

**PANTEION UNIVERSITY OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCES**

**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PSYCHOLOGY**

**DIVISION OF CRIMINOLOGY**

**Violence against women in Colombia under conditions of civil war**

Ph.D. Thesis

Haydee del Carmen Marin Ordoñez

Tripartite Advisory Committee:

Professor J. Farsedakis

Prof. A. Magganis

Associate prof. G. Lazos

Athens, November 2013

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*To my mother Ofelia*

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

AI: Amnesty International

AUC: Auto-defensas Unidas de Colombia - United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia

CERLAC: Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean

CEDAW: Convention of Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CINEP: Centro de Investigacion y Educacion Popular - Centre for Research and Popular Education

CODHES: Consultoria para Los Derechos Humanos y Desplazamiento - the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement

COHA: Council on Hemispheric Affairs

CWGL: Centre for Women's Global Leadership

ELN: Ejercito de Liberación Nacional - National Liberation Army

EPL: Ejército Popular de Liberación - Popular Liberation Army

CWGL: Centre for Women's Global Leadership

FARC: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organisation

FIP: Fundacion Ideas por la Paz - Foundation Ideas for Peace

HRW: Human Rights Watch

IEPRI: Instituto de Estudios Politicos y Relaciones Internacionales Universidad Nacional Bogota - Institute of Political Studies and International Relations of the National University of Bogotá

INCORA: Instituto Colombiano de Reforma Agraria - Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform

JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association

MAS: Muerte a los Sequestadores - Death to the Kidnappers

OAS: Organization of American States

IACHR: Inter-American Commission of Human Rights

OXFAM: Oxford Committee for Famine Relief

OFP: Organización Femenina Popular - Popular Women's Organisation

ONIC: Organización Nacional de Indígena de Colombia - National Indigenous Organisation  
of Colombia

RSS: Red de Solidaridad Social - Social Solidarity Network

TFLAC: Task Force for Latin America and the Caribbean

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

UNIFEM: United Nations Development Fund for Women

UP: Union Patriótica - Patriotic Union

WHO: World Health Organisation

WCHR: World Conference on Human Rights

WOLA: Washington Office on Latin America

## THANKS

I would like to thank the Panteion University for the opportunity of doing this PhD under the auspices of the Department of Sociology and Criminology. I would like to thank my supervisor Professor I. Farsedakis for bearing with me in this long endeavour. Being a foreign student in Greece is difficult in terms of learning the language and coping with a different culture. I must admit that doing a PhD is a task that involves a lot of loneliness, self-discipline and perseverance. It was very hard to complete this thesis and it has taken me much longer than I expected.

I was lucky to find people like Dr. Martina Loos and Dr. Vasiliki Kantzara, who have provided me with support and advice and for their encouragement at every stage. They have made themselves available to answer questions with which I have constantly bombarded them. Many thanks to them and I would also like to thank Julian Cheyne for his invaluable comments and his help with proofreading and with the English language. Without their help this work this work would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank all the women who kindly shared their suffering and their experiences and trusted me to use their stories to inform people about the violence that Colombian women experience in the civil war. I am indebted to the staff of the OFP who helped me with finding the women to interview, for helping me when I visited Barrancabermeja and for the testimonies they shared with me. I am astonished by their courage and devotion to the needs of the women they care for. Without them there would be no research.

I wish to express my thanks and deep appreciation for the support I received from my husband Kostas, from my family in Colombia and from many friends all over the world who encouraged me to finish this PhD. And finally the biggest thanks to God who gave me the health and motivation to show solidarity to all the women that suffer all over the world.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research explores women's experience of violence in civil war in Colombia. Its purpose is to allow women's voices to be heard. Mostly women are unwillingly participants in the war and are at the mercy of competing armed groups. The research includes a review of academic studies into the nature of violence, in particular violence against women, with an emphasis on gender and the work of feminist scholars. As violence against women in a civil war is little studied, is underreported and the violence is invisible the research also relies on reports by human rights groups and other organisations supporting women. It includes an examination of the historical background and the nature of the civil war in Colombia and of work done by scholars into violence against women in other civil wars, notably in the Balkans.

The data was obtained using semi-structured interviews with five women and an expert interview with the director of an NGO as primary sources and 135 testimonies as secondary sources, all taken from the department of Santander in north-eastern Colombia. This material was then analysed and triangulated.

The research explores how women's experience and definition of violence differs from that of men, which is the predominant narrative. Women's experience of war tends to be passive, of a multiplicity of events which create feelings of helplessness and depression. The loss of a husband or relatives is accompanied by displacement, poverty, becoming the sole head of a household, threats and control by armed groups, all resulting in feelings of abandonment and isolation. This occurs in the context of a patriarchal social system which allows violence against women and of a state which is either complicit in the violence, particularly of paramilitary groups, or is too weak to provide support for victims.

## **Chapter 1, introduction**

### **1.1, why I wanted to study the situation of Colombian women in a civil war**

Since very early in my life I have felt strongly about human rights and especially, as a Colombian woman, I have been interested in the position of women in Colombia. It has long been my dream to do a PhD on violence against women to understand the complexities they have faced throughout the history of Colombia, their role in the different epochs and how they have survived in an environment of prevalent social and political violence.

I have also been strongly influenced by my Christian faith which places a great emphasis on the value of human life. As John Paul II said in his Encyclical, Apostolic letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, of August 15<sup>th</sup> 1988: ‘there is a biblical principle which states that humankind is created in God’s image and likeness (Gen.1, 26-27) which constitutes an unchangeable base for Christian anthropology’<sup>1</sup>. This fundamental equality of all people before God requires us to respect the rights of each and every person.

Growing up in a culture with strong roots in slavery, social exclusion, discrimination and exploitation inherited from the time of Spanish colonisation, I believe I can contribute through my research to the understanding of the experiences of women who have been subjected to different kinds of violence.

### **1.2, aims of the research**

Despite international laws, conventions and charters on human rights, which are meant to protect the vulnerable, abuses still exist. Regardless of these supposed protections those who have power can exert domination, violate these conventions and impose rules on those who do not have power. Women in particular have suffered these violations. In all societies, but particularly in societies of a patriarchal character in which men enjoy higher status, men are situated in hierarchies over women creating an atmosphere of violence, discrimination and social inequality.

This research will centre on the experiences of women facing discrimination and violence resulting from the armed conflict, which I characterise as a civil war, in Colombia,

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by J. Paul II from Cf Saint Ireneo, *Adv. Haer.* V.6,1; Saint Agustin, *In Ps.* 4.8:CCL 38,17.



particularly gender-based violence<sup>2</sup> which is reproduced in the different social interactions that affect women. I will examine how sexual violence by armed groups, including the armed forces of the state, has become a common practice in the context of a slowly degrading conflict and a lack of respect for international humanitarian law.

In Colombia, a country which throughout its history as an independent state has suffered civil war and which, in recent times, has for over sixty years experienced ongoing violence, women and girls from different rural regions and ethnic groups have been victims of different forms of violence under civil war circumstances. There are three identified armed actors, the army, paramilitary forces and guerrilla groups, which fight for territorial control and political power. There is evidence of increasing violations of human rights and international humanitarian law against women and girls in the way this conflict is perpetrated by these armed actors.

The rights of women, especially of women heads of households, rural, indigenous, Afro-Colombian and displaced women continue to be breached by sexual discrimination as well as by diverse forms of gender-based violence. The security of women and girls in many areas has deteriorated as a result of the armed conflict and the use of sexual violence and social control by all the armed groups. In particular, because of racism and the abuse of human rights, the fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples in Colombia are under threat, whereby they are being displaced from their lands and, in the worst cases, they are killed or disappeared. Thousands of women and girls have lost their lives in Colombia due to social and political violence and the state itself has acknowledged this state of affairs.

Violence against women tends to be an invisible act whether it takes place in the public or private sphere. It remains invisible because it is not recognised as an offence. Patriarchal societies all over the world take it for granted that the role of women within the family is to obey men and to suffer in silence. Therefore, most offences against women go unreported and on many occasions are not considered to be offences at all. In this context, men have a tendency to impose power and control over women.

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations, 1993, agreement on the definition of violence against women: 'Gender-based violence is a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality of men'

Armed conflict in a society like Colombia takes place against this wider social background of violence against women, especially in the rural areas where the atmosphere is full of fear and menace. It is my particular interest to reveal how women and girls experience civil war and their particular situation of discrimination, violence, and other illicit actions in the context of the social and political situation of the country.

This analysis is based on the experiences of women who are not active participants in the armed conflict. I particularly wanted to provide insights into the experiences of women in the rural areas of Colombia where armed groups are performing indiscriminate attacks on the civil population.

### **1.2.1, the interviewees**

The women I interviewed had found refuge with a women's organisation. They were rural woman, of mixed ethnicity, all but one had come from other parts of Colombia and all had suffered displacement. All the women had experienced the loss of family members and all had bitter experiences of the civil war.

### **1.2.2, location of the research**

The research was carried out in and around the city of Barrancabermeja, which is on the Magdalena River in the department of Santander in central northern Colombia see Map 1 below. The department of Santander is in the area known as Medio Magdalena or Middle Magdalena. The Magdalena River is Colombia's principal river running almost the length of the country from the south-west north to the Caribbean. In the time of the Spanish conquest this area was a centre of resistance by the indigenous population to the invaders. Barrancabermeja was a village until the arrival of the oil industry in the second decade of the twentieth century and continued to experience raids by the indigenous inhabitants until around the same time.

**Map 1 Colombia with insert map of department of Santander and city of Barrancabermeja**



Source: Wikipedia<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Departments\\_of\\_Colombia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Departments_of_Colombia)

Barrancabermeja now has a population of around 320,000, is at the centre of Colombia's oil industry and has the country's largest oil refinery. As an important industrial centre it has long had a history of trade union activity and there have been a number of important strikes in the oil industry in the city.

The Middle Magdalena region, and the area around Barrancabermeja in particular, has experienced some of the fiercest fighting in the civil war with all the main armed actors, the FARC or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the largest guerrilla group, the AUC or United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, the largest paramilitary group and the Colombian Armed Forces, active in the region. With the arrival of industry came the growth of the city and the migration of people from rural areas along with the creation of barrios or slum districts. This process was accelerated by the civil war and the seizure of land and expulsion of peasants by ranchers and paramilitaries.

### **1.2.3, research questions**

The research questions provide the basic structure of the thesis and are the guides for the later framing of the interview questions and the categories for analysis. The aim of the study is set out in the form of a theoretical research question:

What kind of violence do Colombian women experience in civil war?

In order to answer this question I formulated the following research questions that would enable me to examine the phenomenon of violence against women in an empirical way and to identify the civil war environment:

How do women experience the effects of civil war?

In what way do women take part in the civil war?

What kind of violence do they report?

How do women survive as heads of households?

How do women experience the actions of the armed groups? ·

### **1.3, methodology**

I used qualitative research methods in order to discover the kinds of violence women experience in the context of civil war in the area around Barrancabermeja. I used semi-structured interviews to conduct five personal interviews with women who were living in this rural area under very difficult circumstances on 12th January 2007. We had only a short time to talk. This was an extremely dangerous area in which to live and the women had all suffered trauma in their personal lives so they were not unnaturally anxious and fearful, not just of their situation but also of talking with strangers. In addition, I was also anxious for my safety and because of my lack of experience in conducting interviews in any situation, let alone one involving such danger.

The interviews were structured around the logic and uncertainties of war, with 10 open questions which could be asked in any order depending on the flow of the interview. Additional information was provided in an interview with an expert witness, a member of staff of the women's organisation La Organizacion Femenina Popular (The Popular Women's Organisation), OFP, and a set of 135 denunciation testimonies provided by the OFP as secondary information, which could be triangulated with the interviews to give me a clear vision of the violence suffered by the community in general and women in particular.

### **1.4, contributions to academic research**

The subject of violence against women in Colombia has not been researched in terms of theoretical issues. This research is, therefore, of an exploratory character. It seeks to contribute to the social sciences an understanding of women's experiences of violence in the civil war, presented in their own voices, and of the particular conditions faced by women in rural areas. It is hoped this will help in the production of theories around the issue of violence against women in civil war and to develop a proper methodology for studying the situation of women in Latin American countries and to help Latin American researchers, particularly feminists, create new ways of approaching different communities.

It also seeks to contribute to criminological studies in Colombia around crimes and violence against women, because in Colombia there is little or no recognition of crimes against women and there is a lack of action against the perpetrators of violence against women.

## **1.5, structure of the thesis, by chapter**

In this section I will provide a summary of the main points covered in each of the chapters after the introduction.

### **1.5.1, literature review**

The second chapter deals with the definition of violence from different perspectives and in the various disciplines by a wide range of scholars and theorists. It highlights the concept of violence against women as developed by feminist scholars, introducing the term of patriarchy and recognising gender as a resource for understanding the different interactions between women and men, including domestic violence. It examines the definition of civil war in general and how to understand the particular situation of civil war in Colombia, its specifics such as displacement, the forced recruitment of young people by armed groups, the dirty war and the role of paramilitaries and the support provided by the United States to the Colombian state. As it stands scholars in Colombia do not use the term civil war to describe the violence in Colombia and there is little or no recognition of the issue of violence against women at a national level. There is a lack of literature about civil war in Colombia and Latin American countries in general and very little is written about the subject of violence against women. Until the 1990s violence against women in Colombia was not mentioned at all, therefore there are few serious methodological studies about women, both because of a lack of awareness of the gravity of the problem and because of the general attitude that issues to do with women are mainly a matter for the family and outsiders should not interfere in these affairs. As a result government and other authorities are neglectful or uninterested in the problem and it has been left to international human rights organisations to make the most important contributions to the awareness of violence against women.

### **1.5.2, methodology**

This chapter deals with the research methodology. The exploratory character of this research is due to the lack of previous studies. I used qualitative methods which as a distinctive research strategy rely on interviews to gather information about women's experiences and in this way allows for the development of theory. Feminist research in particular is based on the use of interviews with the particular intention of allowing women to speak in their own voices. I adopted this method in my research in order to enable the women I interviewed to tell me of their experience of violence. In particular I used the personal semi-

structured interview because it provides a greater flexibility in the way questions can be asked or their order changed to suit the flow of the interview. I also used the same form of personal interview with the member of staff from the OFP, the organisation providing shelter for the women. She had personal contact with the women and was close to the reality which they experienced. As a member of staff of the NGO supporting the women she was required to respect their confidentiality but was able to provide some information the interviewees were reluctant to provide because of the dangers they faced. Because I could only find five interviewees I also collected secondary data in the form of denunciation-testimonies which were provided by the OFP. I used this to triangulate the interview material. In this chapter, particularly because of the danger facing the women I interviewed, I also discuss the ethics of the research and my positionality as a Colombian woman sharing the same culture which provided me with insights into the situation of these women although it was always important to remember the differences in our situations and experiences. Finally, I discuss the methods of coding, analysis and triangulation.

### **1.5.3, historical perspective**

Chapter 4 provides an historical perspective on Colombian society and the background to the present conflict, focusing particularly on the country's lengthy experience of civil war and violence and how this has altered over time. This includes an analysis of first, the Spanish colonial impact, the seizure of land along with the displacement of indigenous inhabitants and the divisions between the ethnic, rural and urban societies; second, the independence period and the civil wars between the political parties which have preceded the present violence; third, La Violencia and the emergence of peasant guerrilla movements due to the failure of land reform; fourth, the US policy intervention based on the doctrine of 'national security' and the creation of counter insurgency brigades and death squads, in alliance with drug traffickers, which brought civilians, including women, into direct conflict with the state; fifth, the emergence of paramilitary armed groups like the AUC, which exert territorial control both in conjunction with the state and landowners and on their own behalf and the alliances between drug gangs and armed groups of all kinds, including guerrillas, who have also turned to kidnapping and extortion to raise funds. This chapter also examines the part women have played in the civil wars of Colombia, slender though the material on this topic is, and the position of women in the Colombian family and society as this role has developed over time and within different social classes up till modern times.

#### **1.5.4, data analysis, triangulation and interpretation**

This chapter includes the analysis and triangulation of the interviews, the interview with the expert witness and the testimonies. Using the techniques of content analysis and coding and by extracting categories from the data, the primary and secondary data is analysed and triangulated in order to gain an understanding and description of the violence and how it is experienced by women in this area of Colombia. I then interpret the material I have analysed.

#### **1.5.5, conclusions**

Chapter 6 describes the key findings of the research and its contributions to academic study in the fields of sociology and criminology. While there are some very good studies on the subject of violence against women in civil war they are limited in number and much of the work on this subject focuses on sexual violence and how women are used as trophies. I also make recommendations for further study and about the needs of women in these desperate situations.



## **Chapter 2, literature on violence**

### **2.1, introduction**

In this chapter I deal with the various academic approaches to violence, its definition in different social science disciplines and its relation to power in civil war conditions. The research carried out by different scholars, theorists and international human rights organizations on violence against women in a civil war is expressed according to different perspectives and disciplines. For example, one focus is on gender as an important way to understand violence against women and, in particular, domestic violence and how violence in the private domestic sphere is replicated in the public sphere. Another approach is to understand violence as a human rights violation in conjunction with an analysis and definition of civil war, both in general and in Colombia in particular, to gain an insight into the characteristics of the Colombian civil war and all the resulting impacts of the violence against women, such as displacement and other offences. In this respect the reports by international human rights organisations and institutions and their endeavours to assist states in assessing violence against women in civil war situations are a particularly important contribution to research in terms of establishing an accepted definition of the term ‘violence against women’.

### **2.2, definition of violence**

The difficulty of defining and understanding violence is well recognised among academicians and researchers. Indeed violence is so widespread that Arendt has commented: ‘No one engaged in thought about history and politics can remain unaware of the enormous role violence has always played in human affairs, and it is at first glance rather surprising that violence has been singled out so seldom for special consideration [...] violence and its arbitrariness were taken for granted and therefore neglected; no one questions or examines what is obvious at all’ (Arendt, 1970:8).

In broad terms in sociological studies violence is considered to be a social praxis that involves actions and interactions between individuals, groups or institutions that result in harm to human beings (Bilton et al, 1981). In criminology studies, acts of violence are regarded as a social phenomenon that can be treated, studied or prevented by passing the appropriate legislation (Sutherland, 1974:3). Theoretical criminology seeks to understand violence as an explanation of human behaviour, principally male behaviour. In the disciplines

of anthropology and ethnography violence is studied in terms of where the violence takes place and the different political, social, cultural and economic interactions involved (Robben & Nordstrom 1995:4).

The difficulty in defining and delimiting violence has led, in the field of anthropology, to the existence of a wide range of meanings and ambiguities, especially in the production and destruction of social relations (Coronil, 2006:5). Feldman argues that: 'Violence is formative; it shapes people's perceptions of who they are and what they are fighting for across space and time - a continual dynamic that forges as well as affects identities' (Feldman, 1991:6).

Violence is, therefore, also present in the essentialism that posits violence is implicated 'in the formation of the senses, shaping practices of visual objectification that are integral to overtly violent acts yet that appear as external to them' (ibid: 6).

Given the persistence of violence in and between societies, a range of sociological work addresses the empirical and theoretical dimensions of this major social problem (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Giddens, 1996; Mason, 2002). Violence can differ from country to country and culture to culture. From the ethnographic point of view, violence is socially and culturally constructed. As Mason (2002) stressed, violence pervades numerous dimensions of culture and media and thus most aspects of our everyday lives. Therefore, to make any singular definition of violence is a fallacy due to its characteristic of being found in every area of experience (Feldman, 1991) and in every perspective (Robben & Nordstrom, 1995) and because of the reification of violence and the difficulty of knowing the gravity of harm (Swiss & Giller, 1993) as, in situations of war, offences like rape and physical violence are often underreported due to the fear of reprisals.

### **2.2.1, violence, the state and power**

To understand the concept of violence we have to search for its roots and significance. It is necessary, therefore, to deal with a range of issues such as power, the state, legitimacy and its relations with the public sphere.

Max Weber (1917), in his book 'Politics as a Vocation', defined the state as the rule of men over men based on the use of legitimate violence, accepting, therefore, that the state is a source of legitimate physical force.

Some scholars like Gramsci (1971) have argued with Weber's notion of hegemony in which violence is embedded in complex societies. Societies have structures of violence that are reproduced through force and power. 'Violence, force and power are sublimated in social institutions and cultural conceptions of hierarchy that reflect the ideology of the ruling class and have been taken for granted by the subordinate class' (Robben & Nordstrom, 1995:7).

As Coronil states: 'violence is deeply implicated in state practices as well as in states of being that are not confined to the conventions of war; it participates in the formation of institutions and subjectivities as well as in their transformation and destruction' (Coronil, 2006: 26).

Foucault and Arendt also associated violence with power. Arendt described power as the faculty to rule and command in order to be obeyed and that people use violence in order to maintain their power (Arendt, 1970). Foucault argues that power produces 'domains of objects and rituals of truth', power is everywhere and there are power relations in all forms of society, in the family and in the social classes that act without noticing it (Foucault, 1977, 194). He also considers that not only is violence inextricably linked with power but violence, as expressed in war, is the means that allows us to decipher power relations. Violence, in other words, is not a phenomenon of power rather power is a phenomenon of violence.<sup>4</sup>

### **2.3, definition of power**

Theorising about power has long caused problems for social scientists, including feminists (Davis et al, 1991:68). Many attempts have been made to sort out the dilemmas involved in theorising on the subject. A seminal study was written by Lukes (1979) who identified three 'contests' in discussions about power. First, human agency or structural determinism – do individuals have freedom of choice or is individual activity determined by socially structured systems of domination? Second, the nature of the control exercised - is power a straightforward exercise of control or is it elusive, ambiguous, complex and subtle? Third, as consensus or coercion, consensus, which is essential in a highly organised society, or as coercion, involving domination and authority?<sup>5</sup>

Foucault analyses power as 'a mobile and constantly shifting set of force relations that emerge from every social interaction and thus pervade the social body' (Foucault 1977:194). Therefore,

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<sup>4</sup> Cited by Newman: "Terror, Sovereignty and Law: on the Politics of Violence" German Law Journal Vol 5 Issue 5 2004, p.7 569-584

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Davis in *The Gender of Power*, Eds, Davis, Leijenaar & Oldersma, 1991, London, Sage, p. 69

the existence of power relations is evident in all social forms such as in the family, in institutions or between a dominating and a dominated class (ibid 1988:38).

### **2.3.1, symbolic and physical violence**

Violence takes different forms. In general in criminology research interest has focused on physical violence. As Maganas & Artinopoulou (1996:167) stress criminologists very often have limited opinions on violence and focus almost exclusively on sexual and physical violence.

Walter (1972:14) asserts that violence is a behaviour designed to control, dominate and express authority and power against natural human freedom. Among its forms are interpersonal aggressions, physical threat, assault, homicide and armed conflict.

However, this fails to deal with the symbolic nature of violence, which can also be verbal, spiritual or psychological. The degradation, humiliation and mortification caused can victimise more seriously than physical violence.

Other social scientists distinguish between symbolic and physical violence, depending on the context and how it is applied. Martin (2002), for example, defines physical violence as an act of aggression and abuse that is intended to cause injury, damage or harm to a person, it implies the threat of assault and interpersonal aggression and may involve homicide. The study of physical violence can cover its social, criminal and psychopathological aspects.

