

Rebuilding lives in Colombia

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A grassroots women's organisation in Colombia is working to protect women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence, and to support the healing of survivors.

In the context of widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Colombia, the courageous work of grassroots women's organisations in the Pacific coastal city of Buenaventura has been critical in saving lives, accompanying and supporting survivors and their families, and breaking the culture of silence and denial regarding sexual violence. One of the most active organisations is called Butterflies With New Wings, a network of 12 community-based grassroots organisations which was formed by women committed to protecting each other and the women of Buenaventura.

In Colombia, SGBV is used for the purposes of gaining control over territory, resources and communities, intimidating civilians, obtaining information, as retaliation for breaking imposed social codes, and as punishment for sexual orientation and gender identity. Women and children, women leaders and their families, human rights defenders, land rights activists and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people are at particular risk. And SGBV – which is committed by all parties to the conflict – remains both a cause and consequence of displacement.¹

Furthermore, the lack of protection for survivors, the high level of impunity, poor coordination among service providers (legal, medical, psychological), the stigma and discrimination faced by the survivors, distrust in institutional mechanisms, and the often poor quality of culturally insensitive services all create fear and mistrust. These in turn lead

to under-reporting of SGBV and thus to these human rights violations remaining invisible.

In Buenaventura, internally displaced people (IDPs) make up around 58% of the population and over 80%² of the total population live in poverty. People living in the area continue to suffer massive human rights abuses. These include the recruitment of children, torture, kidnappings, killings, threats to life and physical integrity, extortion, and SGBV.

The violence committed by armed groups and subsequent displacement have had a devastating impact, disproportionately affecting indigenous people and Afro-Colombian communities, especially women and children. According to a recent report: "Despite the major impact that violence has on the Colombian population, mental health is still an unexplored field." The psychosocial wounds caused by armed conflicts are less visible than those caused by bullets but that can seriously affect the lives of the survivors



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and their families.³ There is still a critical gap in addressing these invisible wounds, not only for helping individuals and their communities recover but as tools for sustainable peace and grounds for finding durable solutions.

Butterflies and healing

The network's name was initially Butterflies With Broken Wings, a name given by a young survivor of a massacre when she described herself to one of the volunteers as a butterfly with broken wings. After several years of promoting self-healing, the network decided to change the name to Butterflies With New Wings to reflect the outstanding results of their self-healing work and to empower their members.

The network has over 100 volunteers and 30 coordinators covering different neighbourhoods, 75 facilitators and four regional coordinators. Volunteers travel – in pairs – on foot or by bicycle, bus or boat to reach women at risk and to support them. They themselves often face danger and receive threats because of their work and the neighbourhoods they visit. The Butterflies put a great emphasis on self-healing by creating spaces for recovery while reminding women of the strength and wisdom of their ancestors. Preserving Afro-Colombian culture has become one of the missions and self-healing tools for the Butterflies.

The network draws on an ancestral Afro-Colombian practice called *comadreo* to reach out to women in different neighbourhoods in some of the poorest and most violent parts of Buenaventura. Women in these areas are often afraid to report sexual violence and the few women who do so remain unprotected because they often live alongside their aggressors. Building trust in this kind of environment is a slow and challenging process but the Butterflies have found that women respond to the principal of *comadreo* which has the sense of meeting in a spirit of respect, trust, solidarity and confidentiality. And meeting together helps Afro-Colombian women survivors of sexual violence learn more about their culture and traditions: knowledge passed down through the generations but often lost or forgotten

when they fled their homes. These meetings remind the women and girls of a time when their ancestors used braiding to hide seeds or make maps in their hair, maps that helped them and their community to find their way back to a safe place or to freedom – hence the importance of hairstyles as a form of cultural expression for Afro-Colombian women.

The network uses a wide range of traditional healing practices: rituals, ceremonies, symbolic actions and storytelling. By creating a confidential space where women can share their most painful memories, sometimes for the first time, without any fear of stigma or discrimination, the network helps survivors take their first steps to self-healing.

Network members also aim to strengthen the capacity of local state institutions in preventing and responding to SGBV. The network is an active member of an inter-sectoral committee working to prevent gender-based violence and to promote mental health (Mesa Intersectorial contra las Violencias de Género y la Salud Mental) where they can share the knowledge they have gained – through their community outreach work – about gaps in referral pathways and prevention approaches.

The Butterflies run training workshops on project design, monitoring and evaluation to make their interventions more sustainable. The network provides their members with opportunities for training not only in women's rights but also in areas such as health care, psychosocial support and case management. In addition, they have explored the possibility of engaging men and boys in their activities through a pilot project working with young men from Buenaventura; the project was so successful that the network is planning to develop it in more parts of Buenaventura in parallel with their interventions with women and girls.

Recognition of impact

The network has supported and accompanied over 1,000 women and girls from Buenaventura, and in 2014 Butterflies received the Nansen Refugee Award for their outstanding work in protection. The award is now helping them achieve another goal –

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building a women's refuge and a community centre.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Buenaventura accompanies the network in their work in self-healing, community strengthening, and mitigating the psychological and social stress experienced by individuals, families and communities living through violence and displacement.⁴ The work of the Butterflies and similar grassroots organisations is crucial not only for the enormous impact they have on the lives of the women and girls in Buenaventura but also for the effect that the personal healing of individuals has on a society's recovery.

Multisectoral and coordinated efforts by all relevant stakeholders to prevent and respond to SGBV will be a vital element in

constructing a sustainable peace, following the announcement in August 2016 of a peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

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4. UNHCR (2012) *Operational Guidance Mental Health & Psychosocial Support Programming for Refugee Operations* www.unhcr.org/525f94479.pdf