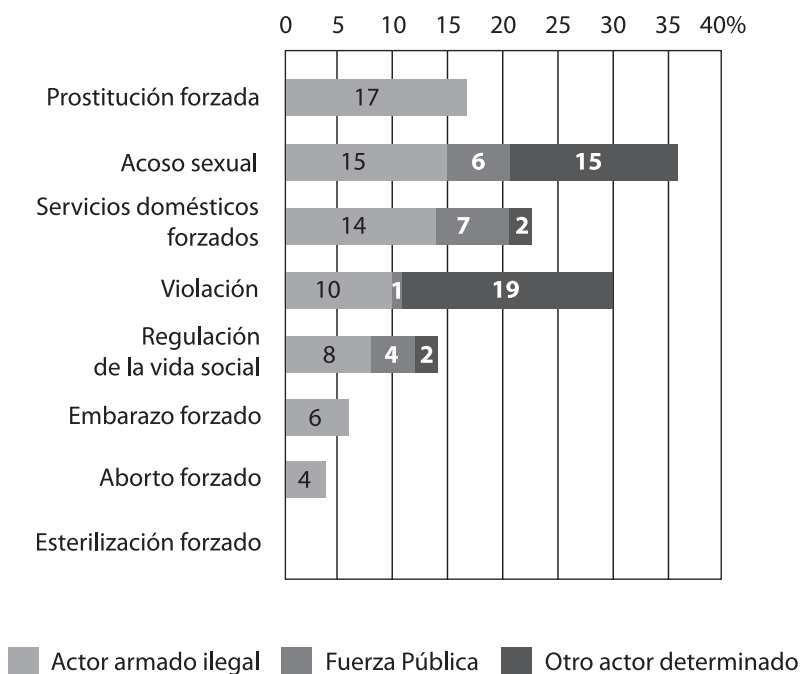
¹⁰ Oxfam Colombia, *Survey on Prevalence of sexual violence against women in the context of the Colombian armed conflict 2010–2015*, 2017, p. 18, <https://humanidadvigente.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Encuesta-de-prevalencia-de-violencia-sexual-CSCG.pdf> [access: 18.12.2022].

¹¹ ILGA, *Center for Reproductive Rights and Colombia Diversa. LGBT Rights and the Armed Conflict in Colombia. Report for the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity*, 2022, p. 5, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/sexualorientation/cfi-report-ga77/ngos/2022-11-10/ILGA%20World-Colombia-Diversa-and%20the-Center-of_Reproductive-Rights.pdf [access: 18.12.2022].

¹² T.J. Turpin, *Many Faces: Women Confronting War*” *The Women and War Reader*, ed. Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin, 1998, p. 3.

exacerbated by the persistence of the culture of weapons, gangsterism, microtrafficking, and the objectification of women.

As the survey (SPSVAW) shows, the main perpetrator of rape against the surveyed women is a civilian actor, followed by illegal armed actors, and then the Colombian security forces with the red bar¹³. As the following graph illustrates, the intensification of violence against women by armed groups becomes a social legitimization of the subordination they suffer. In this way, sexual violence against women is seen as socially permitted and endorsed in conflict zones, which implies that civilian men, even if they are not part of armed groups, feel supported in committing these acts of violence against women. In 97% of cases, impunity persists¹⁴.



Fuente: Elaboración propia con base en Envisé 2010 – 2015

Figure 1. Types of sexual violence and principal perpetrators

Source: SPSVAW.

¹³ Oxfam Colombia, Casa de la Mujer, *Encuesta de Prevalencia de violencia sexual en contra de las mujeres en el contexto del conflicto armado colombiano 2010–2015*, 2017, p. 21, <https://humanidadvigente.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Encuesta-de-prevalencia-de-violencia-sexual-CSCG.pdf> [access: 17.12.2022].

¹⁴ S. Mujer, C. Mosquera Vera, *Treatment of the topic of sexual violence in the Special Jurisdiction for Peace: A feminist call to end impunity and build a gender-focused peace*, 2022, <https://www.sismamujer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Tratamiento-de-la-violencia-sexual-en-la-JEP-7.pdf> [access: 19.12.2022].

Another dimension that shows how the social landscape is transformed due to the armed conflict and militarization culture is the creation of armed masculinities, which becomes the ‘role model’ of masculinities within areas affected by war, especially rural areas with a lack of access to basic social services, particularly education and work. As the National report on sexual violence shows, during times of war, the emergence of “warrior masculinities” occurs, which means the radicalization of some characteristics of previous hegemonic masculinities, such as emotional control, obligatory heterosexuality, and dominance over others¹⁵. Through this specific construction of masculinity, women are seen as less than human, and new generations of the Colombian population start to reproduce this culture of patriarchal violence against other people, maintaining the patriarchal order and the structural violence perpetrated against women in Colombia.