For Bourdieu symbolic violence refers to the imposition of meaning (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). He says these meanings are imposed 'as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the bases of its force'. Martin affirms that symbolic violence is directly connected with power whereby this power is used in a wide range of ways such as language discrimination against minorities, labelling of the poor, inequality between women and men and other cultural manifestations (Martin, 2002:162).

### **2.4, violence against women**

Sociological work on violence reflects the gendered divisions and hierarchies among academics and in society more generally. Consequently the study of violence in intimate relationships and families tends to be located in the arena of gender and women's studies, while the more malestream work on war and civil unrest is usually concentrated in

sociological studies on states, institutions and international relations (Mckie 2005). Feminist studies articulate the term gender in order to understand violence against women and do this in the context of the social and cultural interactions between men and women. Feminist studies have made vital contributions to the new understanding of relationships between men and women. The concept of gender is basically the creation of feminist scholars (Davis et al, 1991). As a corollary to this feminist scholars have presented the issue of violence against women as a gender and human issue. Authors like Davis (Davis et al, 1991), Harding (1986) and Scott (Jackson & Scott, 2002) have elaborated gender as the fundamental organising principle for explaining divisions in women's and men's experiences and contributed making the study of gender critical in the understanding of sexual difference and the nature of violence against women.

## **2.5, gender**

In everyday life we take gender for granted. 'Over the last thirty years the term 'gender' has become common in English language discussion to describe the whole field (though it has never been universally accepted)' (Connell, 2003:7).

The founding theorists of Sociology, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel, recognised women in their biological functions and considered the differences between women and men to be natural (Jackson & Scott, 2002:6). The first step towards a gender based analysis was taken by Talcott Parsons in his functionalist analysis of the family in the USA of the 1950s, echoing Durkheim's analysis, in which he established that there was a complementary division of labour that stabilises and integrates men and women into the wider society. This led, in industrial societies, to the role of goal-oriented men working outside the home and women staying at home with the role of emotional wives (Parsons & Bales, 1956)<sup>6</sup>. This was followed by studies about the increasing participation of women in the post-war labour force and the double burden this imposed upon them (Myrdal & Klein, 1956). This focus on biological functions within the family and at work in society anticipated later feminist research into the inequities of the gender division of labour (Jackson & Scott, 2002:8). These studies into the roles of the sexes provided the groundwork for the later conceptualisation of gender and patriarchy in feminist analysis which emerged in the 1970s.

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in Jackson and Scott (2002) *Gender: A Sociological Reader*, London, Routledge, p6.

Violence against women was not taken seriously in the sociological discipline until the 1970s when feminists opened a way to theorising about the system of patriarchy. Patriarchy is understood as the system of male domination that oppresses women (Millet, 1970)<sup>7</sup>. As Kantzara points out, Millet defines patriarchy as the power of men over women, 'a pervasive phenomenon distinctive of all known societies throughout history' (Kantzara, 2006:987), furthermore she emphasises: 'Patriarchy is reproduced in heterosexual relationships, marriage and family and as a system of domination patriarchy has the means to enforce male power, some of these being violence against and rape of women' (ibid, 988).

Based on the theoretical framework of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), gender is defined as 'socially and culturally made' in everyday interactions. Gender serves as a resource for understanding these interactions and is at the same time a social praxis, as for example in the division of labour or tasks according to gender as well as violence against women.

Gender does not only structure individual interactions but it also forms the main organisational structure of our society (Lorber 1999). Gender is a social structure of a particular kind that involves a specific relationship with bodies. As Connell put it: 'This is recognized in the commonsense definition of gender as an expression of natural difference, the bodily difference of male from female. What is wrong with this formula is not the attention to the bodies, not the concern with sexual reproduction but the idea that cultural patterns simply express bodily difference' (Connell 2003:9).

Relationships between men and women in society may differ from one cultural context to another, but they are still 'gendered'. Connell argues that gender arrangements are social not biological constructions and that individuals are constrained by the power of structures which make it appear that these arrangement are unchanging, whereas in reality they change constantly (Connell 2003:10). This has many consequences in both personal and collective terms. Gender concerns the way human society deals with human bodies and more particularly with female bodies. The main paradox of gender is that it remains silent as a structural and organisational principle of our society and has to be uncovered before it can be overcome (Lorber, 1999:52).

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Kantzara (2006) "Patriarchy" in Fitzpatrick et al (eds) International Encyclopedia and Social Policy, Vol 2, pp 987-989.

A gender perspective recognises that men's and women's experiences and actions during conflict are determined by gender roles and identities assigned by society (Moser & Clark, 2001:30). Violence against men is taken for granted as a result of the way patriarchal culture has developed, men are made for war, to fight, to defend and support women, especially in the family structure. Women, on the other hand, are confined to looking after the home, nurturing and attending to the children. Women and gender issues have generally been excluded from discussions and interventions about conflict and peace as these have been seen as male domains. The point that is relevant in this research is how the social structure determines the way in which violence will occur where women and men are concerned. While women also die in civil conflicts they usually suffer the consequences of massacres by being displaced and left alone when they survive and by becoming solely responsible for their families (Meertens, 1995).

## **2.6, domestic violence**

A key starting point for understanding violence against women, and how this differs from other kinds of violence, is domestic violence. The scientific investigation of domestic violence is a relatively recent phenomenon. The first studies about violence against women, mainly based on domestic violence, appeared in western countries and the United States. In the 1970s the battered women's movement in the United States examined the reasons why men batter women and the theories developed around this subject were based on psychopathology.

Internationally, studies about violence against women began around the issue of domestic violence at a time when this violence was considered to be of a private character and invisible as an intra-family concern. The concept of domestic violence recognised worldwide is the act of physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse towards women by their partner or husband in a familial context (Watts et al, 2001).

As with other kinds of violence, domestic violence also varies from culture to culture. For example, there are practices such as dowry harassment and wife inheritance, which are linked to traditional or customary practices and are limited to specific regions and communities<sup>8</sup>. Violence against women occurs in all cultures and is considered to be a problem that affects

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<sup>8</sup> World Health Organisation (WHO) – Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women, London, 2001, p. 5

society in general. Data reveals that domestic violence is a contemporary problem (Dobash, 2001:1024). Dobash points out that particularly in developing countries violence against women is often invisible and remains unrecognised and unreported (ibid:1024).

Connell points out that: 'Feminist research indicates that the state's non-intervention has tacitly supported domestic violence, which mainly means husbands battering wives, up to the point where a public realm scandal is created and state legitimacy is at issue' (Connell, 1990:527).

The area most in question is violence inside marriage, where state intervention requires the violation of the boundary between the 'public' and the 'private' spheres. Police reluctance to intervene in domestic disputes is common (ibid, 527).

Domestic violence provides an opportunity to examine violence against women. In cases involving violent men in the family, where men are seen as having authority, women are forced to accept and to stay silent in order to avoid further violence. As Dobash stated in her study about violent men 'it is the culture of males in which violent acts may be valorised as signs of masculinity, male authority, power and control' (Dobash & Dobash, 1998:165). Certain forms of masculinity are prized and aggressive and violent encounters between men are treated signs of manhood and male prowess and symbolise the difference between men and women. Examples of these are the bull fighting and rodeo competitions in many Latin American countries which men use to prove their masculinity and physical prowess.

As McWilliams affirms, in societies which experience conflict violence perpetrated in the family constrains women in their everyday lives. It reinforces their subordination and their triple victimisation, by the perpetrator of the assaults, by the institutions of the state, such as the judiciary and legislature and by other bodies like the police and professional help providers within the community which in their responses or attitudes minimise or rationalize the abuse (McWilliams 1998:138). Therefore, 'in societies under stress, there are fewer options for women and fewer controls on men, furthermore when those controls disappear or are lifted as in situations of war or political conflict, then permission is granted, metaphorically speaking, for men to assert or reassert their power and dominance' (ibid).

The study of domestic violence reveals the differences within the practice of violence on men and on women. In exploring these differences it is possible to identify the characteristics of the phenomenon of violence against women and what violence against women means as a whole.



Domestic violence in civil war could point to the specific characteristics of and situations in which violence takes place. Therefore it may broaden the understanding of the kind of violence that happens in a civil war. That men in the family consider they have some right of power over women which reinforces this violence is corroborated by Dobash's opinion that 'for men, violence is embedded in a net of physicality, experience and male culture such that it is more easily used and more readily available as a resource' (Dobash & Dobash, 1998:164). This is an attitude towards women in society which may then be replicated in the behaviour of men in a civil war. In general, at the family level and in civil war men have power and women do not have power. This relationship between power and powerlessness could be replicated in all spheres. The relation between domestic violence and public political violence is complex and not always direct but we can at least underline that the later reproduction of violence in war which results in psychological trauma, displacement, threats, revenge and other forms of violence originated in the home with violence between couples and between parents with children (Meertens, 1995:43).

These structures of power are evident and have violent consequences in the destruction of families. 'Evidence of the direct relation between domestic violence and armed conflict is seen in the breakdown of families due to the cruelty of forced displacement and recruitment to the armed groups' (Ortiz, 2002:3). Ortiz also mentioned that in a psychosocial work by a Colombian NGO, the Fundacion Mujer y Futuro or Women and Future Foundation, many young women and men have joined Colombian armed groups because of violence within the family (Ibid, 3). Another study by Keairns (2002) into child soldiers in Colombia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Angola also found that girls were more likely to join armed groups if they lived in abusive families<sup>9</sup>.

Culture may affect the way in which perpetrators of violence act, as 'cultural beliefs about the role of women in society can also accelerate or moderate the levels of violence against women as well as its impact' (McWilliams, 1998:117). In this context domestic violence could act as a barometer to determine the nature of the violence. Therefore by analysing violence against women in a civil war it is possible to draw parallels with the same violence that occurs in other circumstances, as for example within the family. The same could be the case in the national sphere. The violence experienced by women could be a reflection of relationships in

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<sup>9</sup> Keairns 2002 Voices of Child Soldiers, Quaker United Nations Office, PhD summary, p. 3  
[http://www.essex.ac.uk/armedcon/story\\_id/000761.pdf](http://www.essex.ac.uk/armedcon/story_id/000761.pdf) accessed 13/11/2013

the society. 'The more war we have the more domestic violence we have' is a slogan of a women's organisation, Ruta Pacifica de Las Mujeres or Peaceful Way of Women, which confirms that there is a direct relationship between war and abuse as is revealed in the scandal that over the last 10 years in the Colombian city of Medellin, which has been greatly impacted by the civil war, domestic violence has increased four hundred per cent (Ortiz 2002:5)<sup>10</sup>.

This pattern determines the way women are considered and treated. Threatening women is a means that is used in some societies to impose power over communities facing conflict (Silber 2005:79). There are also deviations from this rule. In some societies women are separated from violent acts or revolutions as, for example, in the Colombian civil wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was considered wrong and immoral to harm women, who were held to be outsiders where war was concerned. War was a matter only for men and the rules of war set out in the Rionegro Convention of 1863 stated that women, children and elderly people were to be considered to be neutrals in war and an attack to them was considered punishable (IEPRI, 1993).

## **2.7, human rights**

Developing an understanding and definition of the rights of women and the abuse they suffer has taken time. Although people's rights were recognised in 1948 by the United Nations, there was no specific acknowledgement of women's rights. There were some studies around the issue of discrimination against women, which was considered as a form of violence against women. Despite this, in many countries women still do not have the same legal rights as men and are therefore treated as second class citizens not just in terms of being able to participate in society but also in the legal system. In addition, the particular vulnerability of women to assault, including sexual assault, is often not acknowledged. In 1979 the United Nations General Assembly agreed the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which established what constitutes discrimination against women, which includes any exclusion or restriction made on the basis of gender which harms women. Later, in 1993, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported on inequality between women and men and on violence against women by men (Medina 2003, 913). In the same year the World Conference on Human Rights (WCHR)

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<sup>10</sup> Ruta Pacifica is a non-governmental women's organisation which defends the human rights of women, especially in the rural and indigenous areas of Colombia. Cited in Ortiz op.cit 2002:5.

Programme of Action included the recognition of non-state violence against women as a violation of human rights<sup>11</sup>.

In December 1993 the UN agreed a specific definition of violence against women in Article One of its Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women thereby greatly assisting researchers and human rights advocates: ‘violence against women means any act of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life’<sup>12</sup>.

The General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) adopted the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women in June 1994. The Convention not only recognised that violence against women constitutes a violation of their human rights, but also refers to violence in both public and private spheres<sup>13</sup>.

In the traditional human rights discourse violations of human rights was considered to be a direct state violation within the public sphere. Where women were concerned there was no place for sex-specific violations which occurred at the hands of non-state actors. In this way violations against women were left invisible. As Clark put it: ‘Crimes against women were denied their public face and therefore their political significance’ (Clark, 1998:110).

Because gender-based violence has been under sustained consideration by women’s organisations throughout the world it is now clearly acknowledged internationally that violence against women is a fundamental violation of human rights. As the report of the first Women’s Leadership Institute, organised by The Center for Women’s Global Leadership in 1991, put it: ‘In response to the local initiatives of women, the international community is slowly recognizing the systemic nature of the issue and interest is growing in the topic of women’s rights as human rights’ (Women’s Leadership Institute, 1992:8)<sup>14</sup>. The importance of engaging in the human rights discourse cannot be underestimated.

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, 1993

<sup>12</sup> UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Articles 1 and 2

<sup>13</sup> OAS Convention, Articles 2 and 3

<sup>14</sup> Report of 1991 Women’s Leadership Institute

[http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CC4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cwgl.rutgers.edu%2Fcomponent%2Fdocman%2Fdoc\\_download%2F172-](http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CC4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cwgl.rutgers.edu%2Fcomponent%2Fdocman%2Fdoc_download%2F172-)

## 2.8, civil war

So far I have considered the nature of violence, its relationship to power and the state, the particular nature of violence against women and how it is understood in the context of the domestic and the wider social spheres. This thesis concerns violence against women in a civil war and I will now examine what is meant by a civil war and its particular impacts.

Civil war is characterised by the extensive use of violence (Enzensberger, 2000:179). In the nineteenth century this was usually associated with revolution. In his 1855 *Dictionario del Pueblo*, or Dictionary of the People, Juan Espinosa outlined the characteristics of the conflicts in Latin America by stating that ‘the irate passions of men are more greatly aroused in the course of civil, political or religious wars than in wars fought between nations...brother fights against brother and son against father...they are inhabitants of the same territory and they communicate their unsatisfied hatred and thirst for vengeance’<sup>15</sup>. In general this definition includes warring between members of the same culture, political community, society or nationality for a variety of reasons (Espinosa, 1855). These features of civil war have long been recognised in international law although early authors considered it was necessary that the state was a party to the conflict (Posada Carbo, op.cit. 7). De Vattel agrees that when a ‘body of citizens’ takes up arms against a sovereign all that is needed for it to be a civil war is for them to have a cause they are fighting for (de Vattel, 1758)<sup>16</sup>.

Posada refers to civil war as including ‘acts of rebellion, insurgency and belligerence’ the most serious being belligerence, definitions which seek to determine the degree of intensity of the conflict and the extent to which the rules of war are applied (Posada Carbo, 2000:9). He includes a rebellion, the least serious of the three levels of violence, which he defines as ‘sporadic confrontations with the forces of the State’, as a civil war (ibid:9).

Civil wars also differ depending on the objectives of the participants and may even become wars between nations. Falk presents five categories ranging from a ‘standard civil war’ through to a war for hegemony, which involves the participation of third-party states, wars for autonomy, secession or reunification, the last four of which can become

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womenviolenceandhumanrights-pdf%3FItemid%3D&ei=hSSEUvTfPM7xhQfz-oCQCQ&usg=AFQjCNFzZoKIqcLaqbF-lajucPRz0\_rBsQ&bvm=bv.56343320,d.ZG4 accessed 14/11/2013

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Posada Carbo, Civil war? The language of conflict in Colombia. FIP, 2001

<sup>16</sup> Emmerich de Vattel, Civil War in R. Falk, ed. The Vietnam War and International Law (Princeton, 1968), vol. 1, p. 20, cited in Posada Carbo, p.7

international wars (Falk 1971)<sup>17</sup>. Indeed, there have been many cases in which, during a civil war, aid is provided by another state or force, in which case some would argue it has become ‘internationalised’. In the case of Colombia the United States has been providing military aid to the Colombian armed forces since the early 1960s under the Alliance for Progress programme launched by President Kennedy and more recently under ‘Plan Colombia’, all of which could be said to bring the Colombian civil war into this internationalised category.

A standard definition of civil war is that there are at least one thousand combat-related deaths per year (Small and Singer, 1982). For many commentators civil war is a conflict over ‘the basic materials of the State, its geography, individuals, tangible and intangible goods’ (Ramirez Tobon, 2000:48). Most importantly, it involves the loss of the lives of many citizens, the majority of whom are economically active.

However, arguments over the definition of civil war have become more complicated. According to Waldmann, ‘Civil wars have lost their “classic” character’, they now have a ‘pre-state’ or ‘para-state’ quality (Waldmann 1999, 27). He and others like Enzensberger conclude there is no sensible way of defining civil wars. Waldmann says ‘a prototype for civil war...does not exist’ (ibid:35) and Enzensberger says ‘Up until the moment there is no useful theory of civil war’ (Enzensberger 1994). However, this just leaves the question unresolved. In international law, as Posada points out, the term now used is simply ‘an internal conflict of a non-international character’ (Posada Carbo, 2000:11).

### **2.8.1, violence against women in a civil war**

Violence against women in all types of war is underreported. However, this is not surprising as violence cannot be divorced from social agency or social structures. In most societies women continue to be less visible than men and they have less presence in the public sphere. Just as the most prevalent types of violence against women in families and relationships have often been ignored, so little attention has been paid to how violence affects women in war.

However, for the purpose of this study, when understanding how women experience civil war, it is necessary to examine if men and women perceive and experience violence in war in the same way. The dominant narrative of war is masculine and it is men’s experiences which

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in Posada Carbo 2000, p.10

tend to be recorded. However, key differences in how men and women experience violence in war have been noted. In her study of women and civil war in the Balkans Nikolić-Ristanović makes important points about the different way in which men and women understand violence in war. Men are also victims but she argues that men still see themselves as active participants. Women and men approach war in different ways. 'The analysis of the influence of war on women defines the conflict as a demonstration of power.' Traditionally power is in the hands of men and, 'as a result of this, men are the one who, as a rule, have a more active part in war' (Nikolić-Ristanović, 1995:21-22). Women's understanding is different. More men may die or suffer injuries, both mental and physical, as a consequence of their participation in war. But for women survival is at the heart of their experience. As Nuha Nafal, a Palestinian woman said, 'when a soldier is killed he is dead. But who continues to suffer? The Mother, the Sister, the Wife' (Hayton-Keeva, 1987:57).

Women see themselves as playing a passive role. 'War increases their feelings of helplessness more than it increases their power, attacking their physical and mental health, war makes them dependent on others as it strengthens the social views which tend to maintain or intensify their submissive role' (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000:22).

When asked to define violence in the context of war her interviewees came up with a much wider range of actions which they considered made them victims of violence than Nikolić-Ristanović expected. They saw violence in a wider context and included being under siege, fear of high-handed authorities, being a refugee, not having food, being under constant surveillance, watching others being persecuted or even being part of a despised nation (ibid:25-30). Losing loved ones, worrying about what was happening to those they loved or watching them suffer was counted as violence against them as women. One interviewee, Anka, said: 'The worst form of violence by far is having your child killed. Compared to that rape is nothing.' Another, Sofia, said: 'There is no act of violence that can be compared to the loss of a dear one' (ibid, 29).

Violence was something that was done to the emotions. Fear and mental violence were seen as forms of violence. Gordana said: 'In my opinion fear holds as much violence as real physical violence does,' while Merima referred to: 'Fear for those we have left behind, whether they will stay alive, whether we shall ever see them again' and Natalija said: 'Mental violence is the worst, when you feel absolutely helpless' (ibid:30-31). Nada said: 'It is physical violence to separate women from their children and take them away, killing children and other close relatives,

even forcing women to watch the plight of complete strangers. The latter is, in my opinion, violence against emotions, and emotions are the most precious part of the woman, they surpass beauty or anything else' (ibid:32).

Helplessness, being left alone to look after their family, separation and missing the opportunity to love were all seen by the interviewees as forms of violence. Violence even goes to the heart of who you are. One woman, Mirjana, said: 'Violence assaults one's personality' (ibid:31). For the researchers Smiljka provided the most precise description of violence when she said: 'Violence against women in war involves rape, their children being killed, their families destroyed, struggling for survival, suffering mental damage, harassment and extortion as refugees, irrespective of their religion and things like that' (ibid:32). As Nikolić-Ristanović puts it: 'Considering all this (women's) whole physical and psychological health is endangered more than men's' (ibid:23). So when considering all the forms of violence women experience it is necessary to bear in mind this difference in the experience and perception of the genders.

When examining the extent of violence against women in situations of armed conflict NGOs like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Oxfam and UN World Conferences (Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995) have all acknowledged and considered the following as human rights violations against women: political killings, threats, intimidation, ill-treatment and torture, including rape and sexual abuse, harassment, coercion and killing; the practice of abduction and forcible recruitment of young women from rural areas where they operate, women being kidnapped and held hostage by guerrilla organisations, disappearances and extrajudicial executions.

Taking Nikolić-Ristanović's research into account a much longer list could be constructed including the kinds of violence she recounts above. As Smilkja had pointed out, violence against women involves a multiplicity of events. Displacement or becoming a refugee is an experience frequently reported by women in war. But as Nikolić-Ristanović notes this often occurs in conjunction with losing or being separated from a husband or children, impoverishment and becoming a sole parent responsible for the family with the attendant difficulties of surviving in new surroundings (Nikolić-Ristanović, 1995:152-159).

Other kinds of violence against women which have received greater attention in recent wars are sexual violence and slavery. Indeed Nikolić-Ristanović says 'Public attention is mainly focused on rape, so much so that it is often considered a synonym for violence against women,

especially in war' (Nikolić-Ristanović, 1995:22). This focus on sexual violence and rape and the use of statistics or the lack of accurate statistics can become a factor in the conflict itself (ibid:41-47). This means other forms of violence receive less attention as sexual violence has a particular resonance with public opinion. Zarcov demonstrates in his studies about the war in Yugoslavia, in which he provides a detailed and deeply gendered analysis of the media war in the Balkans, how male and female bodies came to have a particular significance and how the use of rape as a weapon of war were all drawn upon in the media. Ethnicity was constructed around bodies and this became a cause of confusion and provocation in the war (Zarcov, 2007:171).

Sexual violence and the use of rape are about more than inflicting suffering and harm on individual women. In her reflections on the war in the former Yugoslavia Nikolić-Ristanović's remarks that 'in war, as well as in peace, rape results more from the imbalance of power between the sexes than a genuine sexual impulse. The purely sexual content of rape is used as a means for achieving goals which have nothing to do with sexuality' (Nikolić-Ristanović, 1995:47). Evidence was presented from a medical perspective by Medica Mondiale and the Journal Jama<sup>18</sup> in 1993 of the myriad incidents of rape in war especially in the former Yugoslavia 1991-1993 and in the Liberian civil conflict 1989-1994. As Jama reported: 'Although widespread rape of women has been an underreported aspect of military conflict, the former Yugoslavia, for instance, has focused attention on the use of rape as a deliberate strategy to undermine community bonds and weaken resistance to aggression' (Swiss and Giller, 1993:5). Medica Mondiale is a humanitarian international organisation<sup>19</sup> which has supported women and girl survivors of rape and mutilation as well as women who have been used as sex slaves. In the Republic of Congo it has documented how, after recruitment, children are raped, used as a weapon of war and forced to fight for the armed groups<sup>20</sup>. Rape is used in the conflict as a calculated strategy to destabilise opposition groups as well as to promote fear and submission.

