

The role of women defenders of human rights in Colombia

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Women in Colombia are increasingly being attacked because of their efforts to defend human rights and to bring an end to the conflict and displacement in their country.

Violence against women defenders of human rights is rarely recognised for what it really is: part of a deliberate, calculated strategy to force them to desist from their attempts to change society, save lives and receive justice. Recent reports show there has been a serious increase in the incidence of aggression against the movement for the defence of human rights in Colombia and in particular against women defenders of human rights.¹ These attacks are aimed at silencing women defenders and as such they have a profound impact on perpetuation of the conflict – and prolonging displacement, given that the women's movement has become a key player in effective reestablishment of the rights of the displaced population in Colombia, including the right to restitution of their lands.

In their work, women defenders have experienced sexual violence, attacks or threats of attacks on themselves and also on their children, families and communities. These women also commonly experience the disintegration of their family unit, open reproaches and social stigmatisation for the substitution of their role as mother with that of protector of wider human rights.

However, and in spite of this, in Colombia it is often women who take the lead in demanding truth, justice and reparations for victims of the armed conflict, including the restitution of their lands. The internal armed conflict has forcibly displaced more than 5.2 million people throughout the country, 80% of them women and children, submitting this population to a profound human rights crisis. Therefore, given the failings of the state in terms of an effective response to the crisis, the women who have suffered forced displacement in Colombia have – with the support of women's organisations dedicated to the defence of their human rights – united and fought strongly to demand the effective reestablishment of their rights and the restitution of their lands, fully backed by the necessary guarantees.

This growing strength has been matched by a correlating increase in the risk of attempts on their lives, integrity, security and freedom by armed groups and the paramilitary groups in particular – groups who do not wish the women to make demands of the state for the reestablishment of their rights, the pursuit of truth and justice, and the restitution of their lands. The role of these women leaders is absolutely essential to this process – which is why they are being attacked.

It is worth bearing in mind that peace processes promoted by the government could well generate an upsurge of human rights violations in the country. The armed groups who operate beyond the law and who have broadly and systematically violated the human rights of the civilian population will want to weaken the hand of the victims

in obtaining commitments for reparations in the peace process, particularly in societies such as Colombia where civil society has the capacity to influence outcomes in political negotiations and where, as here, conflict and displacement have created an environment conducive to or forcing women's empowerment. To effectively prevent displacement, peace outcomes must be sustainable, responding not only to military demands but to the aspirations of those who have suffered violence and displacement. And to do this the negotiating capacity and power of civil society, including women groups and IDP associations, need to be protected and strengthened.

In 2004, Colombia's Constitutional Court examined the particular impact of war and forced displacement on women, and concluded that the violence committed as part of the civil conflict within Colombia had a differential and more acute impact on women due to their gender. With the number of men killed in conflict, family roles have had to change, and women – many of whom have also suffered violence, including sexual and gender-based violence – have had to assume new domestic, economic and social roles. As part of this, more women have assumed leadership in IDP organisations and in human rights movements, demanding truth, justice and reparation for the victims of conflict.

The process of strengthening women defenders of human rights allows them to understand that the defence of human rights is a right in itself, protected by international instruments that are binding for Colombia; and that the state must ensure the necessary guarantees for exercising the defence of human rights – which implies both prompt and effective investigations, and effective actions in dismantling the armed agents of conflict. Currently, however, the risk to defenders continues to increase, no advances are being made in police and legal investigations, and paramilitary action persists in such a way that women defenders of human rights continue to be persecuted.

Effective and appropriate protection for women defenders of human rights would contribute not only to strengthening the movement of women defenders but also to strengthening democracy, and to a state based on the rule of law. It would contribute to advancing the processes of peace and reconciliation in such a way that they become sustainable; and by re-establishing human rights and truth, justice and reparation, it would contribute to preventing conflict and the displacement that accompanies it.

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1. Corporación Sisma Mujer, 'Las defensoras de DDHH y su lucha por la Justicia en Colombia', Revista Resistencia, September 2011