2. Gender identities as a strategic political place for resisting

As the title of this essay suggests, the armed conflict in Colombia involved the intensification of patriarchal oppression, as we saw in the first part of this text. However, in the context of a strong feminist movement and the creation of multiple women’s organizations, the armed conflict also meant the rise of a powerful resistance against the war, carried out by rural, peasants, indigenous and Afro-Colombian women from all over the country. In this section, I will explore the use of gender identities as a site of resistance in two subsections: i) the women’s organizations created by women human rights defenders and their participation in the peace agreement; and ii) the initiative “No es Hora de Callar” (It is not time to be silent) by one of the most important survivors, Jineth Bedoya Lima, and the opening of the national case to investigate sexual violence during the armed conflict by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, thanks to the efforts of feminist activists, specially the Five Keys (Cinco Claves) Coalition.

2.1. From survivors of sexual violence to social leaders and women human rights defenders

After experiencing the multiple consequences on women’s lives and bodies, many survivors of these crimes began to reclaim their rights and the rights of their communities, becoming national social leaders and transforming their roles. They took action and used their agency to challenge patriarchal norms and improve their living conditions. These efforts occurred between 2006 and 2019, and two of the most powerful results were Court Ruling 092 of 2008, which highlighted the disproportionate impact of armed conflict and forced displacement on women, and recognized women as subjects of reinforced

¹⁵ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *La Guerra inscrita en el cuerpo*, Informe Nacional de violencia sexual en el conflicto armado, 2017, <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/la-guerra-inscrita-en-el-cuerpo/> [access: 17.12.2022].

constitutional protection¹⁶. Two examples of this effort are the organization “Mujer sigue mis pasos” (‘Women follow my steps’) and the organization “Narrar para vivir” (‘Narrating for life’). These organizations have claimed that ‘My body is my first territory of peace’, a phrase that can be understood through the lens of feminist epistemologies and communitarian feminism, which understands the connections between territoriality as land and as embodied in their bodies, and the co-production of oppression and resistance. The first organization fights for the sexual and reproductive rights of women survivors of sexual violence during the armed conflict, and it was founded by women survivors of this crime. In the words of its founder, María Eugenia Cruz, they work to “ensure that this crime never happens again to any woman”¹⁷. The second organization, founded by Mayerlis Angarita, works to find victims of forced disappearance, as her mother was kidnapped and a victim of this crime. The most powerful consequence of their leadership was the strong influence they had on the inclusion of a gender perspective in the Colombian peace accord signed in 2016. Feminist organizations created two important platforms: “Cinco Claves para un Tratamiento Diferencial de la Violencia Sexual”¹⁸ (Five Keys to a Differential Treatment of Sexual Violence) and the “Cumbre Nacional de Mujeres y Paz”¹⁹ (National Summit of Women and Peace) platform.

As a result, the Colombian peace accord is the only one that includes more than one hundred measures to ensure gender equality, and proposes an innovative gender perspective that is not included in other peace agreements around the world. This was made possible through the influence of feminist groups and women’s organizations that used international commitments, particularly Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, to increase the participation of women in the negotiations, resulting in this significant achievement²⁰.

2.2. Women human rights defenders campaigns and the opening of a new Macro case to investigate sexual violence during the armed conflict

Another important milestone for survivors of sexual violence is the campaign “It is not time to be silent”, created by Jineth Bedoya Lima, a survivor of sexual violence who suffered an attack in the year 2000 while reporting on corruption in jails that held paramilitary groups. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights established in 2021 that the

¹⁶ Constitutional Court, *Ruling 092/2008*, <https://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/autos/2008/a092-08.htm> [access: 18.12.2022].

¹⁷ Mediaset.es, *María Eugenia Cruz advances to denounce violence and abuse against women and girls*, 2015, https://www.mediaset.es/12meses/campanas/doylacara/avanzadoras/maria-eugenia-cruz_18_1964550005.html [access: 18.12.2022].

¹⁸ Corporación Sisma Mujer, Colombia Diversa, Corporación Humanas, Women’s Link Worldwide and the Red Nacional de Mujeres.

¹⁹ Liga Internacional de Mujeres por la paz y la libertad-LIMPAL Colombia, Alianza Imp, ANMUCIC, Casa de la Mujer, C.N.O.A, Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, Mujeres por la Paz, Colectivo de Pensamiento y Acción Mujeres, Paz y Seguridad.