Further studies show how sexual slavery includes other forms of exploitation of a life threatening nature and forced involvement in criminal activity. 'War is a primary source of slaves and slavery forms are persisting or returning' (Cockburn, 1999:12). It involves the

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<sup>18</sup> Jama: The Journal of the American Medical Association August 4. 1993 Volume 270.

<sup>19</sup> Medica Mondiale is a humanitarian organisation which has a project that deals with the development of sustainable local support structures for women in violent situations.

<sup>20</sup> Rape as a weapon of war in the Congo, CNN News, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/10/16/amanpour.congo.rape.documentary/index.html?iref=allsearch> 17/10/2009 31.3.2009, cited in Report by Doctors without frontiers: "Vidas Destrozadas" March 2009 <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/ar/report.cfm?id=4403&cat=activity>



abduction and transportation of women and girls for and by armed groups. They are then forced to accompany them on raids and to provide everything from food to sexual services. Many sexual slaves are also used for dangerous work like demining contested areas or are forced to risk their lives to make fields or hillsides safe for soldiers (Meertens et al, 2006:12). In order to survive women may have to work in the fields, on coca crops or be forced to traffic drugs all for long hours (ibid:23).

The impact of rape and sexual violence continues long after the original event. It creates tensions in families and isolation in the victims. Health workers in Uganda documented, in a case study of 107 Ugandan women who had been raped by soldiers, how because of fear and lack of family and institutional support the women did not speak out about it (Halim, 1998). The scale of the suffering endured by women enslaved in this way was illustrated when the Japanese government, which has for so long denied its responsibility, finally acknowledged the institutionalised enslavement of women during the Second World War in an extensive network of military brothels established throughout the Asian theatre of war for the use of the soldiers of the Imperial army. The estimated 200,000 ‘comfort women’, as they were called, included Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Malaysian, Indonesian and Dutch women (Sancho, 1997)<sup>21</sup>.

## **2.9, civil war in Colombia**

Colombia is known worldwide as a country in a state of civil war. The New York Times in November 2000 referred to ‘the long and murderous civil war in Colombia’<sup>22</sup>. Likewise the Economist, George Will in the Washington Post and Mark Danner in the New York Review of Books have all referred to the conflict in Colombia as a civil war. It may seem strange to have to argue this point when so many outsiders are clear as to the nature of the war but as an editorial in 2000 in the Colombian national newspaper *El Espectador* asked: ‘Why aren’t we capable of perceiving the civil war in Colombia that the rest of the world sees’. The term ‘civil war’ is widely disputed within Colombia and national scholars argue with international opinion about the use of the concept with regard to the present conflict in Colombia (Posada Carbo, 1999, Ramirez Tobon, 2000). Indeed, having provided a number of reasonable definitions of civil war, as above, which would apply in Colombia, such as ‘an internal conflict of a non-

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<sup>21</sup> Cited in Cockburn 1999 p.12

<sup>22</sup> The New York Times November 6, 2000, The Economist, September 16, 2000, The Washington Post, September 10, 2000, The New York Review of Books, October 5, 2000, *El Espectador*, February 20, 2001 (Colombian national newspaper) all cited in Posada Carbo, 2000, p.45

international character' or civil war as a 'rebellion', which he describes as 'sporadic confrontations with the forces of the State', Posada himself then tries to argue that the term civil war does not apply to the present situation in Colombia (Posada Carbo, 2000:45). Maybe it is easier for those outside a country to see the matter more clearly as within a society at war even definitions of the conflict will become a matter of contention between the various actors, both armed and civilian.

As always in time of war truth is the first casualty and there are arguments over the scale of the violence in Colombia. This is a country in which the army is deployed to fight within its own borders, where there are multiple forces fighting in opposition to the army and each other, where during the period 2002 to 2010 every year over 4,000 people are reckoned to have been killed in conflict related deaths and the Colombian Armed Forces was accused of the extrajudicial killings of hundreds of civilians, where around 4.5 million people have been displaced and 30,000 are thought to have been disappeared. By any token this is a country in the throes of an appalling conflict<sup>23</sup>.

Colombia has a long record of civil wars. Most of the civil wars were fought by two rival political parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, in order to gain control over state institutions. After the War of Independence, and mainly during the nineteenth century, historians record fourteen civil wars, principally of a political character, in which the confrontations and armed mobilisations related to the antagonism between these two political parties (Sanchez 1990:9).

The nature and roots of these wars has become a matter of controversy. The level of violence and the enduring character of the civil wars, particularly in the La Violencia, a conflict which began in the second half of the 1940s and is considered to have ended in 1958, has caused some to speculate that there is a culture of violence in Colombia which explains the readiness to take up arms and to cause harm to others (Waldman 2007:64).

However, to argue that there is a propensity to violence fails to explain much about the nature of civil war in Colombia. For the most part, these wars were fought in the countryside and involved peasant armies fighting on behalf of the two political parties. Indigenous people also became entangled in these conflicts fighting usually on the side of the party in power

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<sup>23</sup> Justice for Colombia: About Colombia <http://www.justiceforcolombia.org/about-colombia/> accessed 02/10/2013

although Deas considers their involvement less partisan than in the case of the majority mestizo population in which every district and family was tied to one or other of the parties (Deas, 1997:360). In the nineteenth century there were several wars which resulted in major constitutional changes, notably the Liberal 1863 Rionegro Constitution which created the federal United States of Colombia and its reversal in 1886 by the Conservative centralised Republic of Colombia. For the most part the objective of the party out of power was to achieve power and control of the bureaucracy (Sanchez, 1990:20).

The fact that the two political parties were able to maintain significant armed forces points both to a weakness in the state and a level of rivalry which created perpetual division in the society. Fischer is of the opinion that Colombia has experienced civil war almost from its beginning as a consequence of its incomplete process of formation as a nation that entails a structural problem; the circle of violent collective actors has been expanded to the point where the state is no longer the only point of reference (Fischer, 1999:72)<sup>24</sup>. Romero, who states ‘Colombia is a country at war’ considers the armed conflict is rooted in both historical and socioeconomic inequalities, which have existed since Colombia’s colonisation by Europeans and by fierce political rivalries<sup>25</sup>. This tradition of deeply rooted rivalries is endorsed by Deas. He mentions how ‘The degree of partisan involvement among the Colombians, and its vehemence, sometimes shocked visitors, not only from the old world, but even some from the post-Jacksonian United States’ (Deas, 1997:359). This partisanship often seemed unreal to outsiders but Deas comments that this was partly a matter of survival, but also a question of identity: ‘who could do what to whom at a local level did depend to some degree on the outcome of political conflicts at higher levels - but also the sense of family and local identity’ (ibid:359). He continues by noting that ‘nowhere else (in Latin America) was the political mobilization...so prolonged, nor so internalized by such a high proportion of the population’ (ibid:360).

In modern times the rivalry between the Conservatives and Liberals has ceased to be the motive for the continuing civil war. However, in discussing Colombia since La Violencia Martin also points to the structural weakness of the state, pointing to the tradition of ‘impunity’ in which perpetrators of crimes escape justice and the consequent lack of confidence Colombians have in the state and its institutions of justice. This has resulted in a

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<sup>24</sup> Cited in Posada Carbo, 2000, 19

<sup>25</sup> Romero Amanda, Working paper For Home: “Building from the Inside Out” p.4  
<http://www.forusa.org/programs/colombia/Buildingfrominsidefinal1.html> , accessed on June 26, 2007.

continuing tradition of private justice accompanied by state support for so-called self defence groups leading to 'the apparent paradox that those who incorporate the new safeguards of society are in part the same as those responsible for the initial proliferations of big violence' (Martin 2002:168). Martin goes on to argue that this is evidence of an 'insufficient monopoly of the state on the means of violence, but also of the lack of a political capacity and will to define and apply a coherent policy of law and order' (ibid: 168). This lack of state control is also apparent in the area of economic development and access to land. Free access to land has been treated as a kind 'escape valve'. However, this has meant more or less continuous conflict over uncertain land titles and usurpation leading to 'fraudulent and violent practices of privatization of land and power' (ibid:168-169). He cites the region of Urabá, where there has been a great deal of fighting between guerrillas, paramilitaries and the Colombian army, as a modern example of where there has been 'a rush of all kinds of private interests on the zone, everybody trying to get hold of a part of the available resources' (ibid:169).

As the original rivalry between the Conservative and Liberal parties has receded recent studies have addressed the fighting in Colombia as a 'civil conflict' in which there is a struggle over resources in which economic factors play a principal role in the development of the civil war (Restrepo, Aspagat & Vargas 2003:1). The case of Urabá, cited above, provides such an example of such a struggle.

The situation is now vastly complicated. In the aftermath of La Violencia the two political parties lost control of the forces they had unleashed. The peasant armies became ideologically driven with the emergence of communist guerrilla groups. On the other hand, the Cuban Revolution, the Cold War and later the Drugs War, created an impetus for foreign intervention which was earlier lacking, resulting in military aid and training for the Colombian armed forces and the penetration of the doctrine of national security and the adoption of counter-insurgency strategies all promoted by the United States (Leal, 2002: 8–11). The United States has provided a range of military aid, including training at the notorious School of the Americas, under different programmes dating back to the 1960s with the Alliance for Progress. More recently Plan Colombia which was originally supposedly

restricted to combating drug trafficking was converted to fund the Colombian armed forces and, indirectly, the paramilitaries who are closely connected to the military (Cinep 2004:4)<sup>26</sup>.

The use of torture, disappearance and the targeting of groups and individuals like trade unionists or journalists considered to be subversive became part of the security agenda (Chomsky, 1996:100). As the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alfredo Vasquez Carrizosa (1970-1974), stated: 'During the Kennedy administration,' Washington 'took great pains to transform our regular armies into counterinsurgency brigades, accepting the new strategy of the death squads.' As part of the 'National Security Doctrine, . . . not defense against an external enemy, but a way to make the military establishment the masters of the game . . . [with] the right to combat the internal enemy, as set forth in the Brazilian doctrine, the Argentine doctrine, the Uruguayan doctrine, and the Colombian doctrine: it is the right to fight and to exterminate social workers, trade unionists, men and women who are not supportive of the establishment, and who are assumed to be communist extremists' (Chomsky , 1997:61).

The continuing tradition of self-defence has resulted in the emergence of myriad paramilitary groups, sponsored by landowners or industrialists and often sanctioned by the state. In addition to this are the drug traffickers who have added a new dimension of criminality and corruption to the political system<sup>27</sup>. They assisted in the creation of death squads in the early 1980s in alliance with paramilitaries, army and police units, while the military continued to be accused of connections with the traffickers and paramilitaries (Human Rights Watch, 2000)<sup>28</sup> and guerrillas have been directly involved in drug trafficking. The scale of the connections between paramilitary groups and the Colombian armed forces as well as the extra-judicial killings carried out by the Colombian army itself are well documented, even in the Colombian Government's own often ineffectual attempts to control these forces<sup>29</sup>.

Colombia has become integrated into the wider globalised economy increasing the pressure on communities which occupy land rich in minerals, coal, oil or other resources (Chomsky, Leech and Striffler, 2007). National and international mining companies are also accused of direct or indirect involvement in the murder of trade unionists or the financing of

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<sup>26</sup> Deuda con la humanidad, Paramilitarismo de Estado 1988-2003, CINEP 2004 (on cd) can be accessed at [www.nocheyniebla.org](http://www.nocheyniebla.org)

<sup>27</sup> Romero, ibid accessed 26/6/2007

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch Report 2000, the Ties that Bind, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/colombia/> accessed 02/10/2013

<sup>29</sup> Just the Facts, Justf.org <http://justf.org/files/primarydocs/080728coce.pdf> accessed 14/11/2013

paramilitary groups. While paramilitaries are responsible for most of these violations guerrillas also commit abuses and extort money from mining communities (Lopez-Gamundi, 2011)<sup>30</sup>.

As Martin points out: 'The civilian population is the main victim of the violence' (Martin 2002:181). Since the early 1980s the terror and atrocities of La Violencia, when massacre, torture and the mutilation of victims' bodies were widespread, have reappeared. Much of the warfare takes place in frontier regions like Urabá but threats, disappearances and other abuses may happen anywhere. As Martin says 'Urabá is only one of the different theatres (urban and rural) that make up the current crisis in Colombia, people are not able to inscribe the violence they confront in a larger narrative that would give certain national unity and 'readability' to the situation' (ibid:180). In regions like Urabá he notes how violence has become 'banal' and 'normal', 'Extreme distrust and fear take the place of sentiments of social adherence and of forms of solidarity' (ibid:183). Martin notes that impunity continues. In the fifteen years from 1985 12,000 people have been killed in Urabá with 95% of the homicides unresolved. The multiplicity of armed groups which fight each other, including guerrillas fighting other guerrillas, simply means the population 'is forced to choose between two camps (or to flee from Urabá)' (ibid:182).

The reasons given by ex-combatant women interviewed by La Fundacion Mujer y Futuro (The Woman and Future Foundation) based in the department of Santander, for joining guerrilla groups reinforce many of the points made about the civil war. They considered the political system was failing to represent the people, favoured the United States and ignored the needs of peasants. They cited the loss of legitimacy of the state in the 1980s with the emergence of paramilitaries, the failure to deal with corruption and impunity, the constant violations of human rights, the absence of respect for life and the increasing degree of social and political violence (Lelievre, Moreno & Ortiz, 2004: 29).

Even though Waldman considers 'a prototype of civil war doesn't exist' he still thinks that certain features of the conflict in Colombia make it appropriate to describe it as a civil war, notably the length of time the war has been going on, that there is a struggle for territory and for natural resources, the involvement of the United States in providing funding and other military aid, the state's armed forces are widely deployed, there are frequent massacres, widespread and indiscriminate violence and the use of torture, authorities fail to respond to

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<sup>30</sup> Report from Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) <http://www.coha.org/colombias-gold-rush-the-silver-lining-for-paramilitaries-and-guerrillas/> accessed 02/10/2013

appeals for help from civilians and a very large number of people have been forcibly displaced (Waldman, 1999:36 ).

### **2.9.1, civil war and displacement in Colombia**

One of the ways of understanding the civil war in Colombia and its effects is to examine the phenomenon of the forcible displacement of large numbers of civilians. Displacement coincides with a situation of chronic and widespread human rights violations. It is a consequence of the interrelated abuse of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. In the case of Colombia Osorio writes, 'forced displacement is a violent experience which produces radical and abrupt changes in the lives of individuals and communities' (Osorio, 2008:29). It involves the loss of home and social status and is a powerful and traumatic experience of social exclusion (Osorio, op cit. 29). Escobar asserts that displacement is a complex interaction of different types of violence (Escobar 1989:83). Sometimes this involves confrontations between the different armed actors, paramilitaries, armed forces of the state and insurgent groups but on other occasions violence is unleashed simply to force people to move. Civilians find life becomes unbearable because of the stress of having armed groups in the neighbourhood, the controls they exert or their constant suspicion that the civilians are working with an opposed group.

According to La Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (The Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement), COHDES, 5.2 million people were displaced in Colombia between 1985 and September 2011. COHDES considers the Colombian authorities seriously underestimate the number of displaced persons (COHDES, 2011)<sup>31</sup>.

In Colombia there are powerful political and economic interests which exercise control over land to establish megaprojects for the exploitation of natural resources which in turn require the expulsion of whole populations. As globalisation advances Gruner notes: 'Colombian lands are increasingly a focus of dispute in order to access the riches and natural resources moved by geostrategic global markets and corporative interests that search for the profitable business' (Gruner, 2002:5). Territorial control of strategic zones becomes a requirement in the

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<sup>31</sup> Original information from COHDES, 2011, in Spanish [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/%28httpDocuments%29/081D0486B7FEB864C125796E004F4F13/\\$file/Codhes+Bolet%C3%ADn+Septiembre+2011.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/%28httpDocuments%29/081D0486B7FEB864C125796E004F4F13/$file/Codhes+Bolet%C3%ADn+Septiembre+2011.pdf) Report in English on <http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/%28httpEnvelopes%29/A7E1B7BD7528B329C12575E500525165?OpenDocument#expand> accessed 27/09/2012

development of these megaprojects (Gruner 2002:4, Escobar 1989:84). Together with the neoliberal economic model which favours landowners the emergence of drug trafficking in the 1980s created a new threat for the poor, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities which often live in those areas where coca is cultivated by the traffickers as traffickers, the government and other armed groups fight for control of land to grow coca or to destroy the coca plantations.

According to CODHES, the largest Colombian organisation dealing with the phenomenon of displacement, displacement is a war strategy and its mechanism is the social exclusion of people, families and communities which in the majority of cases, belong to disadvantaged groups. The use of such strategies to displace people poses yet another threat to the rights of indigenous and Afro-Colombian people who have faced repeated efforts to take control of their land. In this instance it serves to undermine the 1991 national constitution which provides legal recognition of the rights of ethnic indigenous and Afro-Colombian people to their land (Rojas Rodriguez, 2002:18).

Rojas argues that this process involves the imposition of a new social order at all levels of society based on the insertion of powerful economic, social and political interests. This hegemonic order seeks to control individuals and their social spaces, to disrupt the existing order and to create an acculturation process in which people lose their social identity, habits and their location in the war (Rojas Rodriguez, 2002:19).

## **2.10, women, civil war and displacement in Colombia**

When women are displaced they often become family providers because their partners have been killed by armed groups. At the same time they have to leave their land, livestock, and other means of subsistence. Red de Solidaridad Social or Social Solidarity Network (RSS), a government organisation working on displacement, stated in 2001 that 49-58% of those displaced are women while 72% were women and children, revealing the particular impact this has on women as it shows not only the number of women displaced but also the impact of the civil war on families and the extent to which women would be looking after families on their own (RSS, 2001)<sup>32</sup>. In its 2008 report a Commission of the Colombian Congress into Displacement stated that whereas the number of female heads of household in the population as a whole was 28.1% among the displaced this was 46% and that while

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<sup>32</sup> RSS Informe sobre Desplazamiento Forzado in Colombia en el Primer Trimestre 2001



widows on average lived until they were fifty among the displaced their average age was thirty-four (Comisión de Seguimiento a la Política Pública sobre Desplazamiento Forzado, 2008).

Displacement coincides with a situation of chronic and widespread human rights violations; furthermore, it is a consequence of the interrelated manifestations of abuses of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. Forced displacement accentuates the marginalisation and invisibility already suffered by women. This general vulnerability underscores the patriarchal relationships and structures that configure specific gendered notions and practices that are applied both during war time and on a daily institutional and organisational basis. In addition 'the violence exercised by all armed actors engaged in intimidation, degradation and destruction of female subjectivity exhibits contempt and a lack of respect for human rights' (Villarreal & Rios, 2006:45)<sup>33</sup>. As well as suffering forced displacement women are subject to death threats and women's organisations come under attack for supporting the displaced and defending the rights of women (Ramirez Parra 2006: 1). It is a contradictory situation in which victims demand the social and institutional restitution of their rights at the same time as they are being stigmatised.

The negative effect of displacement on families and communities contributes to increasing discrimination and fragmentation of the families and households. According to Moser & Clark, the difficulties facing displaced people in adapting to their new environment affects the human, social and psychological aspects. The changes that face displaced populations and the recipient communities experience are not fully understood and the gendered differences within these populations even less so. Displaced women and girls face discrimination from the communities they move to, presenting a significant barrier to assistance for victims of violence (Moser & Clark, 2001:32).

The main areas of Colombia where there is an increasing number of displaced people are Uraba, Magdalena Medio, Putumayo and Chocó while displacement also occurs to a lesser degree in the majority of other rural areas. Many women have no home and are unable to assume responsibility for supporting their families economically (CODHES, 2000; Osorio, 2008).

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<sup>33</sup> Cited by Osorio, 2008, p.33

Studies into violence against women in Colombia from a human rights perspective have described the different kinds of violence inflicted mainly on the poor and on vulnerable women and girls in different rural areas of Colombia. When women are displaced they often become family providers because their partners have been killed by armed groups. At the same time they are forced to leave their land, livestock and other means of subsistence (Romero 2001:3). Reports on the internal displacement of people resulting from the civil war show how entire communities may be targeted if their land is seen as strategically desirable (CODHES, 2002:9, IACHR, 2006:3, OXFAM, 2009:6).

Women and children are the most affected civilians, who as survivors, have to face the continued violence and threats toward their communities, often being forced to flee with little notice. Women must bear the loss of their dead and disappeared while adapting to the rapid and radical shifts taking place in their individual and family lives. They strive to recreate the social fabric in the midst of discrimination and poverty (Osorio 2008, 35).

A report from Amnesty International on Colombia stated that for displaced women and girls, sexual assault, exploitation, and abuse are constant threats from armed groups who believe the women and girls are involved with other armed groups. In addition, women and girls face discrimination from the communities they move to, presenting a significant barrier to assistance for victims of violence (Amnesty International, 2004).

## **2.11, Colombian studies into women and the civil war in Colombia**

For the most part I would say there is lack of detailed study in Colombia about violence against women and a lack of understanding of the particular situations in communities and the impact of violence. There have been a number of studies by Colombian scholars into violence in a civil war in Colombia (Restrepo, Spagat & Vargas, 2003) but most of it is general, there is little theoretical work and they do not discriminate by gender. More recently scholars have talked about a war against civilians, but not against women in particular.

An additional problem is that in Latin America most of the studies relating to women and feminist studies are imported from the west and are related to labour, family and economic issues. There are no theoretical studies about the specific situations of women in each particular country. As Acosta-Belen puts it: 'Feminist methodologies in Latin America have failed in conceptualising their reality... A great proportion of the feminist studies and gender research produced by Latin-American and Caribbean researchers has tended to focus on case studies or

specific countries, issues or events rather than on broad theoretical discussions' (Acosta-Belén, 1994:8).

Latin American feminists tend to concentrate on practical discussions about labour, family and economic issues rather on theoretical debates. As Lavrin (1993:28) points out there is a danger in applying theoretical models developed from outside the region such as Europe or the United States and urges scholars to look at how Latin American women conceptualise their own reality<sup>34</sup>.

For the most part the task of researching and informing the Colombian public and government and the world at large has been left to Colombian NGOs which are part of La Mesa de Trabajo Mujer y Conflicto Armado, the Women and Armed Conflict Working Group, which works on human rights and with local communities. Mesa de Trabajo produces annual reports which provide information specifically on violence against women and the violation of their human rights. Its main objective is to empower women affected by the civil war by making them aware of their human rights and contributing to the search for peace. It also seeks to develop a proper diagnosis of the socio-political violence that women and girls are suffering. It declares that the lack of diagnosis and detailed data about the effects of political violence against women and children shows the need for the presentation of primary data from affected women in rural communities provided by different organisations to highlight their sufferings (Mesa de Trabajo, 2001 & 2002).

Mesa de Trabajo is sceptical about a resolution of the civil war. It argues that Colombia faces a human rights crisis and the rights of women will continue to be violated as 'the origin of the violations of human rights derive from the deep socio-economic and cultural inequities' (Mesa de Trabajo, 2000:3). The human rights of women will continue to be violated. Women and girls in the armed conflict context suffer the direct and indirect effects of the confrontations: 'They have been victims of human rights violations for different reasons: for living in the area of conflict, for having a connection with or relatives who are involved with an armed group, for being community leaders or for working in support of victims' (ibid, 2000:9).

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<sup>34</sup>Cited in Acosta-Belén 1994, Opening new paths research on women in Latin America and the Caribbean Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Latin American Program. p.2

In its 2006 report Mesa emphasised that 'the state authorities are negligent in many cases of the violation of women's human rights, whose perpetrators remain unaffected in impunity, because of the discriminatory and patriarchal perceptions of those who enforce justice' (ibid, 2006).

In its 2009 report Mesa stressed that the economic conditions of women have not been transformed and, furthermore, in the armed conflict women have continued to be victims of threats, harassment, sexual violence, murder and other crimes for working for women's rights and for their communities (ibid, 2009)

However, just as Colombian scholars seem unwilling to accept the idea that their country is experiencing civil war it is also the case that they are reluctant to explore all the dimensions of the violence which women experience.

## **2.12, international human rights research into violence against women in Colombia**

Historically women have suffered discrimination and human rights violations. Additionally, in civil war in Colombia using violence against women is the perfect strategy for armed actors in order to control territories and communities (AI, 2004:7; IACHR, 2006:28). Armed groups use different forms of physical, psychological and sexual violence against women. All these acts are designed to dehumanise women (IAHCR, 2006). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2003) states that women suffer four types of political violence during internal armed conflict: 1) as direct targets of violent acts, 2) as incidental victims of sexual aggression previous to and simultaneous with these conflicts, 3) as part of a network of family, affective and social relationships that are shattered because of these conflicts, and 4) as targets of sexual violence or restricted freedom within the armed groups to which they belong (Osorio, 2008, 32).

During the last two decades a variety of international organisations including the United Nations and non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International have documented that women and girls from different regions, ethnic groups and economic conditions have been victims of a variety of forms of violence and discrimination, especially in the situation of war in the rural areas. The studies emphasise that sexual violence is prevalent in the civil war occurring in Colombia (UN, 2002; AI, 2005; IACHR, 2006).

These international organisations provide reports about countries that are experiencing civil conflicts but for the most part the information they produce is based on information provided by local organisations such as Mesa de Trabajo, mentioned above. For example Amnesty International says in its 2004 report: ‘Amnesty received information from women’s organisations, human rights groups, and social organizations (lesbians), representatives of indigenous and afro-descendants communities and government authorities and state institutions with responsibility for issues around violence against women and girls’ (AI, 2004).

Just as these international bodies have had to rely on information supplied by Colombian NGOs so Colombian NGOs have had to rely on International NGOs like Amnesty or other human rights bodies to bring these crimes to public attention.

### **2.12.1, Amnesty International**

Amnesty International (AI) is a British organisation which, since 1961, has been dedicated to defending the human rights of vulnerable people especially women, children and elderly people.

Many reports of different topics regarding violence against women from Amnesty international contribute to raising awareness in the public. The Amnesty report of October 2004 on Colombia affirmed that all the armed groups, the security forces, paramilitaries<sup>35</sup> and guerrillas<sup>36</sup>, have sexually abused or exploited women, either civilians or their own combatants for over 40 years of war. Women and girls are the hidden victims of that conflict because sexual and other abuses often remain undeclared due to fear and shame. The gender stereotyping embedded in the minds of the armed groups contributes to increase the violence against women. The manifestation of this violence such as threatening, committing sexual violence, the use of women to terrorise communities making it easier for military control to inflict vengeance to the adversaries and to accumulate “trophy of war”, among others. Finally, the state fails to take the responsibility to end these abuses (AI, 2004:3).

Amnesty International, in a study on sexual violence against women in Colombia, underlined that sexual violence including rape is one of the most serious offences against women by members of armed groups. Rape is underreported and, even if there is evidence

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35. ‘Armed group composed of ex army officials or civilians that are supported by the army in order to make a contra insurgency war’ (Gonzalez, et al. 2002:59)

36. Armed group mainly of peasant origin with Marxist-Leninist ideology involved in agrarian matters and active in the insurgency (Gonzalez, et al. Ibid:52) .

left on victims' bodies, sexual violence is rarely recorded in autopsy reports. 'Sexual abuse and exploitation of women and girls has been ignored, not only because violence against women has been perceived as belonging to the private sphere, but because sexual abuse has prevented many women from speaking out'. As a consequence, the perpetrators remain in impunity, a fact that has aggravated the violence against women and is considered widespread in the context of armed conflict (AI, 2004). Furthermore, the importance of impunity is underlined as follows: 'Impunity is the cornerstone of the human rights crisis. Although successive governments have acknowledged the extent of the problem, they have themselves been unable or unwilling to introduce measures to ensure that those responsible are held accountable before the law, whether they be security force personnel, paramilitaries or guerrillas. Because those responsible for human rights violations are seldom punished public confidence in the administration of justice and the rule of law has been undermined. The knowledge that crimes will go unpunished – and may even be rewarded- has not only contributed to the escalation of human rights violations; it is also a factor behind the spiral of violence in society at large' (AI, 2004:8).

As a conclusion and recommendation from AI to the Colombian state, as the entity responsible of preventing and punishing the sexual abuse of women, it says there is little evidence that the Colombian authorities have taken sufficient measures to put an end to such abuses, to bring perpetrators to justice or to tackle their causes of violence. 'As long as gender-based discrimination is not addressed, and international norms on violence against women not enforced, the foundations remain in place for gender-based and sexual violence to take on more extreme forms in the context of armed conflict and to continue to spread to all spheres of society' (AI, 2004:38).

### **2.12.2, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights**

The Organisation of American States' Inter American Commission on Human Rights compiled its report following a visit to Colombia undertaken by the former United Nations Special Rapporteur Ms. Susana Villaran in June 2005. The report says 'the primary objective was to assess the impact of the armed conflict on Colombian women and to receive information about the legislative, policy, institutional and judicial measures taken by the state to safeguard the rights of women within the socio-political context' (IACHR, 2006:1). The reporter visited the three cities of Colombia: Bogota, Valledupar and Quibdo where she met state authorities, civil society organisations, including indigenous and afro-Colombian organisations, NGOs and human rights organisations.

The report has four themes, a review of the Colombian armed conflict and its impact on women; an assessment of the manifestations of violence against women aggravated by this phenomenon; the particular impact of the conflict on indigenous and Afro-Colombian women; and the response of the state to these problems. This work also provides a series of conclusions and recommendations for the State (IACHR, 2006:1).

The IACHR shared Amnesty International's view, stated above, that in Colombia violence against women is a perfect strategy used by the armed actors in order to have the upper hand in controlling territories and communities. Members of the armed groups use different forms of violence, such as physical, psychological and sexual acts to dehumanise and control women.

The report confirms that national and local officials interviewed during the visit recognised the existing challenges in the adoption of a legislative and public policy framework and in the design of state programmes destined to protect the rights of the women. The officials agreed that the state has failed to meet the needs of women, particularly Afro-Colombian and indigenous women, who should be the beneficiaries of public policies. These women are in the worst situation, due to their ethnic and cultural origins, geographical location and poverty.

### **2.12.3, United Nations Special Rapporteur**

The United Nations Special Rapporteur produced an extremely valuable report and made a number of highly pertinent comments following her visit to Colombia in 2001<sup>37</sup>. She noted with concern the lack of interest in the subject of violence against women that she found at all levels of Colombian society and in the media as well as the level of threat and violence experienced by those individuals and organisations who sought to support and defend women rights. The legal system had failed to prosecute offenders and did not understand the issue of gender specific violence which required training at 'all levels of the justice system' (UN, 2002:25). Impunity, as noted by all human rights observers, was rife in the system and not just impunity but complicity between state authorities, including prosecutors, the Colombian armed forces and paramilitaries. She drew particular attention to how: 'Women have been abducted by armed men, detained for a time in conditions of sexual slavery, raped and made to

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<sup>37</sup> Report of the UN Special Rapporteur <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G02/113/17/PDF/G0211317.pdf?OpenElement> accessed 14/11/2013

perform domestic chores. Women have been targeted for being the female relatives of the “other” side. After being raped some women have been sexually mutilated before being killed. Furthermore, survivors explain how paramilitaries arrive in a village, completely control and terrorize the population, and commit human rights abuses with total impunity’ (ibid:2).

She cited a particular case in which victims described how authorities turned up after a massacre: ‘The paramilitaries took off their masks and said that the military had arrived. Then cars, prosecutors and ICRC arrived in the village. We think that the military were preventing people from entering the village during the massacre’ (ibid:13).

The Rapporteur made a considerable number of observations regarding displacement and the fact that the vast majority of displaced persons were women and children. She comments, in similar terms as Amnesty and IACHR that ‘displacement in Colombia is not merely incidental to the armed conflict but is also a deliberate strategy of war (ibid:16). She goes on to observe how: ‘armed groups attempt to settle their scores by attacking civilians suspected of being associated with the “other” side and they do so with such severity as to leave those whose physical security is threatened with no choice but to flee. Armed factions use violence or threaten to use violence to control territories and population throughout the country (ibid:17).

She also states that: ‘violence against women, particularly sexual violence by armed groups, has become a common practice in the context of a slowly degrading conflict and lack of respect for international humanitarian law. Sometimes such violent acts are committed at the same time as massacres or as way of terrorizing or threatening women and communities’ (ibid:13).

In addition she noted that as many as one in two displaced women experienced violence at the hands of their spouses highlighting the stress experienced by people who were living under such difficult circumstances. Furthermore, she also noted the discrimination faced by displaced women and the large number of displaced families, estimated to be one in three, that were headed by women, many of them widows from rural areas whose husbands had been killed. ‘The victims of internal displacement who have suffered most from loss of their identity, even more than men, are traditional peasant women, particularly those who have been widowed through violence. Notwithstanding their grief, these women have to safeguard the family’s physical survival and build a new social identity in an unknown and hostile urban environment’ (ibid, 20).

The Rapporteur also drew particular attention to the position of minority ethnic women, both because of the discrimination they suffer in general terms and as displaced persons. ‘Furthermore, women from the indigenous and Afro-Colombian population suffer



multiple/intersectional discrimination on the basis of gender, race, colour and ethnic origin and as internally displaced persons' (ibid:10).

The Special Rapporteur provided a damning judgement on the position of women in the civil war in Colombia and the violence they face: 'The conflict reproduces and deepens discrimination between the different groups and women suffer intersectional discrimination on the basis of their gender, and their ethnic and cultural origin. Although men are most frequently the victims of summary executions and massacres, violence against women, particularly sexual violence by armed groups, has become a common practice in the context of a slowly degrading conflict and lack of respect for international humanitarian law' (ibid:13).

#### **2.12.4, reports by international and national organisations**

The following table, Table 1, shows reports by international and national organisations on violence against women in the civil war in Colombia

**TABLE 1 Reports by international and national institutions on violence against women in Colombia**

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>City/ Department</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Amnesty International</b>	2004	Cauca Bolívar	“Colombia, Scarred bodies, hidden crimes”	To contribute to awareness about seriousness of violence against women (v. a. w.)	With reports based on the firsthand accounts by survivors, from women’s orgs., Human Rights groups, indigenous representatives, governments & state institutions	Description from testimonies,
<b>OAS International Commission on Human Rights.</b>	2006	Bogotá, Cartagena & Quibdó	“Violence and Discrimination against women in the armed conflict in Colombia”	To assess the impact of the armed conflict on Colombian women and to receive official information about different state measures to safeguard the rights of women.	Report information on observation and testimonies	Description of the visit of UN reporter, structural problems, legal framework and emphasis on sexual violence against women.
<b>UN. Quaker</b>	2004	4 different rural areas of Colombia	“The voices of Girl Child Soldiers of Colombia”	To obtain cultural information about 6 girls soldiers from the conflict areas.	In-depth interviews	Description of the voices of girl soldiers in Colombia in order to prevent abuse,
						demobilise and reintegrate them into society.
<b>Mesa de Trabajo Mujer y Conflicto Armado – Women and Armed Conflict Working Group</b>	Annual Reports 2001-2009	All the areas of conflict in Colombia	“Denunciations of the violation of women’s human rights”	Collection of testimonies, reports from women’s organisations on violence against women.	Collection of primary and secondary sources by the hr.org. and member’s Testimonies, meetings with organisations and workshops	Workshops with direct victims of v.a.w. with human rights organisations.
<b>United Nations Special Rapporteur</b>	2001 Report Pub 2002	Bogotá	Mission to Colombia	To investigate impact of the conflict on the human rights of women	State organizations and some victims of violence	Sexual violence has become a common practice in a conflict situation.

TABLE 1 Reports by international and national institutions on violence against women in Colombia

Separate Document

### **2.13, conclusion**

This chapter has examined the concept of violence according to different disciplines and perspectives and its connections with power. The concept of violence is so broad that there is no single definition because it varies according to the social, political, cultural and economic circumstances of each society. Violence is strongly associated with gender in the sense that gender serves as a resource for understanding the interactions between men and women, how violence occurs between them and how violence against women may differ from that inflicted on men. The introduction of the concept of gender in the academic sphere by feminist scholars contributed to the development of research about violence against women. Examining domestic violence provides a way to understand the particular nature of violence against women and how violence which first happens in the home or in the private sphere can be replicated in civil war.

In order to understand women's experience of violence it is necessary to discover what they count as violence. The interviews carried out by Nikolić-Ristanović reveal how violence in a civil war is understood by women, how this does not conform to the expectations of researchers and how it differs from how men experience violence. The offences women list, such as violence against the emotions or fear for loved ones, reveals how women may experience war in a different way from men and reflects their vulnerability and feelings of helplessness in the face of conflict.

This chapter also considers the nature of violence in a civil war and in particular the civil war in Colombia and its specific forms and impacts, such as the displacement of millions of people, mainly women and children, the breakdown of families due to the disappearance and killing of male family members, the recruitment or kidnapping of young people by armed groups. As has been pointed out the nature of the war is itself a matter of dispute and the use of the term 'civil war' is not accepted by Colombian academics. However, its scale, the violence of the dirty war perpetrated mainly by paramilitaries, the number of those killed and displaced and the involvement of an outside power, the United States, and global economic interests all point to a war rather than to something which can be described as an internal conflict. As most Colombian scholars are unwilling to see the conflict as a war I have had to depend on a small number of Colombian and international scholars who do characterise the conflict as a war.

The lack of academic literature about violence against women in the civil war in Colombia means I have had to rely mostly on reports by NGOs in Colombia, particularly women's organisations providing care and support for women who have been displaced or are in need of medical care or economic support, and also on international human rights groups, which in turn have also relied on these same NGOs. With the existing literature about violence against women I am able to provide give a broad map of the situation, although, there is a need to research and follow the particular situation of many Colombian women organisations in the rural areas and to identify the particularities of their culture in order to conceptualize their situation and to determine the kind of violence they suffer within civil war conditions.

## **Chapter 3, methodology**

### **3.1, introduction**

The subject of my thesis is the experience of women in civil war in Colombia. As can be imagined this involves women in situations of great vulnerability. Because of this aspect of the situation I want to emphasise the importance of qualitative research based on interviews as a way of doing research about women's experiences. I have adopted a feminist perspective which I believe allows for a greater sensitivity and has a greater capacity for enabling women to express themselves. A feminist perspective in interviewing has the advantage of a more reciprocal approach which minimises the distance between the researcher and the researched. I will examine the usefulness of semi-structured interviews both in terms of the needs of the interviewees and the interviewer and the difficulties we faced in undertaking the interviews. Alongside the exploratory character of the qualitative research I have used triangulation of the data to give the research more validity. I will describe the methods of data collection and the use of secondary material in the form of denunciation testimonies and the further information supplied by the director of a field organisation involved in caring for the women, whom I also interviewed as an expert. I will also discuss the ethics of interviewing women under such stressful conditions and my own positionality.

### **3.2, feminist studies**

Research based around women's experiences is known as a feminist perspective in research and this feminist research deals with the empirical study of women's affairs, especially sensitive research which takes account of women's standpoints (Harding, 1987).

Historically, social science research methods have marginalised, inadequately represented or even omitted women's experiences entirely. The feminist researcher's primary motivations are to empower women and to restructure the imbalance in understanding women's experiences. Therefore, feminist research investigates both the knowledge which is produced and the methods of producing that knowledge (DeVault, 1999:28).

Feminist researchers have tended to favour using interviews, with the objective of minimising the distance and the power inequalities between the researcher and the researched and to ensure that the subject's views are accurately reflected as 'insiders' (Harding, 1987:7).

Feminist research is primarily concerned with gender relations and this includes masculinities as well as femininities. Contemporary feminist approaches acknowledge gender inequality and seek to incorporate an awareness of gender relations in the analysis through a reflexive understanding of interviews. Gender as a social category is included in the sense that it is a fundamental aspect of subjectivity and of social praxis. Gender does not only structure individual interactions, it also forms the main organisational structure of our society (Lorber, 1999) and as such it involves a specific relationship with bodies. Since gender concerns the way human society deals with human bodies, in particular with female bodies, gender has many consequences in both our personal and our collective lives (Connell, 2003:10). This thesis will examine women's experience in civil war in Colombia taking these theoretical ideas about gender into consideration.

### **3.3, feminist methodology**

Feminist methodology is distinctive to the extent that it is shaped by feminist theory, politics and ethics and grounded in women's experiences (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002:171). Feminist methodology is 'a critique that views the apparatus of knowledge production as one site that has constructed and sustained women's oppression' (DeVault, 1999:30). Feminist methodology also attempts to innovate and to discover new strategies for managing women's lives and activities, surpassing the conventional approaches that have often failed to properly describe the real situation and the women's experiences. DeVault asserts that 'research generated by academic feminism - involving a new and careful attention to women's experiences - is beginning to bring women in to theorizing' and make visible the invisible in terms of what has been ignored, censored and suppressed' (ibid, 1990:96). She also stresses that feminist methodologies intend to develop research practices that do the work of excavation in women's perspectives, feminists seek a methodology that will support research which is of value to women and leads to social change (ibid, 1999).

Generally a feminist methodology is characterised by methods, knowledge and theories which are distinctly based upon the experiences of women (Duelli Klein, 1983) and in this way, it allows for women to study women in an interactive process, to gain more valid information. Feminist methodology entails choices between ideas, experiences and realities as a way of creating connections to draw out specific aspects of women's situations (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002:171). The latest currents of feminist methodology attempt to develop new concepts and ideas based upon women's experiences.

Following these theories, this research about violence against women seeks to elicit, based on the method of personal interviewing, the experiences of women and thereby to describe and reveal the power relations and the forms of control by which they feel oppressed in the civil war in Colombia.

### **3.4, feminist perspectives**

Over the last two decades feminists have begun to outline principles for a feminist research methodology. Feminist perspectives are mainly based on the use of qualitative methods, because they are considered the most appropriate method for gathering valid information. These principles have contributed to improving the process of research and to producing more complete and detailed knowledge than traditional methods (Kim, 1997).

In the academic sphere feminist perspectives are considered innovative as compared with the scholarly tradition; thereby contributing to the improvement of research outcomes (Devault, 1990; Harding, 1986; Ramazanoglu, 2002). Harding (1970) introduces the question of going beyond the traditional methodologies and searching for a distinctive feminist method of inquiry.

Feminist methods in research are those methods that feminists have modified. DeVault located feminist methodology with this argument when she said ‘feminists have modified rather than invented research methods; however, feminist researchers have produced a distinctive body of writing about research practice and epistemology’ (DeVault, 1999:28). Ramazanoglu asserts that a feminist standpoint explores relations between knowledge and power and ‘assumes the inseparability of politics, theory and epistemology’ (Ramazanoglu, 2004:65). Harding points out that feminist social research has been ‘focused in examining women’s contributions in the public world which were already the focus of social science analysis’ (Harding, 1987:4).

A particularly important issue is the recognition of the presence of emotion in feminist research (Blakely, 2007) and its validity within the research process is now widely accepted by feminist scholars (Reinharz, 1992; Wolf, 1992; Wincup, 2001). ‘This link between feelings and research has been a longstanding interest and has become an integral part of feminist methodology, despite positivist criticisms from within the major academic disciplines’ (Blakely, 2007:2).



### **3.5, qualitative research**

Qualitative research is one of the approaches of social research and is used to enable expression and the collection of data based on words rather than numbers. It is built on understanding the realities of the social world allowing for rich descriptions of people in their natural contexts and, according to Bryman & Burgess (1999), has become steadily more popular and important in research since 1970.

Because it is seen as being more sensitive to the exploration of the different ways social reality can be constructed, more open to accommodating emotional and inner experience and more concerned with social interactions (Mason, 1996; Bryman, 2001) qualitative research has been viewed by many feminists as more compatible and easily adapted to their central doctrines and beliefs. Consequently it has become associated with feminist studies

Qualitative research entails sensitising concepts, based on women's personal experiences of oppression and the types of violence and the different actors involved in the varying situations and courses of action. It also emphasises the issues of reliability and validity as measures of the quality of the research and subsumes qualitative interviewing as one of the research methods (Mason, 1996).

As it is commonly connected with a feminist standpoint qualitative research is often focussed on women's experiences and with advocating for women's perspectives. Its sensitivity allows women to study women with an active reflexivity (Mason, 1996), a way of critically examining and analytically exploring the research process. Bryman argues that qualitative research allows:

- 'Women's voices to be heard;
- Exploitation to be reducing by giving as well as receiving in the course of fieldwork; and
- Women not to be treated as objects to be controlled by the researcher's technical procedures' (Bryman, 2001:286).

Validity is given in the research to women's experiences by allowing active participation, face to face contact and caring about the women's context.

Since qualitative research is often seen as having a more fluid and exploratory character than quantitative research (Mason, 1996:9) this makes it possible for the research design to be

left open to explore new fields, even if the research has already began. Whereas quantitative research seeks to test a hypothesis, qualitative research usually entails formulating research questions to be explored and developed in the research process (Mason, et al, 1996:15). Using this key method of qualitative interviewing we can discover women's concerns and commitment in their struggles.

I have used qualitative research because it is the appropriate form of study for apprehending the experiences of women as lived experiences which are not quantifiable but particularly identifiable (Beeman, 2000:3), as every woman has her own validity. Qualitative research gives perceptions as a way of exploring the truth and generating new theories. Additionally, it implies a relationship between the researcher and the objective of the research, in this case violence against women, as a total identification or a kind of empathy (Mies, 1983), as I am a woman and a Colombian. I will go into this point in more depth later.

### **3.6, feminist perspectives in interviewing**

The interview is a technique that has been gaining in popularity in social research and in feminist research in particular (Devault, 1990; Harding, 1987; Mason 1991:147; Kim, 1997:111). The personal interview is one of the most commonly used methods in qualitative research. According to Seideman (1998:3) an interview is a way of telling stories and establishing meaning. When people tell stories they select details of their experience from their stream of consciousness and at the root of semi-structured interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people, a way of exploring their ideas and how they understand their experience.