²⁰ D.M. Gómez, D.M. Montealegre, *Colombian women’s and feminist movements in the peace negotiation process in Havana: complexities of the struggle for peace in transitional contexts*, “Social Identities” 2021, Vol. 27(4), pp. 445–460.

physical, sexual, and psychological torture of Jineth Bedoya could not have been carried out without the acquiescence or collaboration of the State²¹. After more than twenty years, international justice has condemned the Colombian State and has established an important precedent in this field.

In addition, in 2022, Jineth Bedoya was appointed by the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (SRSV) as a Global Ambassador for the prevention of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Using her new status, she insisted on the creation of a special case in the Special Jurisdiction for Peace to investigate sexual violence during the armed conflict. Thanks to her persistence and especially due to the efforts of feminist coalitions, particularly the Platform Five Keys, which argued that “the opening of a national case on sexual and reproductive violence, and violence based on the victim’s sexual orientation and gender identity is a necessary and urgent measure for transitional justice with a gender perspective”²², a special macro case on sexual violence and other crimes related to gender, sex, orientation, or identity was announced last year²³. On September 27, 2023, Colombia became the first country in which the special tribunal for peace prioritizes and creates a special macro case for investigating “Gender-based violence, sexual violence, reproductive violence, and other crimes committed because of prejudice based on sexual orientation, gender expression and/or gender identity in the context of the Colombian armed conflict”²⁴. This shows the strength of the Colombian feminist movement not only in the formulation of the peace accord but also in the implementation of the justice component, six years after the peace agreement was signed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, gender and sexuality were weaponized during the armed conflict in Colombia and were used as strategies of war by all groups involved in the conflict. Sexual violence, in particular, was used as a mechanism to control certain territories, sow terror among populations, particularly indigenous and peasant groups, and silence women’s leadership. The militarization of the conflict also intensified patriarchy within the social landscape and contributed to the reproduction of gender-based violence. However, women who were victims of sexual violence during the conflict were able to resist the war and

²¹ Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Case of Bedoya Lima et al.*, V. Colombia Judgment of August 26, 2021; https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_431_ing.pdf [access: 18.12.2022].

²² Five Keys, *The opening of a national case on sexual and reproductive violence, and violence based on the victim’s sexual orientation and gender identity is a necessary and urgent measure for transitional justice with a gender perspective*, 2021, <https://www.sismamujer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/The-opening-of-a-national-case-of-sexual-and-reproductive-violence.pdf> [access: 15.12.2022].

²³ Rutas del conflicto, *Tras años de luchas se abre un macrocaso de violencia sexual en la JEP*, 2022, <https://rutasdelconflicto.com/notas/anos-luchas-abre-macrocaso-violencia-sexual-la-jep> [access: 20.12.2022].

²⁴ Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, *La JEP abre macrocaso 11, que investiga la violencia basada en género, incluyendo violencia sexual y reproductiva, y crímenes cometidos por prejuicio*, 2023, <https://www.jep.gov.co/Sala-de-Prensa/Paginas/-la-jep-abre-macrocaso-11-que-investiga-la-violencia-basada-en-genero-incluyendo-violencia-sexual-y-reproductiva-y-crimenes.aspx> [access: 1.09.2023].

declare themselves survivors of violence, becoming important social leaders and women human rights defenders in the country. Their agency and strategic use of gender and their place in society highlight the potential for women to respond to armed conflict and resist oppression. Despite facing discrimination and violence, these women persevered and became key figures in building peace, leading social change, and challenging patriarchal narratives of war through their feminist responses.

The armed conflict in Colombia led to the intensification of patriarchal oppression and the weaponization of gender and sexuality as tools of war. Nevertheless, the rise of a powerful resistance against the conflict, led by rural, Afro-Colombian women, highlights the potential for women to resist oppression and assert their agency. The creation of women's organizations and the initiative "It is not time to be silent" by Jineth Bedoya Lima, a survivor of sexual violence, allowed for the recognition of women as subjects of reinforced constitutional protection and the inclusion of a gender perspective in the Colombian peace accord.

The most significant part of this mobilization is the strength of feminist groups' united efforts. As evidenced by the work of the Five Keys Coalition, which successfully advocated before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, resulting in the first macro case of sexual violence. This triumph of the feminist movements and the Five Keys Coalition: Corporación Sisma Mujer, Colombia Diversa, Corporación Humanas, Women's Link Worldwide and the Red Nacional de Mujeres, shows the fundamental role of feminist work in multiple fields. From the beginning, through the incorporation of the gender perspective in the peace agreement, and subsequently advocating for the creation of this macro case, until now with the official opening of the macro case eleven, which places Colombia at the forefront of gender advances in transitional justice setting an example for the rest of the world. This underscores the critical role that women and feminist organisations had in the peace process's success, as well as the potential for women and LGBTIQ+ people to be essential actors in achieving gender equality, democracy, and peace.

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