Using the technique of interviewing has been an important issue in the circles of social science and feminist research, through interviews women can approach women in a confident way. The feminist interview method encourages and promotes a more reflexive and reciprocal approach and seeks to neutralise the hierarchical, exploitative power relations that have been claimed to be inherent in the more traditional interview structure. DeVault's approach undermines the traditional and conventional method for conducting interviews and affirms that feminist researchers can extend the methods of this qualitative tradition in distinctive ways (DeVault, 1999:59).

Feminists have discussed how the traditional interview has been used as a site for the exploitation and subordination of women, where women are not able to speak freely and

where, on many occasions, the interviewers have potentially created outcomes against the interests of their interviewees (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Women who contribute to research as interviewees are very often under great stress and, in this case, danger. It is essential we researchers should appreciate their vulnerable position, because without them the research would not be possible. One way in which feminist researchers have addressed this problem is by treating the interview as co-constructive. For example, in traditional interview formats the interviewer directs the questioning and takes ownership of the material, in the feminist interview method the woman recounts her experiences in her own words with the interviewer serving only as a guide to the account. Therefore, feminist researchers claim that developing a rapport with interviewees is an essential part of establishing trust and respect and of maintaining an empathetic position. Many feminist researchers suggest that a closer relationship with interviewees can produce a more valid and meaningful account of women's experiences as well avoiding hierarchical relationships (DeVault, 1999; Reinhartz, 1992). One of the distinctive aspects of the feminist standpoint is the social location of female researchers who are in a better position to uncover truths about women and in this way reduce interviewer bias. For example, if women carry out surveys on women this may improve the validity of the research findings (Kim, 1997: 108).

I wanted to learn about the women's experiences in the civil war, their involvement with the armed groups, the interrelations they may have with the armed actors and the war atmosphere in which they live and I found that conducting these interviews provided personal contact with the women as well as experience of the area and the war environment. I could follow the women's personal reactions and at the same time, the personal contact enabled me to build their confidence in me. The interviews were very rich expressions of their experiences.

### **3.7, semi-structured interviews**

This particular research on violence against women is a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews, which included a list of 10 questions on the specific topic to be covered. A semi-structured interview typically refers to a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview schedule but in which the sequence of questions can be varied. The questions are frequently somewhat more general in their frame of reference from those typically found in a structured interview schedule. The

interview schedule or set of questions is a kind of framework that is easy to follow and helps the interviewer to focus and avoid becoming sidetracked into other areas of personal history.

The interview was designed so that the interviewees would feel free to speak. If need be the order of the questions could be changed and she could speak using her own idioms. Bryman argues for the merits of a semi-structured interview in which the questions can be changed, reordered or added to, allowing some latitude to ask further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies (Bryman, 2001, 110). This means there is the possibility of responding to thoughts and information expressed during the interview. These may be statements which are not direct answers to questions but which, nevertheless provide information which can be explored further. A semi-structured qualitative interview also provides some security for a less experienced researcher (Bryman, 2001:314).

The circumstances of civil war under which the interviews were undertaken made it important to use an approach that could be adapted to the pressures of a situation with high risks on both sides, for both the interviewees and the interviewer, in which time was short. The semi-structured interview seemed to be the approach that would be best to get an insight into the experiences of Colombian women in rural areas which are torn by conflict.

### **3.8, ethics**

In qualitative research ethical issues play an important role in terms of gaining the best results and in the protection of the rights of the participants such as confidentiality and privacy<sup>38</sup>. The protection of the human rights of the participants is imperative so ethical principles should guide all researchers and research. In qualitative research it is possible to report on incidents and ethical issues encountered in studies (Orb, Eisenhauer &Wynaden, 2001:96).

It is important for researchers to understand the power they have and their responsibilities in dealing with the information they collect. They have to ensure their research retains fidelity and consistency with the facts.

Plainly in a situation of civil war it is essential to be aware of the vulnerability of the women participants. From the beginning my objective was to protect their rights as people

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<sup>38</sup> Journal of nursing Scholarship 2000:93, <http://www.columbia.edu/~mvp19/RMC/M5/QualEthics.pdf> accessed May 21<sup>st</sup> 2013

made vulnerable and affected by violence and to guard their privacy in revealing their experiences. I am deeply grateful for their willingness to share their experiences and their contribution to the study of their situation is invaluable. They rely on me and trust me to truly report their experiences and to protect their identities. Therefore, to protect their privacy I have concealed their names and details which might reveal their identities.

In this process both the participants and I found ourselves in situations of high risk and danger. There were things that happened during the interviews that I was not aware of and of which I was not informed at the time. Those helping organise the interviews were aware of the risks in the situation and in order to prevent me becoming nervous, when men were passing near the place we were doing the interviews, they concealed this from me for the sake of the success of the interviews.

Research into violence against women is sensitive research. As my experience demonstrates it not only implies high risks for interviewees but also for interviewers, as is also recognised in the literature (Cree et al, 2002:238).

### **3.8.1, voluntary participation and consent**

It is important that interviewees themselves understand and agree to participate in the research voluntarily and that they are not misled by the researcher. I made an oral agreement with each interviewee to gain their consent to being interviewed. Before each interview I explained what the research was about and asked for their consent to continue. The women interviewees were keen to provide information once they were informed about the objectives of my research and participated willingly.

### **3.8.2, anonymity and confidentiality**

As part of the agreement with each interviewee I promised to respect her privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. This included respecting the rights of expression of the interviewees as well as avoiding putting them in danger. The personal identity of the women interviewed was protected by not using names or and care was taken to make sure the information used would be too vague to provide details of who they were.

### **3.8.3, research in situations of danger**

Particular pressures face researchers in situations of danger, like a civil war. I only had a limited amount of time to do the interviews and this and the tension and emotion surrounding the visit meant it was important to take care to ensure accuracy in recording and discussing the women's experiences. Because of the war both the interviewee and the interviewer are in danger and in such circumstances people find it hard to trust other people. The women are afraid for their lives, they may be reluctant to speak about what they have suffered, they are living in isolated areas, where the roads are poor, in places which are very difficult to reach, taking a lot of time and costing a lot of money. These dangers and difficulties are the main reasons why only five women were interviewed.

### **3.8.4, research is a two-way street**

A researcher has a key role in highlighting issues and this was my challenge. The interviewee and the researcher need each other and both are vital to the success of the project. If I did not find women participants I would not be able to carry out the research. If I did not do the research the women would not get their stories told. In this case, plainly my research depended on finding willing interviewees and I have to acknowledge my debt to these women without whom it would not have been possible.

For my part, in particular I learned about the strength of the women interviewees, their capacity to endure in situations which I can hardly imagine and which I find it hard to believe I would survive. The commitment and courage they showed in contributing to this research challenged and inspired me to spread their message and to advance studies on women. The research itself is a channel for the voices of the silent victims of violence.

I was able to experience empathy with them and understand them through their lived expressions, which gave me a real appreciation of their suffering, of the kind of civil war taking place in the rural areas of Colombia and of the real lived conditions which lie at the heart of the fears of the women and their responses about the kind of violence they suffer.

### **3.9, positionality**

Being a woman and of the same nationality as the interviewees provided me with a certain familiarity and ease with the women to be interviewed. We shared the same language,

Spanish, which also created a closeness to the women and I could follow what they said easily and understand and explore their feelings. DeVault affirms that a 'new kind of attention to the language of research should be central to the feminist project' (DeVault, 1999:60). Even so it was still very important to listen to them carefully to make sure I understood them clearly. In some interviews I felt so familiar with some of the kinds of male behaviour they described, such as aggressive attitudes within the family, that I felt emotionally involved in their situation, a fact that affected me later when I was transcribing the interviews. This kind of behaviour is very much embedded in our Latin American culture, and I found I was challenged both by the need to overcome these emotions and to retain some distance in order to analyse the women's stories objectively and in this way to avoid bias. It was always important to take time to review what I had transcribed to ensure the record was accurate and that it reflected the sentiments expressed by the women.

However, I also had to be aware of the differences between the women and me. As a woman from the capital city, Bogota, my experience of life is very different from that of women from the rural areas. I have had access to education and enjoyed all kinds of benefits and opportunities not available to women in the country. Women in rural areas have little access to education and face a constant struggle to survive farming the land. I have never experienced being displaced and I find it hard to imagine what this must be like, being forced to live on the streets, to feel abandoned, to face danger on a daily basis and, possibly, to lose your family, land and identity.

It is also pertinent to note that I am primarily motivated by my human rights perspective, as I have no involvement with any political party or movement. I seek to defend people's rights, especially the rights of women.

### **3.9.1, impact of this research on me**

I felt disoriented when I arrived in the area where I was to carry out the research. It was very isolated and I felt nervous. When I took a taxi to the NGO's shelter the taxi driver asked me a lot of personal questions, who was I and what was I looking for? This only added to my nervousness. But in reality I was not fully aware of the danger of the situation at that time.

I was also unprepared for the poor living conditions of the first two women interviewees and the degree of their suffering. Their tears greatly moved me and only then did I begin to understand the gravity of their situation.

I was very struck by the strength of the last women interviewees and their capacity to overcome all kinds of difficulties. They live with these circumstances all the time whereas I, as a researcher, was just a visitor. Their courage greatly encouraged me and reinforced my determination to complete the research.

### **3.10, exploratory research and discovery**

Qualitative research can be oriented toward exploration and discovery as exploratory research is based on qualitative methods which use open-ended questions in order to give the participants the opportunity to answer in their own words. In that way, because it provides rich and explanatory expressions, it gives meaningful and particular responses (Mason, 1996:6).

Exploratory research is a type of research conducted to respond to a problem that has not been clearly defined (Selnes, 1997), and is used when the topic or issue is new and when data is difficult to collect. The concepts of ontology and epistemology are very important in such exploratory research because they are concerned with discovering what the particular object of the investigation is, or exactly what we believe it is, and what counts as knowledge and as evidence as well as the construction of social explanations and the making of generalisations (Mason, 1996:28).

Interviewing allows for the exploration of incompletely articulated aspects of women's experiences (DeVault, 1999:65). Therefore, in a context where the area of research remains in some way undefined, semi-structured interviews can be used to cover issues which might not have been included when the research was first envisaged.

In an exploratory study it is important to be selective, not neutral, in viewing and interpreting (Mason, 1997:6). The elements chosen by the researcher should be based, implicitly or explicitly, on a way of seeing the world and on a particular form of explanatory logic.

The results of exploratory research can provide significant insight into a given situation. As stated above, exploratory research is conducted into an issue or problem where there are no earlier studies to refer to. As I mentioned in chapter two there are no specific studies about violence against women in the context of civil war in Colombia, as opposed to general studies about violence in conflict situations and these frame violent situations in general theoretical



models. This research tries to be different in so far as I concentrate more on the particular and specific conditions of each woman interviewee, on their realities, based on their experiences, in order to understand the nature of the violence they experience. It is my hope that gaining insights into violence against women in this way will contribute to further studies about women in Latin America and could influence the way of doing research in the future.

### **3.11, the research**

It was only possible to conduct five semi-structured interviews for this research into violence against women in civil war in Colombia. They are referred to as primary sources because they were obtained through direct contact with the women subjects (Galan, 2008)<sup>39</sup>. I also conducted an expert interview and received one hundred and thirty-five denunciation-testimonies from the OFP. I also wrote up field notes based on my recollections, observations and experiences.

#### **3.11.1, the research material**

The research material consists of the following:

- 5 semi-structured qualitative interviews with Colombian women taken on January 12nd 2007
- One expert interview with a Colombian woman, a staff member of the OFP, taken on January 12nd 2007
- 135 testimonies from the OFP, gathered from the communities in the area of research between January 27 2001 until June 21<sup>st</sup> 2006, which were presented to the police and local authorities in November 2006
- Field notes with observations before, during and after the interviews, the physical location of the area and other details regarding the social environment, written during the trip.

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<sup>39</sup> Galan A. Manuel 'métodología de la investigación' (2008) <http://manuelgalan.blogspot.gr/2008/05/guia-metodologica-para-diseos-de.html> accessed March 8 2011

### **3.12, the interviews with the women**

I describe below how I devised the questions, found the interviewees and conducted the interviews with the women. I conducted this research on the basis of semi-structured interviews with a guided questionnaire.

#### **3.12.1, developing the guidelines for the semi-structured interviews**

Before I designed the questionnaire guideline I devised three interview themes. These themes were based on what I already knew regarding the civil war and the broader political, social and economic context based on my own experience of living, working and studying in Colombia and of being involved in human rights groups campaigning on human rights in Colombia both in Colombia and in other countries and from the literature which existed on the subject. On that basis I selected the themes laid out below which I thought would cover the areas I was interested in:

- Upbringing, environment and family,
- Experience of civil war in the home environment
- Experience as a member of an armed group

These themes would open the way to exploring the experiences of the women and their experience of the civil war. I then classified the questions according to these themes; see the interview questionnaire in appendix 1.

The aim of the study was set out in the form of a theoretical research question:

What kind of violence do Colombian women experience in civil war?

To answer this I devised the following research questions:

- How do women experience the effects of civil war?
- In what way do Colombian women take part in the civil war?
- What kind of violence do they report?
- How do women survive as head of households?

- How do the armed groups act towards women?

In order to get descriptions of the women's experiences in the civil war, their involvement with the armed groups, the interactions they may have in the area and the war atmosphere in which they live the interviews were designed as a set of 10 questions. This was a guideline for the interviews and can be found in Appendix 1. It was deemed necessary to prepare the interviews with an initial question followed by more detailed questions. These questions could be applied in different orders, according to the flow of the interview. This focused method of qualitative interviewing through open questions provided a useful structure for a very chaotic, fragile and dangerous interview situation.

Below are examples of the interview questions:

- Could you please tell me your experience of living in your previous home and how long did you live there?
- Could you please tell me about your experience with armed groups?
- Could you please tell me what kind of violence have you experienced personally?
- Could you please describe your feelings of fear?

The interviews were recorded on the computer and transcribed according to transcription rules (Bailey, 2008:127-131) and translated from Spanish into English. The interviews lasted between 10 and 50 minutes.

### **3.12.2, finding the interviewees**

In order to carry out the research I needed to find women who were prepared to be interviewed. For this I needed contacts in the field. I was put in touch, through friends of friends, with the OFP, which is a non-governmental humanitarian organisation founded in 1972 with the main purpose of assisting the communities of San Pablo, Cantagallo, Puerto Wilches, Sur de Bolivar and Barrancabermeja in the Magdalena Medio region. It focuses on their social needs, working for their human rights and for the empowerment of women, and provides integrated social services, legal assistance, health and psychosocial care especially to women who have been raped, injured and tortured. It also does work on the reconstruction of the social fabric and provides training in running small businesses and in developing work

skills. It runs houses in each municipality in which it works called ‘casa de la mujer’ (woman’s house) where they run restaurants in which the women work to provide food for the workers of the area. The women continue to be involved in campaigning for peace and justice and are considered to be targets by the paramilitaries.

As an organisation working in the field with women directly affected by the civil war, the OFP was able to provide me with women to interview. First, however, I had to satisfy the staff member of the OFP, whom I would also interview as an expert witness, that I was an acceptable researcher. When we first met in Bogota, the capital of Colombia, the member of staff asked me why I wanted to do this research and asked me for a research proposal which we could discuss together. I presented her with a broad draft about my opinion of the Colombian political situation and the purpose of the research at our second meeting. These meetings demonstrated to me the commitment and professionalism of the organisation and their care when dealing with people they did not know.

Once she was sure I could be trusted with information about the situation facing the organisation and the women being cared for she emphasised the importance of anonymity. We agreed the date for my visit, which would take place in January 2007, when I could do the interviews. For reasons of security and to protect the women as well as me the arrangements for the interviews were made by the OFP. I was taken to the locations by the staff member and was told as little as possible about where they were or about what was happening in the area at that time to reduce the tension I might be feeling.

### **3.12.3, how and why were the interviewees selected?**

The member of staff of the OFP selected the women for the interview. She explained to me that there are many different cases of women injured by the attacks of armed groups but they are afraid and embarrassed to speak out. She asked several women whose cases she considered to be particularly acute if they would agree to be interviewed as she thought they would provide the best information for my study. The women were selected because they were located in different strategic areas to give a spread of locations, they had suffered physically and psychologically and had experience of displacement, they were considered to be at risk of a high degree of harm and were available at that moment to speak. Despite the difficulty of finding women who would agree to be interviewed, she managed to discover five who were prepared to meet me.

### **3.12.3, description of the interviewees**

The following table, Table 2, provides brief biographical details of the five women who were interviewed. For a more detailed description of the interviewees, see Appendix 2. Here I provide some general impressions of the women, which demonstrate the difficulties of conducting interviews under these conditions. Apart from interviewee 2 all the women manifested fear when they started to speak, they had been in this state of fear since their husbands and relatives were killed or disappeared and they were afraid to trust anybody. They were in a highly vulnerable psychological condition even if some of them were not physically hurt themselves.

**Table 2 Description of the interviewees**

	<b>Age &amp; ethnic background</b>	<b>Present status</b>	<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>Home Location</b>	<b>Work</b>	<b>Deaths, injuries and other harm</b>
<b>1</b>	34 Mestizo	Single mother	2	Valle de Cauca	Rural jobs - OFP restaurant	2 sons kidnapped, raped, sexual slavery, forced to work
<b>2</b>	25 Afro-Colombian	Widow	4	Chocó	Farming	husband killed, threatened
<b>3</b>	21 Mestizo	Married	1	Antioquia	Farming	Daughter killed, husband injured, threatened
<b>4</b>	45 Mestizo	Widow	3	Barranca-bermeja	Farming – housework OFP restaurant	Tortured, injured, husband killed
<b>5</b>	35 Mestizo	Single	1	Bolivar	Rural jobs, OFP restaurant	Husband killed, brothers kidnapped, threatened

#### **3.12.4, location of the interviews**

To conduct the interviews I had to travel by bus for ten hours from Bogota to Santander, an area located in the north east of Colombia, where the level of fighting is high and armed groups are known to have a presence (Romero 91, Gonzalez 2000).

For reasons of safety all the interviews were done on the same day and I travelled with the staff member of the OFP to meet the women. The arrangements were made in secret by the director with some of her staff before the interviews. I was then taken by the member of staff on her motorbike, carrying my laptop with me, to the different areas to find the women. It took about twenty minutes along rough country tracks to reach our first interview destination. She intentionally did not explain me many things about the area or the insecurity they feel every day, but I felt that she was also nervous. I had a lot of expectations about what it was going to be like and the risky situation that I was facing.

### **3.12.5, conducting the interviews**

After I was introduced to each interviewee by the staff member of the OFP I first made a short statement to express my concern and to demonstrate my commitment to explore and understand their situation what was really happening to them and other women in the area. I wanted to convince them of my sincerity. I then asked some opening questions such as their name, occupation and how long they had been living in this area to get some background information and in order to help the women to relax and gain a bit of confidence in me so they could feel free to speak openly. The interviews were designed to last from twenty (20) to fifty (50) minutes. The following table, see Table 3 below, gives an overview of the interviews according to the location, the interview time and the interruptions that occurred during the interviews.

**TABLE 3 Description of the interviews**

	<b>Location of interview</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Number of Interruptions</b>	<b>Length of interruptions</b>	<b>Special remarks (feelings)</b>
<b>1</b>	In a village	50 min.	none		tears
<b>2</b>	In a village	60 min	3	15 min.	Calm but concerned at presence of strangers
<b>3</b>	OFP house South of City	25 min	none		Felt afraid
<b>4</b>	OFP house Centre of City	20 min	2	10 min	Felt nervous
<b>5</b>	OFP house Centre of City	20 min	1	5 min	Needed to be accompanied



### **3.13., interview with the expert witness, a staff member of the OFP**

As stated, I also interviewed a staff member of the OFP as an expert witness<sup>40</sup> with years of experience of caring for victims in the field. She was born and brought up in the local administrative centre, the small city of Barrancabermeja, and has extensive knowledge of the area, its history, the conflict and the treatment of women.

I conducted a semi-structured interview with her. I used the same questionnaire as I had used with the women, but since she had heard the last interview she was aware of the questions. She then answered me more generally and emphasised the points that she considered to be most important.

Because it was so hard to carry out the interviews, they had to be done in one day because of the unfavourable conditions, the lack of time, the difficult location and the few women who were available, I needed the assistance of the director to complete the information with her own testimony and with the further written information in the form of the 135 denunciation testimonies. Not only did she provide further insights into the experiences of the women but she also provided a broad overview of the situation and the war in that area. It is an indication of the dangers she faced throughout this time that a few years later, in February 2013, she received a very severe death threat which forced her to leave her job with the organisation.

### **3.14, the denunciation testimonies**

In law testimony is a form of evidence that is obtained from a witness who makes a solemn statement or declaration of fact<sup>41</sup>. Testimony may be oral and written and it is usually made by affirmation or under oath at risk of penalty of perjury. In Latin America ‘testimonio’ is a Spanish term meaning evidence presented in a first person account of human rights abuses, violence, war and conditions of social oppression. Testimonies have been widely used especially in countries like Chile and Argentina where evidence has been presented to human rights tribunals, truth commissions and other international human rights commissions.

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<sup>40</sup> <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/expert-witness> accessed 01/10/2013

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Testimony.html> accessed 01/10/2013

The supporting set of one hundred and thirty-five denunciation testimonies collected and given to me by the OFP to complement the information provided by the five women interviewees. As an example I attach eight testimonies translated into English in Appendix 3.

These denunciation testimonies cover not only violence against women but also men, children and groups in the area<sup>42</sup>. The testimonies included not only statements about violence but also about the different ways in which women were affected, such as the loneliness and responsibility of facing situations after their husbands or other members of their families had been killed or harmed.

The testimonies were dated between January 27<sup>th</sup> 2001 and June 21<sup>st</sup> 2006. The information was collected on a confidential basis in the OFP's office because of the dangers of providing information during an armed conflict. The testimonies were classified using the same process of category creation as with the interviews, however, some new sub-categories had to be created as they included material not present in the interviews. This is described in more detail below.

### **3.15, field notes**

Field notes are one of the means employed by qualitative researchers whose objective is to try and understand the various different perspectives of the subject being studied. Field notes allow the researcher to access the subject and record what they observe in an unobtrusive manner<sup>43</sup>. Quinn (1990) writes that field notes contain 'the ongoing data that are being collected, such as descriptions of what is being experienced and observed, quotations from the people observed, the observer's feelings and reactions to what is observed and field-generated insights and interpretations' (Quinn, 1990, 242).

Field notes helped me to understand the setting and the context, the situation facing the women, what it was like to be in a war zone, the atmosphere and tension and the fear that pervaded everything. Field notes were important because of the kind of dangers both I and the interviewees faced which meant I and they had to avoid staying in one place for any length of time. Using field notes meant I was able to write up my experiences and memories

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<sup>42</sup> These denunciations were collected by the OFP between January 27<sup>th</sup> and June 26<sup>th</sup> 2006 and were presented to the local authorities, police, army and governors, as well as national and international organisations on November 2006.

<sup>43</sup> 1990 collection edited by Roger Sanjek, *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology*

during the trip when I was more relaxed and had more time and could provide more detail than I could record at the time.

Field notes can contain what people say, direct quotations or as near as possible to what was said, the observer's own feelings and reactions to their experiences and reflections about the personal meanings and significance of what has occurred (Quinn, 1990, 241).

The field notes I wrote up were based on personal impressions regarding the dynamics of the interview, sentiments and reactions, direct quotations, including the opinions of the OFP member of staff, as well as observations about the places I visited and the geographical context. Some field notes were written after the interview and some on the bus going back when I finished the trip. I wrote about my fears and my expectations and about how I felt nervous when doing the interviews because I did not have any previous experience in this field. They were handwritten in Spanish and later written in the computer. They contain 4 pages. The field notes are in Appendix 3 and have been translated into English to provide an insight into their content.

### **3.16, data triangulation**

Triangulation is the combination of two or more data sources (Denzin, 1970) within the same study. Triangulation can operate within research strategies with more than one method (Webb, 1966) to corroborate data and thereby provide greater confidence in the findings (Bryman, 2001:274). In this case there is only one method. Triangulation can be used in qualitative research.

Using triangulation (Denzin, 1970, Knafl, 1992) as a combination of two or more data sources in qualitative research is a means to increase confidence in the trustworthiness of the researcher's data and its interpretation. Triangulation is most often thought of as a method for demonstrating convergent validity (Breitmayer 1993:242).

The combinations resulting from data triangulation also serve to highlight different perspectives on the same phenomenon (Mitchell 1986:21). In this study the perspectives of the women interviewees serve as the primary sources and are combined with the denunciation testimonies, which provide a large number of witness statements about many of the offences committed by the armed groups and the expert interview with the member of staff of the OFP as secondary sources. This research places great reliance on secondary data. This is due to the

difficulty of finding women to interview in face of the dangers and difficulties of gaining access to areas where they have taken refuge. The interview with the member of staff, who has witnessed attacks on women and other people in the war zone over the past ten years and more during the time she has been working in the organisation, is also important for the triangulation. She has also been the victim of death threats and being native to this war zone is particularly vulnerable.

### **3.17, method of data analysis**

All the different kinds of data were analysed using the technique of content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is a technique for making inferences by actively and systematically identifying specific characteristics of messages (Mayring 2000: 2-4). It attempts to define more casual descriptions of the content (Berelson 1941:14) in natural ways and also it is a valid method to draw specific inferences (Krippendorff 1969:103) from the women's experiences. It assists in understanding the particular situation of women in circumstances of civil war, by using the syntactic characteristics of the text to make rich descriptions of their experiences.

Using content analysis in this research facilitates the formulation of the core questions to discover how women experience the violence in conditions of civil war. It also allows themes and categories which are related to each other to be created. Content analysis is important for its non-numerical contributions in insight and interest (Berelson, 1952:114). In content analysis the content of the message forms the basis for drawing inferences and conclusions about the text (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1976).

### **3.18, coding**

Coding is the process of noting what is interesting as a way of classifying information (Seidman, 1998:107). Coding is a decisive stage in the process of doing content analysis (Bryman, 2001:186). The coding manual is designed to include all the possible categories for each dimension being coded. For this research I found the coding manual to be the most appropriate way of considering and classifying the forms of violence the women had experience.

### **3.18.1, category development**

In order to organise the material it is necessary to use categories as a system of classification. Within the framework of a qualitative approach categories are of central importance for developing the aspects of interpretation and are to be formulated in terms of the material (Mayring 2000:3). The formulation and definition of appropriate categories takes on central importance (Berelson, 1952:146), in making sense of the study.

I identified the following 9 categories arising from the open questions of the semi-structured interviews:

Experiences of living in your home area

Experiences of losing members of the family

Situation of the family since then

Changes in the area in which you are now living

Experiences of personal violence

Feelings of fear

Experience with armed groups

Feelings within the community

Other experiences of violence

Using coding as the process of combing the data for categories and then marking similar passages of text with a code label so that they can easily be retrieved at a later stage for further comparison and analysis (Taylor & Gibbs 2010)<sup>44</sup>, I combined some categories on the basis that they have links or relationships between them. For example I subsumed the first category which is ‘experiences of living in your home area’ with the category ‘changes in the area in which you are now living’ because I considered they cover very similar issues. I also subsumed the category ‘experiences of losing members of the family’ with the category of ‘situation of the family since then’. This category can show the new circumstances that women face and the incapability to move. The category of ‘personal violence’ is also linked

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<sup>44</sup>How and what to code [http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/Intro\\_QDA/how\\_what\\_to\\_code.php](http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/Intro_QDA/how_what_to_code.php) accessed 22/10/2013

with the category of ‘feelings of fear’ and the category of ‘other experiences of violence’. All three categories can refer to personal experiences of violence and can express what they feel about the violence they face.

On this basis I developed four main categories, arrived at from the interview questionnaire:

Experiences in the areas where you have lived

Experiences of your family

Experiences with armed groups

Personal experiences

I then developed these categories by creating sub-categories and further sub-divisions for a more specific analysis, as are illustrated in the following tree:

- Experiences in the areas where you have lived
  - Sub-category – displacement
- Experiences in the family
  - Sub-category – becoming head of household
- Experiences with armed groups
  - Sub-categories - forced to do things
    - sexual slavery
    - to cook
    - to attend meetings
  - forced recruitment
  - social control by armed groups
- Personal experience of violence
  - Sub-categories - threats
    - intimidation
    - impact on Women

As I stated above, when it came to the testimonies I found there were a number of offences which were not adequately covered by the sub-categories created in the category ‘experiences with armed groups’. I therefore added four new sub-categories for the testimonies, assault

and attacks, harassment, sabotage of meetings and assassination, in that category. There is inevitably some overlap between the categories. I created a table, Table 3, which can be found in chapter 5, to illustrate the incidence of violence found in the testimonies. This table also includes offences under two sub-categories, threats and intimidation, found under the category, personal experience of violence. The purpose of the table is not to include all the possible offences reported in the testimonies as this is secondary material. It does not, for example, include a sub-category of displacement to cover the displacement of two whole communities as reported in the testimonies. Its purpose is to further illustrate the kinds of offences reported by my interviewees. The data analysis is then concluded with an interpretation of the material.

### **3.19, conclusion**

The importance of qualitative research is that it involves sensitivity, validity and reliability, all of which makes it the most useful methodology for the study of violence against women in Colombia under civil war. Feminist methodologies have proved to be the most effective and sensitive for studying women's affairs by being grounded in women's experience, which has contributed to the development of theories around women's concerns. This method of interviewing provided personal contact with the women, the area and the war environment.

Feminist studies have a great deal to contribute to this study of violence against women, due to their capacity to provide insights into women's situations, to explore innovative methods to express women's voices, and more generally, to give validity to women's experiences.

Feminist research is concerned with gender relations. It was possible, therefore, using the analysis of gender as a social category that influences the structure of the society, to consider and to frame the women's experiences in civil war in Colombia as gendered.

The semi-structured interviews provided the rich content of the research, even though the number of interviews was limited. They facilitated the exploratory character of this research and allowed the women's situations to be described.

The data was triangulated to provide a frame for its analysis in the next chapter. The use of content analysis in analysing the interview material enabled the women's experiences to be

clearly described and validated. The analysis of these texts in deductive and inductive categories provided a rich content and the procedure was used to match the denunciation testimonies in a way that complemented the information gained in the interviews.

A vital issue in research of this kind is to understand the ethics of interviewing and to be aware of the dangers of breaching confidentiality. The interviewees are extremely vulnerable, both because of the traumatic events they have experienced and the continuing dangers they face.

In addition I also have to be aware of my positionality. On the one hand I have some things in common with the women I was interviewing including the same nationality, language and some elements of the same culture. However, we are also quite different in terms of our class, our occupations and our lifestyle. I have lived either in the capital city of Colombia or abroad and have enjoyed advantages in terms of education and the freedom of living in many different places and cultures, whereas my interviewees have lived, for the most part, as farmers in rural Colombia. However, seeing the stressful conditions these women had to endure challenged me to persevere and complete this research.



## **Chapter 4, historical perspective**

### **4.1. introduction**

In this chapter I will focus on the socio-political context of Colombia in order to understand the position of women since the colonial era, how the settlement by the Spanish empire imposed a patriarchal culture and a highly unequal land distribution system and to examine the development of the country, the rise of the armed groups, the civil war and how the prevalent violence and discrimination has impacted on women.

### **4.2, the colonial experience and the class system**

In 1492 the Spanish conquerors arrived in South America moved by the desire for gold and new territory and set about appropriating the most productive land from the huge indigenous populations (Meisel, 1980, Gruner, 2000). From the start indigenous women suffered at the hands of the settlers.

The Vice-Royalty of New Granada, El Virreinato de la Nueva Granada, was the territory created as part of the Spanish Empire in the north-western corner of South America. It included the land now known as Colombia as well as modern Panama, Venezuela and Ecuador as well as parts of Guyana, Brazil and Peru.

The Spanish conquest led to the creation of a class system which was closely linked to ethnicity. The three principal ethnic groups were the black slaves brought from Africa, the white settlers or colonos and the indigenous natives. However, a hierarchy of ethnic sub-groups came into existence with the European born Spanish 'peninsulares' at the head of the pyramid, followed by the 'criollos' or American born Europeans. At the head of this hierarchy the main objective was to become ennobled either by marriage or by paying for the privilege, a practice called 'limpieza de sangre or blood cleansing' (Jaramillo, 1990:25)<sup>45</sup>. The most important thing was to have a special rank or nobility (Gonzalez, 1984; Umaña, 1997).

Below them were the mestizos, descendants of Europeans and indigenous, who soon became the majority, and the mulatos, the descendants of whites and black slaves or blacks

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<sup>45</sup> Cited in Baez (2001), op cit. pg. 12

and indigenous people. The latter are also called zambos and the term mulato was also applied to descendants of whites and indigenous people. Pardos was another term used to describe those of mixed race. At the bottom were the Afro-American slaves and the Indios or indigenous people. This hierarchy was further complicated by further variations such as free blacks, poor Spaniards, runaway slaves and those who wanted to be classified in a different group, like indigenous people who might want to be classified as mestizo to achieve greater freedom (Wade, 1997:28). As Wade put it, Colombia became 'A race mixture, a complex of physical and cultural transformations in which blacks and Indians became various types of mixed people' (Wade, 1994:61).

This division in the population was also reflected in where the different groups lived. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the most important cities and towns were populated by the Spanish settlers while other races were for the most part restricted to smaller, more remote towns or to the countryside, with some of the richer, better connected settlers occupying large estates.

Documents held in the national archives in Bogota<sup>46</sup> describe the hierarchical distribution of urban spaces and the political and strategic goals for the foundation of new cities and the resettlement of the population in places where they could be subject to civil and religious control and taxation.

The early period of Spanish settlement was marked by a massive decline in the population due to the treatment of the indigenous people, the shock of conquest and the introduction of diseases against which they had no resistance (Woodrow, 1972). By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the population recovered in particular because of the mixing of the races which resulted in a big expansion of the poor mestizo, or free, population. Tovar provides a broad picture of the situation towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: 'According to the 1778 census, 47% of the New Granada were categorized free, 25% white and only 20% were indigenous' (Tovar Pinzon, 1982:42).

The two most populated areas of Colombia were the Caribbean coast and the central mountains, which contained the most productive land. The main cities, which were dominated by the peninsulares and the criollos, were Cartagena and Santa Marta, on the coast, and Bogota and Tunja, in the central mountains. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century these two regions of

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<sup>46</sup> Archivo General de la Nacion- AGN, poblaciones –varias Tomo 11, Folio 245r, cited in El Anuario Colombia de Historia Social y de la Cultura vol.21 p.41

Colombia, the coast and the central mountains also contained sixty-five per cent of the indigenous population of New Granada (Meisel, 1980:252).

Being the most productive regions these were the areas where the *encomienda* system, described below, was most developed. The central region had 196 *encomiendas*, the provinces of Cartagena and Santa Marta had 97 *encomiendas* (Molina, 1976:39)<sup>47</sup>.

### **4.3, the political and economic system**

The colonial system was built on the Spanish patriarchal model and was based on a diffused system of authority (Zambrano 2011:10). The Spanish crown delegated its authority to the viceroyalty, which in turn delegated it to the *encomienda* holders who exercised local authority and to priests who were in charge of Christian indoctrination. Within this system power was delegated to the emerging Colombian elite who then raised taxes and maintained order for the Spanish king. As the Colombian economist Garay put it: ‘The political organization of Colombia was structured according to the Spanish elites who settled in the country; ruling lightly and haphazardly mainly concerned with order and taxes’ (Garay 1994:29).

In the rural areas this authority was divided between landowners, or *encomenderos*, and the church, which could result in local differences due to the different interests of the *encomenderos* and the ecclesiastic authorities, the latter providing the indoctrination needed to underpin the new political and economic structure. ‘The process of indoctrination had two purposes, to control the Indians and to ensure the exploitation and the income’ (Ortiz, 1972:143).

At the heart of the economic system was the *encomienda* which was a system of slavery whereby the Spanish *encomenderos*, or *encomienda* holders, were granted a number of indigenous people to work on their farms, mainly in central Colombia, or for cattle rearing, mainly on the coast (Reyes, 1990). The administrative structure which governed the indigenous people was based on ‘*la ley indiana*’, the indian law, otherwise known as the Burgos Laws (1512-13 and a later version, the New Laws of the Indies (1542), which were supposed to regulate the relationships between settlers and the Indian peoples. In principle this was supposed to be a paternalistic system whereby the *encomenderos* had responsibility for the welfare of a group of indigenous people. In reality it was simply a system of

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<sup>47</sup> Op cit. P.44 El Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura, vol.21

exploitation. In fact because the *encomienda* system was so exploitative it was legally abolished in the middle of the sixteenth century and replaced by a system of *repartimiento* on royal land, which provided for a minimal wage payment plus other payments in kind. This also applied on private estates which came to be known as *latifundia* or *hacienda*, large estates of the best land in the hands of the white elite with the peasant population confined to *minifundios*, or smallholdings, on much inferior land. Because of settler resistance the abolition of the *encomienda* system was postponed and the position of the indigenous population remained much the same. One way for the indigenous to escape this system was to intermarry so as to cease to be a full-blooded Indian and become a *mestizo*, as *mestizos* were exempt from these legal systems, one of the reasons for the massive increase in the mixed, free, peasant population (*ibid*, 1990).

The colonial system represented a massive seizure of land by the European settlers from the existing indigenous occupiers and the imposition of new concepts of individual ownership which replaced the communal system of landholding of the indigenous peoples (*ibid*, 1990). This struggle to control land has continued ever since and was one of the driving forces in the civil wars which were a regular occurrence in Colombia's history (Garcia, 1973:80).

One attempt to preserve some land for the indigenous population was established in the system of *resguardo*, or reservation, which resembled the system in the United States whereby land was set aside for a particular indigenous group. However, this tended to result in indigenous people being put on inferior land and over time the introduction of individual ownership has been used to undermine these communal holdings. The creation of *resguardos* did not in itself protect indigenous land holdings for if a conflict arose over the use of the land for agriculture or mining the people would still be moved in the name of the national good (Colmenares, 1983).

Alongside the *encomienda* system on the land was the *mita*, a system of forced labour which was applied mainly in the mines. The colonial system depended on the exploitation of the enormous mineral wealth of the Americas. In Colombia there were extensive gold, silver and copper mines in addition to emeralds and other precious stones workings (*ibid*). As with the seizure of land for agriculture the same process applied to mining whereby indigenous people were forcibly removed from areas where minerals were present. This process of

expulsion continues today, as for example in the mining of coal or extraction of oil (Segura Escobar, 2001:91).

At the start the colonialists used indigenous labour. However, as a consequence of the conquest there was a massive death rate among the indigenous people, both through overwork and because of diseases imported from Europe. One example of this was the Chibcha people in central Colombia, one of the largest indigenous populations in the country. However, by 1528 they were so reduced that there were moves to abolish slavery among the Indians. By then it was too late and the Chibchas died out (Tovar Pinzon, 1980:33-38).

Needing a new labour supply the Spanish turned to importing black slaves from Africa. This use of slave labour exaggerated the ethnic class divisions. Those at the bottom of the pile, who were also of the wrong colour, were regarded as inferior by the white elite while miscegenation was officially frowned upon although it was widespread. The ruling class was in constant fear of insurrection and any uprisings were brutally suppressed, practices which have continued to this day and can be seen in the civil wars which have occurred throughout Colombia's history (Fals Borda, 1975).

The Spanish crown operated a system of close control over what could be written about colonial affairs. A royal law, Cedula Real 1578, banned Indian chronicles along with all literature that was not authorized by the crown. The only people authorised to write about the situation in the New kingdom of Granada were priests who were allowed to write popular histories or poems. However, this has allowed important sources to survive which make plain the sufferings of the indigenous peoples, notably the writings of priests like Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474 – 1566), who described and denounced the treatment of the indigenous inhabitants and campaigned for their legal protection (Borges, 1990).

#### **4.4, the position of women**

There is little description of the role and political participation of women in the New Kingdom of Granada in Colombian historiography. One social analysis of the encomienda system in the colonial history of Santa Fe and Tunja between 1566 and 1636 referred to the lack of literature on the participation of women as encomenderas<sup>48</sup>. For the most part the social, economic, and political participation of women in the New Kingdom of Granada

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<sup>48</sup> Historical tales "El carnero", Rodríguez Feryle 1637, La Bella Encomendera, José Caicedo Rojas 1884; Le encomendera de Bogotá, Raimundo Rivas, 1923

during the colonial period centred around the marriage of elite Creole and Spanish women to encomenderos. The only women historians have acknowledged were those who belonged to the aristocratic class and who could participate in politics because they were able to read and write<sup>49</sup>. For example, during the War of Independence of 1809-1810 the activities of upper class women like the Ecuadorian Manuela Cañizares and the Colombians Polonia Salavarrieta and Manuela Saenz are recorded as being active on the side of the revolutionaries against the Spanish colonials (Posada Gutierrez, 1971:485).

Apart from these few instances the lives of women in colonial society remain unrecorded and invisible. If they were peasants working on the land their lives revolved around their families, their husbands and children. In Colombia's successive civil wars in the nineteenth century they were nurses and cooks (Cherpak, Jaramillo and Martinez, 1981).

'La Encomienda en Popayan'<sup>50</sup>, a novel, describes how women were forced to work on handmade, mainly knitted, crafts through which they contributed to the family income. Indigenous, peasant or mestizo women and old people paid tribute in the form of craft goods, crops and fruit from the land (Ruiz Rivera, 1975:94).

Although the colonial system was built on a racial hierarchy the colonial state did not establish clear boundaries between the encomienda system, the family and authority. Even though it was considered unacceptable encomenderos often married indigenous or mestizo women, which meant that she and her children could later inherit the property, opening the way for a few members of the excluded classes to join the elite.

The patriarchal system imposed by the Spaniards in colonial times remained unchanged until recent times. Women were seen in two ways, as sacred or as objects of pleasure (Velazquez Toro, 1989:61). In the first case she was sacred, as a bride of Christ, according to the religious model of the virgin-mother, or as a bride under the authority of her husband, in both cases under the tutelage of adult men. In the second instance she was an object of pleasure, in particular if she was a woman from one of the non-white ethnic groups, an indigenous, meztizo or black, a woman who was not a member of the upper class. As a result, from the colonial period a double standard was applied in gender relations. On the one hand a man would have a wife, the mother of his legitimate children, who inherited not only his

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<sup>49</sup> By the 19<sup>th</sup> century few women were able to write or to read.

<sup>50</sup> La Encomienda en Popayan by Padilla (1975)

goods but also his social prestige, and on the other he would have lovers and prostitutes whose children were considered bastards and who had no inheritance in his goods or his social prestige.

However, as was noted above, the male elite took non-white women as wives and lovers and their illegitimate sons came to be treated as a kind of sub-class on the fringe of the elite. In the case of Santafe de Bogota, in recent studies about the past and about novellas such 'Las Ibañez', Duarte French found that the rules, which were supposedly imposed in civil and religious society, were not closely followed. This study about Bogota in the middle of the 19th century recorded a high number of bastard sons employed in the political and administrative capital of the country (Duarte French, 1982).

During the colonial period the church held great power and after independence it ruled alongside the Conservative Party for long periods of time, which had severe consequences for women's relationships within their families reinforcing the division of women into the virtuous or the pleasurable as noted above. Women were strictly controlled and restricted in their behaviour. If a woman was found, or even believed, to have been unfaithful her husband or father had the right to kill her. Men could rape a woman with little fear of any consequences, but if there was a problem he would overcome this by marrying her (Posada Gutierrez, 1971: 430).

#### **4.5, independence from Spain**

With independence the rule of the peninsulares or Spanish conquerors was replaced by that of the criollos, or American born whites. One of their principal concerns had always been to avoid the controls over trade imposed by the Spanish crown and its merchants in Seville and Cadiz. Attempts by the Spanish authorities to reinforce these controls at the end of the eighteenth century had helped bring about the movement for independence. Now they were free to expand their trade with other European powers, particularly the British (Gruner, 2000).

Much of Colombia remained outside the direct control of the state which meant that there was still land to be occupied by the elite. Large areas on the Pacific coast and in the Amazon were unexplored apart from Putumayo where rubber was exploited in the forests.

The position of those outside the elite remained much the same. They continued working in the mines, on the estates of the settlers and in domestic services. Slavery continued for

most Afro-Colombians. However, as part of the enlightened, liberal thinking of the time wages were introduced. However, for the most part this made little difference to those working on the land as they simply continued to work for their old owners as debt slaves and were still confined to their minifundios alongside the much larger latifundios. The economy, the production of raw materials, of crops and minerals were increasingly integrated into the world economy as Colombia became an enclave which was exploited for the benefit of the national elite and the industrialised nations (Garcia, 1973:80).

One of the most notorious examples of foreign involvement in the agricultural sector occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. The arrival of the United Fruit Company in the region of Santa Marta led to conflict over land, the dispossession of peasants, reminiscent of recent events, and disputes with the labour force. This resulted in the Bananas Strike of 1928 in which as many as 2000 workers were killed by the Colombian army (LeGrand, 2003:191-214).

The new elite continued the policy of expelling indigenous people from the land. From 1832, under the guise of an enlightened policy of improving the lot of indigenous people the Republic promoted the division of *resguardos* as a process of privatisation of all lands and providing rights of ownership to individuals (Benavides 2009:23). This undermining of indigenous communities speeded up the growth of the class of peasants. As women seldom received the title to land under this supposed reform programme they were the most severely affected by the breakup of communal land holdings. The principal result of this policy was to break up the communal landholdings of the indigenous and allow landowners to acquire peasant holdings (Meertens, 2006:14).

The regime created by the Republic meant that indigenous and mixed race peoples did not have the right to vote, they did not have political representation, and the political system was open only to the white elite as long as they were male, literate and propertied. The new elite continued to regard the non-white population as uncivilized and inferior, fit only to be slaves. The indigenous people were treated as children in need of guidance by local bosses, or *caciques* (Gonzalez 1984:176,177). Indeed all those excluded from power were obliged turn to local landowners for their protection and survival. This in turn contributed to the division of the country into supporters of the two main political parties, the Liberals and



Conservatives as these relationships became entrenched in local rivalries, which would then provide the fuel for armed conflict, as was noted in chapter two.

During the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries the same systems of cruelty and violence as had been in use during the colonial period remained in place. The use of terror occurred especially on the borders of Colombia and more precisely in areas where mining and rubber production took place. For instance, the treatment of the indigenous population in the southern part of Colombia along the Putumayo river and on the border with Peru and Brazil, in areas where rubber was being exploited became the subject of an international inquiry. The Peruvian Amazonian Company, owned by Julio César Arana was financed by British and American investors who were on the company's board. Its activities were described by an American, Walter Hardenburg, who described the appalling treatment of the Indians. An inquiry was launched and Sir Roger Casement was sent to the region in 1910 to investigate on behalf of the British government. He wrote: 'In 1910 in the areas of rubber-gathering in the jungle of the Cara-Paraná and Igara-Paraná tributaries on the middle reaches of the Putumayo river, the terror and tortures and the toll in human life inflicted on the Huitotos Indian community is indescribable' (Taussig, 1984:42).

Hardenburg's own account, which had been circulated in London by the Anti-Slavery Society's journal *The Truth*, was graphic: 'they force the Pacific Indians of the Putumayo to work day and night at the extraction of rubber, without the slightest remuneration; that they give them nothing to eat; that they keep them in the most complete naked-ness; that they rob them of their crops, their women, and their children to satisfy the voracity, lasciviousness and avarice of themselves and their employees, for they live on the Indians' food, keep harems and concubines, and sell these people at wholesale and retail in Iquitos; that they flog them inhumanly, until their bones are visible; that they give them no medical treatment, but let them die, eaten up by maggots, or to serve as food for the chiefs' dogs; that they castrate them, cut off their ears, fingers, arms, legs; that they torture them by means of fire, of water, and by tying them up, crucified, head down; that they burn and destroy their houses and crops; that they cut them to pieces with machetes; that they grasp children by the feet and dash their heads against walls and trees, until their brains fly out; that they have the old folks killed when they can work no longer; and, finally, that to amuse themselves, to practise shooting, or to celebrate the sabado de Gloria they discharge their weapons at men, women, and children, or, in

preference to this, they souse them with kerosene and set fire to them to enjoy their desperate agony<sup>51</sup>.

It is worth noting that many of the horrors described here were also found in the more violent civil wars of the nineteenth century and later in recent civil wars of the twentieth century, La Violencia and the present conflict from the 1980s, as is described elsewhere in this chapter and in chapter 2.

#### **4.6, the family and the position of women after independence**

The position of women changed little in the aftermath of independence from Spain. The nuclear family continued to be authoritarian and patriarchal, often affected by machismo<sup>52</sup>. This culture of machismo contributed profoundly to the inequality and unfairness that existed between women and men and delayed the provision of legal rights to women.

In the patriarchal system imposed by the colonialists the father or husband was the head of the family. After independence there was little change. In the Colombian constitutions of 1849 and 1886, the citizen was recognised as a married man. The family was used as an instrument of social control designed to perpetuate the status quo, to reproduce its values, patriarchy, racism and classism (Bermudez, 1987).

It was only well into the twentieth century that rights started to be granted to women. Civil property rights finally arrived in 1932 under Law 28 which allowed them to control their own property. The right to go to university was provided in 1936 along with the right to receive a salary. In 1945 women were finally given citizenship but were still not able to vote, which was granted in 1954 but first used in the elections of 1957. Equality between men and women in terms of jurisdiction over children was legally recognized in 1974 (Restrepo, 2006:59). Despite this slow extension of rights tradition still dominated gender relationships and the roles and responsibilities of men and women in marriage remained much as before. Women continued to be submissive and subordinated.

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<sup>51</sup> Walter Hardenburg, *The Putumayo: the Devil's paradise. Travels in the Peruvian Amazon Region and an account of the atrocities committed upon the Indians therein* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1912), pp. 213-214 [http://archive.org/stream/putumayodevilspa00hardrich/putumayodevilspa00hardrich\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/putumayodevilspa00hardrich/putumayodevilspa00hardrich_djvu.txt) accessed 21/11/2013

<sup>52</sup> strong or aggressive masculine pride <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/machismo> accessed 23/11/2013

The rapid economic development which was accompanied by the growth of urban industrial centres, together with the displacement of many rural families, particularly in the 1980s, created a different profile among traditional Colombian families. The decline of the patriarchal extended family was apparent in urban societies, as increased geographical and social mobility, weakened kinship ties and young people gained greater independence<sup>53</sup>. Government policies towards the family are in many way inconsistent (Baez, 2001:15). On the one hand the father is often obliged to work away from his family in order to sustain it but and on the other hand the defence of the family is considered to be a high priority for the Colombian state.

During the last two decades in urban areas and among the upper class of Colombian society, have achieved greater equality in terms of access to education at the same level as men, participation in the labour force and changes in gender roles within the family, as well as benefiting from a reduction in the birth rate, facts that have contributed to the broadening of women's participation in the public and political life of the country, including the armed groups.

On the other hand, in the rural areas, the position of lower class women continues much as before, they continue to suffer discriminated in social terms with limited access to health services, education and welfare, suffering high levels of illiteracy and vulnerability to all kinds of violence.

Families at the bottom of the social structure were adversely affected by geographic dislocation. They continued to be characterised by a large number of extra-marital unions and mother centred households. However, traditional elements of trust and mutual dependence among relatives, no matter how distant the relationship, were still strong. The already large circle of kin relationships was extended through the institutions of *compadrazgo*, a complex form of ritual kinship created by choosing *compadres*, or godparents' to become patrons for their godchildren. Ties with relatives and *compadres* continue to be important in political and business activities.

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<sup>53</sup> Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/42.htm> revised June 24/2011 accessed 14/10/2013

#### **4.7, women and land reform**

One example of the continuing discrimination against women is in the area of land reform. Women were systematically discriminated against in agrarian reform in Latin America. Only a husband, as a head of the family, could have access to land under the land reform legislation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This discrimination has continued into modern times. The Colombian National Institution of Land Reform, INCORA, has discriminated against women since its foundation in 1961. The Agrarian Reform Law No 135 which also founded INCORA specified there could only one recipient per household. By law the husband was the head of the family and was therefore the most likely to be the beneficiary. INCORA also created a points system including level of education, knowledge of farming and a history of working near the land to be transferred (Edwards, 1980:60).

All of these favoured men. By and large men were better educated than women and even poor men more likely to be literate. In most cases, apart from members of the aristocracy, women were not allowed to study. This was critical in the administration of land reform as one of the criteria for granting land rights was the level of education of the possible beneficiaries. Lack of education disqualified many from receiving grants of land. Although the civil rights of women were recognised in the Civil Code in 1932 whereby women could freely administer their own property. INCORA failed to act on this law and stipulated that widows were not allowed to inherit their husband's land assignment and also required land had to be granted to those who have knowledge and experience. (Deere & León 2000:83, 84, 103-112; FAO 1994: 67.) This practice shows women's invisibility in agriculture and the lack of recognition of their contribution. Land reform did not benefit women. Until 1986 only 11.2% of the land assigned had been granted to women. (Leon, Prieto & Salazar, 1987:49).

Despite promulgating a range of policies for women on issues like health, rural development, equality, property rights in recent times, apart from the recognition of women as citizens and their emergence in the political arena, Colombian Governments have failed during the past four decades to implement these rural policies and changes to give women proper social assistance and protection in development plans (Meertens, 2006:90).

#### **4.8, historical trends in Colombian women's struggles**

For decades women's struggles and the part women have played in national conflicts has been denied. In Colombia during the period of "La Violencia", 1949-1958, women played an active role in the war participating in support networks for armed bands (Meertens, 1983). Peasant women provided food and acted as nurses, guards and spies (Alape 1985).

After 1975 following the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico the involvement of Colombian women in transnational feminist networks forced the state to pay more attention to women's participation in development issues (Murdock 2003:133-4). In 1982 the Colombian state ratified the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Women's organisations in Colombia made further gains later in the 1980s. In 1985 the Encuentro de Mujeres de Sectores Populares, Meeting of Women in Popular Sectors, brought together 100 women from 23 cities representing 41 organisations, including libraries, slum organisations, school parents' associations and microenterprises, followed in 1987 by the first Congreso Nacional de la Mujer Trabajadora, National Congress of Working Women, with 3000 women participants from all over the country demonstrating the level of their involvement in union and popular movements<sup>54</sup>.

#### **4.9, civil war in Colombia**

In 1810 Colombia declared independence from Spain and in 1819 was renamed Gran Colombia. The prospect of a new order encouraged many indigenous people to fight for independence although once the Spanish were defeated there was little change in their position.

However, the propensity for conflict within the new elite had already manifested itself. Even in the period before the Declaration of Independence from Spain in 1810 Colombia experienced civil conflict between different factions arguing over federalist and centralist political systems. These divisions continued during the War of Independence with Spain with cities and provinces fighting each other enabling the colonial power to re-establish itself for a brief period (Ortiz, 1972:143).

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<sup>54</sup> Protagonismo de Mujer <http://www.eurosur.org/FLACSO/mujeres/colombia/orga-1.htm> accessed 05/05/2009

After independence and the later break-up in 1830 of the state of Gran Colombia, which had included Ecuador and Venezuela along with Panama which remained a part of Colombia until 1903, Colombia continued to be wracked by violent confrontations between the Liberal party, broadly supporting federalist systems, and the Conservative party, which broadly supported a centralist system and was strongly allied to the Catholic Church. This division dominated political life during the nineteenth century up to recent times. These confrontations often resulted in open warfare, the most serious of which was the Thousand Days War in 1899-1902, in which an estimated 100,000 people lost their lives (Bergquist, 1981).

During the nineteenth century indigenous people began to fight for their rights and identity. For example in Cauca, a province in south-west Colombia, indigenous people resisted the loss of their identity but gradually found themselves becoming just another peasant community as desired by the white elite. Indigenous people also fought in the civil wars taking sides, as in the War of a Thousand Days (1900-1904), in an attempt to defend their interests (Campos, 2003)<sup>55</sup>.

But this period also saw the emergence of more independent indigenous movements. One of the best known indigenous leaders of the period was Quintín Lame<sup>56</sup> who started out fighting for the army of the Conservative Party in the War of a Thousand Days but then launched his own indigenous movement in 1911 followed by an attempt at creating a Republic of Indigenous Peoples in the provinces of Cauca, Tolima, Valle and Huila. After attempting to use the law to argue for the rights of indigenous people and to protect the *resguardos* in 1914 Lame and eighty comrades launched an unsuccessful guerrilla movement called 'Las Montoneras' to take back their land (Tello, 1983).

#### **4.10, the nature of civil war in Colombia in modern times**

In modern times, however, this willingness to resort to violence came to a head in the vicious civil war known as La Violencia, in which as many as 500,000 people may have died. Depending on the interpretation of events La Violencia is understood to have started either in 1946 after the election of a Conservative government, which saw the start of land wars between peasants supporting the Liberal and Conservative parties, or in April 1948 with the

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<sup>55</sup> Cited in Benavides (2001) p.21

<sup>56</sup> Indigenous leader of the Paeces' communities in the department of Cauca, he was educated and wrote about ancestral rights which were outside the laws of the republic.

assassination of the Liberal Party presidential candidate Jorge Gaitan. La Violencia resulted in such a state of chaos that it resulted in one of Colombia's few military coups led by General Rojas Pinilla in 1953. To recover their power and force Pinilla from power the Conservatives and Liberals finally reached an agreement called the National Front to effectively share power in 1958. However, the violence continued in the countryside and was followed by the creation of new communist movements, meaning that the present civil war is to all intents and purposes a continuation of a conflict which has now lasted for over sixty-five years.

La Violencia set the pattern of violence which has continued up to recent times. Most of the fighting occurred in rural Colombia and most of those killed were peasants. It was known as La Violencia not just for the level of violence and the number of deaths but also for the atrocities, the mutilations, tortures and terror committed by the warring factions and the use of violence against civilians. It was a war for the control of land and assets and it involved the use of paramilitary forces by landowners and politicians (Meertens, 1995).

Following the Cuban revolution in 1959 a new ideological element became important in the ongoing civil war. Continuing struggles over land and the eviction of peasants meant that the war never came to an end and the early 1960s saw further clashes between these groups and the Colombian army. Armed bands of peasants had continued to exist after the creation of the National Front in 1957-58 and the formal end of the war between the Liberal and Conservative Parties. In order to escape the Colombian Army some Liberal and communist peasant groups sought refuge in south-east Colombia where they tried to create independent republics (Molano, 1992:199). However, the creation of the National Front saw the start of a further programme of clearing peasants from the countryside as part of an Accelerated Economic Development plan designed to introduce industrial farming to Colombia. 'In defining these republics as gangs of communist bandits, the government had an excuse to launch military attacks against them, condemn them politically, and blockade them economically.... The only possible outcome was war. One by one the republics fell to the army, and once they were under government control the land became concentrated in the hands of the large landowners' (Pizarro, 1992:181).

In order to resist the Colombian Army the remaining groups formed the oldest of the present guerrilla forces, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) FARC in 1964. The Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National

Liberation Army) ELN, also came into existence in that year. Both were Communist in inspiration but the ELN adopted an ideology which mixed Cuban Marxism with Christian ideas around Liberation Theology and was led at times by Catholic priests. Other guerrilla armies also emerged in the 1960s and 1970s such as the Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Army) EPL, and the Movimiento 19 de Abril (19<sup>th</sup> April Movement) M19 (Gonzalez, 2002).

There have been several attempts to negotiate a long term peace agreement with the different guerrilla groups. Perhaps the most sustained and successful was during the presidency of Belisario Betancur (1982-1986) when the FARC helped form a political party, La Union Patriótica (Patriotic Union) UP, and the M19 disbanded and formed the La Alianza Democrática or Democratic Alliance. However, this process, like others, was bedevilled by ill will on the part of the army and right wing elements with large numbers of demobilised guerrillas and their leaders being assassinated and by army operations designed to prevent agreements being reached as well as fighting between different guerrilla organisations. Thousands of UP activists including its leader, Jaime Pardo, who was murdered in 1987, were assassinated. Its presidential candidate, Bernardo Jaramillo, was killed in 1990. This period also saw the assassination of other leading left wing politicians such as Luis Carlos Galán, the presidential candidate of the Liberal Party in 1989 and Carlos Pizarro, former M19 leader and Alianza Democrática presidential candidate, in 1990.

The crisis of legitimacy facing the Colombia state during the 1980s led to a long running process of constitutional reform which culminated in 1991 in the creation of a new constitution, also known as the Constitution of Rights. Fox et al (2002) describe the constitutional assembly's efforts in the following terms: 'The constitutional assembly's attempt to create a better framework for a functioning democracy represented an act of political will that, in the light of Colombia's history of violence, was nothing short of prodigious.' However, it is indicative of Colombia's problems that such a high-minded effort should have produced so little result<sup>57</sup>. The failure of the state to tackle impunity, its own involvement in violence, its complicity in the violence of paramilitary forces and its alliance with powerful commercial interests have all contributed to the failure of the constitution.

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<sup>57</sup> "Lessons of the Colombian Constitutional Reform of 1991", Fox, Stetson & Gallón-Giraldo, (United States Institute of Peace) (2002)  
[http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Framing%20the%20State/Chapter17\\_Framing.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Framing%20the%20State/Chapter17_Framing.pdf) accessed 21/11/2013



However, responsibility also rests with guerrillas, who have raised funds by kidnapping, extorting money from companies and, more recently, drug trafficking. Former guerrillas, particularly from the fragmented EPL, have become major players in the drugs business and have even ended up forming paramilitary organisations fighting other guerrillas. In the 1990s, the largest guerrilla force, the FARC, was able to field around 10,000 fighters on its own operating on 70 fronts and at the end of the 1990s, along with the ELN, controlled up to 35% of the country, although mostly less populated rural areas.

#### **4.11, intervention by the United States**

The Cold War and the Cuban Revolution have long been used to justify the United States Government military interventions in Latin America. The competition between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its supposed fellow travellers had created a new tension in Latin America. American and other western economic interests became steadily more important over the coming decades. The emergence of Communist guerrilla movements in Colombia attracted particular attention meaning that the civil war has always had an international dimension.

The main vehicle for American intervention in the 1960s was the Alliance for Progress, launched at the Punta del Este meeting of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in 1961. It was an ambitious reform and development programme that tacitly recognised the social and economic context of insurgency. However, throughout the 1960s the military track was dominant, with increasing resort to illegal methods of repression including torture, disappearances and the sponsorship of paramilitary groups, as integral parts of ‘low intensity warfare’.

The national security doctrine emphasised the security of the state rather than of the citizen; it privileged the notion of the “internal enemy,” represented by local agents of international communism, over the traditional “external enemy,” and it enshrined military control of the state, either outright in the form of military regimes or through civilian governments dependent upon military backing.

More recently the so-called War on Drugs, which replaced the Cold War, has enabled the US to continue its involvement and turned Colombia into its closest ally in the region. This involvement has, for the most part, taken the form of military aid in terms of equipment, funding and training, the latter designed to build close links with the Colombian military. U.S.

military assistance and training programs, particularly in the areas of intelligence, interrogation techniques, and counterinsurgency, sowed the national security doctrine among Latin American military officers (Leal, 2002: 8–11).

These developments in the management of the conflict have to be seen in the context of the growing importance of transnational capital and economic interdependence, otherwise known as globalisation, the changes in the function of the nation state, which has struggled to maintain its leading role, and the rearticulating of social, political, and cultural relations during this period (Fazio, 2000). The United States had long claimed the right to intervene in the affairs of Latin America under the Monroe Doctrine. Using the opportunities provided by the Colombian civil war the United States effectively “re-hegemonized” Latin America and refined new forms of intervention. Colombia and the unstable Andean region became a laboratory for the development of these new methods through such instruments as the Plan Colombia and the Andean Regional Initiative.

#### **4.12, the Dirty War**

From the early 1980s on the violence in Colombia was aggravated by the emergence of drug trafficking groups and growing numbers of paramilitaries. This resulted in the increased displacement of families, especially those located in strategic areas where landowners and corporations such as Chiquita<sup>58</sup> or companies looking to develop mineral or oil production were seeking to control land or labour (Reyes 1991).

The first death squad of the dirty war, Muerte a los Sequestadores (Death to the Kidnappers) MAS, was established in 1981 by drug traffickers. It became the model for later paramilitary groups formed by local landowners and elements in the army and police and its name was even adopted by military units (Amnesty International, 2005). Hundreds more death squads followed. A succession of paramilitary organisations emerged during the 1980s and 1990s such the ‘servicios especiales de vigilancia y seguridad privada’ (special vigilance and private security services) also known as CONVIVIR and the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) AUC. However, these are just the labels attached to a proliferation of groups. At different times the Colombian government has sought to control these paramilitary forces as for example with the AUC but

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<sup>58</sup> United States National Security Archive <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB217/#docs> accessed 20/11/2013

has also promoted new official units, such as the CONVIVIR groups, which were also found to be committing similar abuses and had to be closed down. In 2005, Amnesty International stated that “The vast majority of non-combat politically-motivated killings, “disappearances”, and cases of torture have been carried out by army-backed paramilitaries”<sup>59</sup>. Gonzalez describes the “dirty war” as a contra insurgent war against the guerrillas groups and consists of illegal actions by armed civilians under the aegis of public structures against the population in regions where they assume there is a guerrilla presence (Gonzalez et al., 2002:59).

In political terms the paramilitaries are considered to be extreme right wing and para-institutional armed groupings<sup>60</sup>. Paramilitary forces in Colombia owe their existence to laws which allow or encourage such forces to be created, such as the Colombian presidential decree 3398 and Law 48 of 1965<sup>61</sup>. This Law is frequently cited by the Colombian military to justify the creation of paramilitary units and military directives provide guidance on the setting up of such units. Despite legislation passed in 1989 outlawing paramilitary groups paramilitary groups continued to receive support from the authorities as with the CONVIVIR forces which were established by Colombia's Ministry of Defence under the 1994 Decree 356 (Amnesty International, 2005:8-9). The paramilitaries are supposed to operate within a system of control by state authorities. In reality state authorities, particularly at a local or regional level, and other powerful interest groups such as landowners or corporations are keen to use them as a means of controlling territory and to threaten or eliminate those they consider undesirable.

The Dirty War and the involvement of the United States escalated in the early 1980s, not only in Colombia, as the Reagan administration extended these programmes throughout the region, leaving it devastated, strewn with hundreds of thousands of corpses tortured and mutilated people who might otherwise have been insufficiently supportive of the establishment, perhaps even influenced by ‘subversives’. The basic guidelines are spelled out in U.S. manuals of counterinsurgency and ‘low intensity conflict’ (Chomsky, 1996:100).

The Colombian government was an enthusiastic supporter of these policies. Chomsky notes a European-Latin American Inquiry reported that in 1988 the Colombian government

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<sup>59</sup> Colombia: The Paramilitaries in Medellin: Demobilization of Legalization? *Amnesty International*, August 31, 2005, pp. 3-4

<sup>60</sup> Uprimny Rodrigo and Vargas Alfredo, cited in Gonzalez 2002”Violencia politica en Colombia, Cinep, Bogota, Colombia p. 60

<sup>61</sup> HRW, 1996: “II. History of the Military-Paramilitary Partnership” accessed 19/11/2013

established a new judicial regime which called for 'total war against the internal enemy' and which authorised 'maximal criminalization of the political and social opposition'. The Inquiry referred to this as 'the consolidation of state terror in Colombia'. It noted 'a high military official' had observed in 1987 that although the guerrillas were the official targets in fact they were of minor importance. "The real danger," he explained, is "what the insurgents have called the political and psychological war," the efforts "to control the popular elements" and "to manipulate the masses." The "subversives" hope to influence unions, universities, media, and so on, and the government must counter this "war" with its own "total war in the political, economic, and social arenas" (Giraldo, 1996)<sup>62</sup>.

Chomsky goes on to report the findings of the Inquiry 'labor organizations, popular movements, indigenous organizations, oppositional political parties, peasant movements, intellectual sectors, religious currents, youth and student groups, neighborhood organizations,' must be secured. "Every individual who in one or another manner supports the goals of the enemy must be considered a traitor and treated in that manner' (ibid). Any civilian could be targeted if suspicion fell on them.

As Chomsky points out US involvement in the war in Colombia increased throughout this period. For instance, between 1984 and 1992 6,844 Colombian soldiers were trained under the U.S. international Military Education and Training Programme. Over 2,000 Colombian officers were trained from 1990 to 1992 during the first two years of the presidency of Cesar Gaviria when, according to the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) "violence reached unprecedented levels" (ibid). This violence has continued into recent times. One indication of the level of violence perpetrated just by the Colombian armed forces is that between 2002 and 2009 over a thousand extra-judicial killings alleged to have been carried out by the Colombian armed forces were assigned for investigation to human rights department of the Attorney-General's office (United States Office on Colombia, 2009)<sup>63</sup>.

With the end of the Soviet threat and of the Cold War the United States reconfigured its foreign policy and security agendas. Drug trafficking was elevated as the new threat to US security. Just as with the Alliance for Progress, it was claimed Plan Colombia, the programme launched by the United States in 2000, was not a military aid programme.

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<sup>62</sup> Introduction by Chomsky in Javier Giraldo, *Colombia: The Genocidal Democracy*, Common Courage Press, July, 1996 <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/199607--.htm> accessed 22/11/2013

<sup>63</sup> United States Office on Colombia (2009) <http://www.usofficeoncolombia.org/uploads/application-pdf/2009-%20June%20EJE%20memo.pdf> accessed 19/11/2013

However, as with the Alliance for Progress, this pretence was soon abandoned. On July 13th 2000 President Bill Clinton signed public Law 106-246 which included a package worth US\$1.3 billion aimed at eradicating drug trafficking in the Caquetá & Putumayo departments. However, 80% of the US support to combat drug traffickers came through assistance to the Colombian military (Romero, 2002:8). Ramirez notes that the application of Plan Colombia has led to a further militarisation of the state. In addition it resulted in a more destructive struggle for territorial control in border areas and between the guerrillas and paramilitaries (Ramirez, 2007:31).

#### **4.13, women and civil war in Colombia**

Although most women played a purely passive role in the various civil wars of the nineteenth century there were some like *las vivanderas*, or volunteers, and *las juanas*, who not only prepared food but often fought alongside the peasant soldiers (Posada Gutierrez, 1971:485; Ortiz, 1972:143). In modern times the emergence of the second wave of feminism in Latin America with its demands for access to education and participation in the labour market, as well as for the modification of gender roles both inside and outside the family had a considerable impact on the emancipation of Colombian women (Lelievre et al, 2004:28). The demographic changes which occurred during this time, the reduction of the birth rate, the greater number of women going out to work, the increasing number of women in higher education along with changes in lifestyle such as the use of contraception saw women playing a much greater part in public life. This was reflected in the fact that even though the insurgent movements did not focus on gender issues in their political programmes many women were moved to join the armed struggle (ibid, 29).

However, despite the deep social economic transformation of the country and the roles played by women in every aspect of life, it remained the case that, as in other areas of life, women for the most part were still expected to be submissive which made them invisible, even within the insurgent groups. For instance, women in the FARC have never held leading positions and have not even taken part in decision making (ibid:90).

Guerrilla groups recruited many women. The secret character of this militancy makes it hard to gather exact quantitative data on why women joined guerrilla groups. Some joined because their relatives or parents had experienced violence or had bad memories of the period of *La Violencia*, others for intellectual reasons or just out of sympathy with the guerrillas' objectives. They had adopted new political ideas or were supporting their husbands or

partners. Many women who participated in social movements and in left wing political organisations were forced to leave the country because they or their relatives were threatened with death (Restrepo Velez 2006:72).

Testimonies from women who participated in guerrilla groups (Lelievre, Moreno & Ortiz 2004:47) show those women saw themselves as breaking with the traditional feminine role and asserting their equality with men. Even so, the military structure of these groups reproduced the vertical and patriarchal relationships of traditional familiar relations in which men command and women obey. The testimonies affirm that their decision to participate was free and their roles depended on the characteristics of the guerrilla group to which they belonged. If it was a rural group their roles were mostly domestic, cooking, nursing, and looking after prisoners. Among urban guerrillas women were more educated and their functions varied from recruitment, advertising, intelligence and acquiring provisions, like clothes and medicines and organising accommodation for the troops. The majority of the women revealed that they never participated in combat.

One exception to this rule was the M19. Many women students joined this guerrilla group because of the image of its members as jovial, middle class intellectuals and its philosophy of 'cultural modernity' which broke with the violent ideas of the 1950s. It concentrated on wider national policies and objectives (Pecuat 2003:74)<sup>64</sup>. It lasted around 10 years. In their last action they occupied the Palace of Justice in Bogota. However, in the confrontation with the Colombian army which followed many lawyers and judges as well as other civilians died. Among those who died were women from the M19 including some who directed the operation and who were killed or disappeared by the military forces (Castro Caycedo, 2003:141).

However, leaving aside that small proportion of women who have chosen to participate in the Colombia's civil wars, most women are not active participants. It is an indication of the role culture plays even in civil war that in the nineteenth century women and children were not attacked during fighting (Meertens, 1994). However, these taboos no longer apply. In the present civil war both women and children have suffered direct attacks, assassination, torture,

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<sup>64</sup> Cited in Lelievre et al (2004) p.38

rape and other forms of harm. Many different human rights organisations have recorded the scale of violence perpetrated against women and its impacts<sup>65</sup>.

Modern Colombia is a country which is increasingly integrated into the world economy. A particular feature of the war in Colombia is the scale of the displacement of rural people. Displacement in Colombia is a deliberate strategy of war used to establish control over strategic territory, land needed for mining, the cultivation of drugs, cattle ranching, oil exploration or other business activity often pursued by international business interests. The importance of this aspect of the war is borne out by studies which estimate that 70 percent of internally displaced persons have lost their land (WFP, 1999:6)<sup>66</sup>. This process of dispossession has been at the heart of the story of Colombia. It continues today and it is women, so often invisible in that story, who make up the majority of displaced persons.

#### **4.14, conclusion**

The history of Colombia is one of continuous dispossession and discrimination against indigenous and rural people. From the time of the Spanish conquest till modern times different groups of the powerful have sought to take control of land and resources and force the poor to work for them, often as slaves. For women this meant the imposition of a patriarchal culture, which has survived to this day. Independence from Spain did not alter this process. Instead of the Spanish elite it was the American born criollos who took the lead. The original encomienda system may have been abandoned but it was replaced by the hacienda with the poor confined to small holdings on marginal land. In order to safeguard their future peasants sought protectors among the powerful. However, they then became entangled in the civil wars of the elite as the two political parties fought for control of the state. The process of dispossession continued as new means were found to divide up the land holdings of the indigenous peoples.

The history of Colombia also reveals a willingness to take up arms, particularly on the part of the elite, in their struggles for control. For the most part these wars were fought by the peasant followers of the powerful and they culminated in the appalling atrocities of La Violencia. At that point the armed struggle moved out the elite's control with the emergence

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<sup>65</sup> Compilation of material by Women Under Siege

<http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/conflicts/profile/colombia> accessed 20/11/2013

<sup>66</sup> World Food Programme (1996) <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/2676.pdf> accessed 21/11/2013

of ideological peasant and middle class movements like the FARC and the M19. In order to regain control the divided forces of the ruling parties regrouped and formed an alliance through the National Front. This coincided with the growing involvement of the United States, its provision of funds and resources, including training and equipment, and its promotion of a new national security doctrine which justified the assault on the poor and anyone who sought to advocate on their behalf or defend them. Further complicating matters and adding further justification for intervention has been the emergence of criminal drug trafficking gangs, although in reality these are largely irrelevant to the processes of dispossession which have been at work for so long.

At the same time as this new phase in Colombia's civil wars developed Colombia became increasingly drawn into the globalised economy. The penetration of international corporations in a range of sectors, including mining, agriculture and oil exploration, resulted in further pressure for control of land and resources. La Violencia had seen the use of paramilitary forces and massive displacement of the poor in the fighting over land. The continuation of this war from the 1960s onwards saw ever greater displacement of peasants, the emergence of an enormous number of armed bands, death squads, self-defence forces, paramilitary organisations, many created by the state and its armed forces, some sponsored by an alliance of businesses, drug traffickers, landowners, corporations and local or regional authorities. Guerrilla forces also multiplied and in some cases became simple criminal organisations. Even those that retained a political purpose resorted to kidnapping, extortion and became entangled in the drugs business.

The people most at risk and who suffered the most were the poor, the ordinary population. Many were forced to migrate to the cities, either because they were forced off the land or because there was no work or prospects for them in the rural areas. While the urban middle class prospered the poor, both in the cities and the countryside, remained excluded.

For the most part women are invisible in the history of Colombia. At the very bottom poor women, particularly Afro-Colombian and indigenous women, have been subjected to constant discrimination and control. Women seldom appear in the history books and even when changes have happened, as for example in the few limited attempts at land reform, they were passed over and it was men who received the benefit. While there has been a slow process of women gaining rights, particularly in the last twenty or thirty years, this has made



little difference to poor, rural women. In the past civil wars did not result in direct attacks on women but that is no longer the case with women being assassinated, tortured, raped and being controlled and forced to conform to the demands of armed men. This has meant the deliberate enforcement of the traditional patriarchal culture by paramilitaries and others seeking to control communities and territories.

The modern history of Colombia is about the massive displacement of millions of people, the deliberate targeting and elimination of those considered to be subversive, the waging of war on the poor and the dispossessed and the alliance between the national elite and international military forces and commercial interests, particularly from the United States. Those bearing the burden of this warfare are the rural poor, particularly women who make up the majority of those displaced, who are left widowed after the murder of their husbands and have to struggle to survive and bring up their children alone.

## **Chapter 5, data analysis**

### **5.1, introduction**

In this study about violence against women in a civil war in Colombia the experiences collected from the women interviewees serve as the primary sources and are combined with the denunciation testimonies and the interview with the expert, the staff member of the OFP, as secondary sources as a triangulation. I then created the categories and sub-categories, which I reproduce below, under the coding process for the purpose of analysing the data, as was discussed in Chapter 3.

Experiences in the areas where you have lived

Sub-category – displacement

Experiences in the family

Sub-category – becoming head of household

Experiences with armed groups

Sub-categories - forced to do things - sexual slavery

- to cook

- to attend meetings

- forced recruitment

- social control by armed groups

Personal experience of violence

Sub-categories - threats

- intimidation

- impact on women

In the following sections I examine the material collected using these categories and sub-categories, triangulate it and interpret it.

## 5.2, experiences in the areas where you have lived

Four of the five women I interviewed came from other parts of Colombia. They were poor women, who experienced poverty, lack of work and, in all but one case, violence in their home area before coming to the part of Santander where they were now living, where they all experienced further violence. For example interviewee 3, who had come from Antioquia, to the west of Santander, said:

*“Until the year 2005 we were living in a small mountain where there was a farm up there. It is small village with only 20 houses in the south of the department. There, we had to live the poverty, lack of food and a lot of illness because the paramilitaries don’t allowed to pass the lorries that brought the food, so the shops didn’t have anything to sell” (Interview 3, paragraph 1).*

Interviewee 2 also described how her family was faced with poverty in the department of Chocó, to the west of Santander on the Pacific coast, and had to move:

*“I come from Chocó a place where we were happy, but at the end my husband didn’t have a job. One relative brought us to a place near here, because there was a job” (Interview 2, paragraph 1).*

But then, having moved with her husband to an area near to her present home her husband was killed by paramilitaries and she had to move again:

*“I lost my husband in the previous place we were, he was working in a farm for rich people, but the armed groups killed him because they said he was collaborating with the guerrillas” (Interview 2, paragraph 2).*

Interviewee 5, who had come from the department of Bolivar, which is to the north of Santander, said:

*“I grew up in the village, but I can’t live in my house because I was receiving threats from the paramilitaries, they said they want to kill me” (Interview 5, paragraph 1).*

The one woman, interviewee 4, who had always lived in the Barrancabermeja area had also experienced poverty and homelessness and had been forced to move from place to place in the vicinity after her husband was killed:

*“Since they killed my husband I am moving from one place to another, I didn’t have a house and I had to work in houses to bring up my 3 children” (Interview 4, paragraph 1).*

### 5.2.1, displacement

Examining the first category of the experiences of the women interviewees in the area they had been living, it was interesting to know if they have lived there for a long time or whether they had been displaced and have only recently come to live in their present home. The first interviewee had suffered the cruel situation of being displaced because of poverty and having a family to support. Her children had been kidnapped and she had to move to serve the paramilitaries:

*“During the last 4 years I have experienced the situation of going from one place to another, as a displaced woman I have experienced bad times and I have suffered many bad situations... I was forced to leave the house and to work for the paramilitary group, where I have to attend the radio and to do all the things they wanted including sexual services” (Interview 1, paragraph 1).*

The second interviewee had the problem of having a family to support and not being able to feed the family. She was then forced to move again after her husband was killed and she was threatened by paramilitaries:

*“Then we felt threatened every day, my children and I were nervous and tried to escape, but the conditions were no better, then I met my second husband in order to protect me, and now with him we moved to where we live now” (Interview 2, paragraph 3).*

Another cause of displacement is the damage done to crops in the areas where the government sprays to eliminate coca plantations:

*“We were forced to leave the farm because they were crop spraying the plantations in order to stop the coca plantations. This poisoned the food crops” (Interview 3, paragraph 2).*

Following the procedure of triangulation I analysed the denunciation testimonies using the same sub-category of displacement.

In these cases the displacement did not happen to a family or an individual but was experienced by whole communities. For example these were the testimony of women from two different communities:

*“The paramilitaries entered the north-east part of the Kennedy suburb and told all the inhabitants they had two hours to empty their houses and leave” (Testimony 10, February 24<sup>th</sup> 2001).*

*“The whole community of Brisas de Bolívar was affected by the actions of the paramilitaries, who forced them to abandon their houses and move to the town to ask for institutional support” (Testimony 66, May 29 2002).*

### **5.3, experiences in the family**

In the second category of experiences in the family I found that all the women interviewed had experienced losing members of their families. The first interviewee faced the tragic situation of her children being taken away and her inability to do anything to about it:

*“...a group of men entered my house with aggression and took my children” (Interview 1, paragraph 1).*

The second interviewee described how her husband was killed by paramilitaries who claimed he was working with guerrillas:

*“...the armed groups killed my husband on the farm where we were working, claiming that he was collaborating with the guerrillas...” (Interview 2, paragraph 2).*

The fifth interviewee has suffered the loss of many men in her family, including the death of her husband and a brother, who were killed by paramilitaries and whose bodies were left in the river.

*“The armed conflict has caused me terrible pain: my father joined the guerrillas and two brothers were taken by the guerrillas groups, my husband was killed by the paramilitaries and another brother was taken and disappeared by the paramilitaries too. Their bodies were left by the river” (Interview 5, paragraph 2).*

I found many cases in the testimonies where a man had been taken from his house and disappeared.

*“Henry Campo was taken by three men who identified themselves as paramilitaries; they were on bicycles, when he arrived at his home in the main road of Nueva Esperanza Suburb in Barrancabermeja. Immediately afterwards his relatives were told very aggressively not to report this to any authority. Furthermore, they also asked for three young men of the family” (Testimony 78, April 30 2003).*

The husband of one of the directors of the OFP house in the North-east sector of the city was taken in front of the family:

“Mr. Dimas Jose Esmeral Diaz 35 years old, husband of Ana Isabel Duran was in his house around 7:30 pm, while he was with his family, two men supposedly paramilitaries entered into his house and killed him” (Testimony 120, April 26 2005).

### **5.3.1, women heads of household**

The loss of husbands or partners had the consequence of making the women the sole head of the household. The condition of poverty in which interviewee 4 found herself, shows hard her life had become and her suffering. This had further consequences in creating difficulties between her and her daughter which resulted in her daughter leaving home and suffering sexual exploitation.

*“Since they killed my husband I am moving from place to place, I didn’t have a house and I have to work in houses to provide for my three children. Because of our poverty we had problems in the family. I was very aggressive with my daughter who left me. She then went to work for a woman who exploited her sexually” (Interview 4, paragraph 2).*

Interviewee 2 described how vulnerable she felt looking after her children on her own:

*“Then we felt the daily threats and my children and I were nervous and tried to escape but the conditions did not get any better. Then I met my second husband in order to protect me and now with we moved to where we live now” (Interview 2, paragraph 3).*

### **5.4, experiences with armed groups**

In this third category, experiences with armed groups, I wanted to know how far women are involved with the armed groups, if they had any relatives in an armed group or if they had any relationship with armed groups. In fact none of the women interviewed were or had been members of an armed group. But not being a member of an armed group did not prevent the women or their family members being accused of being associated with an armed group and one woman, interviewee 5, did report that her father had joined a guerrilla group, as stated above. The women’s experience of armed groups was of seeing their men killed or kidnapped by them, as reported above, or being forced to do things for them, as below.

#### **5.4.1, forced to do things**

The further sub-categories show the kind of things they are forced to do:

##### ***sexual slavery***

The first interviewee described how she was raped. Later she was forced to provide sexual services for the paramilitaries:

*“A group of men aggressively entered my house, they raped me and took my children (one 12 the other 17 years old). I was forced to leave the house to work for the paramilitaries, where I was forced to work for them and to the things they wanted, including sexual services” (Interview 1, paragraph 1).*

This interviewee was deeply affected by her experiences with the paramilitaries and she started to crumble as she told her story. After crying deeply she said she was forced to do other things, like cook for the paramilitaries, and to stay in touch with them by using a walkie-talkie which made her feel like a prisoner:

She declared that at the same time she was threatened that if she didn't collaborate with them, it was because she belonged to the guerrillas.

“Then in order to save my life I had to do what they wanted!” (Interview 1, paragraph 8).

##### ***forced to cook***

“I cooked for them and they controlled me by forcing me to use a walkie-talkie and tell them what I was doing so that I felt like a prisoner” (Interview 1, paragraph 1).

##### ***forced to attend meetings***

The women experienced a variety of impositions including being forced to attend demonstrations. Guerrillas forced interviewee 5 to attend a demonstration which was intended to show that the community supported them after a leader was killed:

*“In the south of Bolivar the army fought with the guerrillas and killed the guerrillas' leader. They (guerrillas) forced us to go on a demonstration, whether we liked it or not as a show of solidarity” (Interview 5, paragraph 4)*

The same kind of forced attendance is found in the testimonies.

“The paramilitaries continued to hold meeting with the communities apparently with the support of the local authorities. In these meetings they intimidate the women’s organisation in order to stop their activities, especially on Women’s Day” (Testimony 21, March 8 2001)

“In June and July, paramilitaries forced people from three villages to assist with meetings in which they were prohibited (in a threatening way) from participating in the mobilisation that was going to take place on 14<sup>th</sup> August” (Testimony 32, August 13 2001).

#### **5.4.2, forced recruitment**

Women also had to endure seeing their children being forcibly recruited by armed groups. Forced recruitment did not happen to the women, although, as above, women were forced to do things for the groups. But their children and other relatives faced this situation when a group decided it needed recruits for its campaign. That is the case with the first woman interviewed, two of her children were taken by the force and since then she hasn’t been able to find out anything about them:

*“When the paramilitaries took the city of Barrancabermeja, they entered my house... and took my children” (Interview 1, paragraph 1).*

She thought they wanted to use the children in their group, but she hasn’t heard anything of them since.

#### **5.4.3, social control by armed groups**

The interviewees stated how they experienced direct or indirect social control by armed groups. These experiences referred particularly to the paramilitaries and included being prevented from moving freely, the use of road blocks and the creation of fear simply through the presence of armed men. Women experience particular controls about what they are allowed to wear, how they can behave, whether they can go out in the street, the expectation that they will be available and ready to please men. Similar points were made in the testimonies and by the OFP staff member.

Interviewee 2 described how she felt like a prisoner because they are not allowed to move around freely:



*“We were not allowed to go out; different groups come in the night to control the area. During the day, we can only go to find food; there are checkpoints at the entrances to the village...” (Interview 2, paragraph 4).*

Interviewee 3 described how this control affected their daily lives:

*“The paramilitaries remained in the public school for about 15 days, then we were not able to go out and we had to survive with the things we had...” (Interview 3, paragraph 3).*

Interviewee 3 also emphasised how women are under the control of the paramilitaries because they have to behave in certain ways or even ask permission to move around:

*“We learned that women cannot go out freely because of paramilitary control, women have to wear certain clothes, to behave when going in the streets and sometimes ask permission to pass” (Interview 3 paragraph 7).*

The testimonies provide similar evidence about the social control that women experienced including attempts to control their participation in women’s organisations. This could take the form of the control of public areas, roadblocks in strategic places and orders to a whole community to stay indoors, all of which was designed to create an environment where the armed group could check and control the movement of people in the area. These are some of the examples of social control:

*“the paramilitaries established a false police roadblock in front of the OFP organisation’s house in the north part in the suburb La Virgen, they were taken written note of every car’s number that passed by the area...” (Testimony 11, February 26 2001).*

*“In the northeast sector of Barrancabermeja, El Danubio suburb, the paramilitaries stopped a bus that was taking the women to the demonstration. They made the women get down in order to make a list and forbade them to attend the mobilisation” (Testimony 35, August 10 2001).*

*“The night of 20 of July around 9 pm two armed men were surrounding the house of the OFP, they asked the people to close the shops and the houses, and told the people who were in the streets to go to sleep..” (Testimony 100, July 21 2004).*

The expert witness, the OFP member of staff, made similar points about attempts to control women in terms of how they behave, what they wear and also in trying to prevent them being active in organisations or to get them to provide information:

*“We notice that the control of women in the way to behave, how and what to wear, to go out or not, is something that doesn’t seem to be evident but women feel it in their daily lives” (Page 8, line 9).*

*“Social control has affected women more severely. In the villages around the area of study, women had been threatened or assassinated by armed groups (guerrillas, paramilitaries or the army) that indiscriminately forbid them to approach the opposite group; at the same time, each of these groups many times involves women in the war in order to obtain information” (Page 8, line 24).*

*“The widespread violence in the area of Santander has affected the whole population, the economy and the environment. But social control has mainly affected women; in more than 5 municipalities women have been assassinated or threatened with the prohibition of getting in touch with the opposite group as well as very often the armed group involves affectively with women” (Page 9, line 38).*

## **5.5, personal experiences of violence**

The interviewees’ comments on their personal experiences of violence reflected the direct or indirect violence they felt was being used against them and how this affected their personal lives. These experiences caused them suffering even though they are not personally involved in the war.

### **5.5.1, threat**

Threat was the most common word the women interviewees used when they were asked the open questions. Everyday threats affected the tranquility of the women in their home. For example interviewee 3 said she felt threatened all the time, she could not relax:

*“So, we live with continuous threats that are killing us slowly, because there is no tranquility, not to eat, not to sleep and every moment I think is the moment they will kill us” (Interview 3, paragraph 4).*

Interviewee 4 had the worst experience in that after being beaten she was released but threatened that if she spoke about what had happened she would be killed. She continued to carry the burden of this pain, anger and fear:

*“after hitting me, they released me at a place close to my house with the threat-condition of keeping silence and not to speak to anybody, otherwise I would be dead” (Interview 4, paragraph 4).*

Threats were also made against those who had suffered the loss of their relatives. The fifth interviewee was threatened because she refuses to give up searching for her brothers:

*“I am receiving death threats from the paramilitaries because I am looking for my brothers, they said they want to kill me” (Interview 5, paragraph 30).*

I then examined the testimonies to discover what they revealed about the threats women suffered. In the testimonies women were threatened with a variety of punishments, usually with death, of relatives being killed in front of them, or of the whole family being killed, if they did not leave their house immediately. There were also threats of putting explosives or of setting fire to the organisation's houses, threats of disappearance or attack, and misinformation in order to confuse and to frighten the women.

The women who were most in danger were those who belonged to the organisation. The threats were mostly designed to prevent women working for the organisation:

*“You have to leave the organization because it is going to be finished otherwise your life is in danger” (Testimony 8, January 30 2001).*

Other threats designed to prevent women attending meetings or demonstrations are very common in the testimonies. Women were followed and attempts were made to prevent them travelling as is revealed in the following testimony:

*“The night of August 13<sup>th</sup> 2001, before the demonstration, women from the Municipalities of Puerto Wilches, San Pablo and Cantagallo were threatened not to go to the city of Barrancabermeja in order to participate. Nevertheless, 27 women arrived in private boats from the river....” (Testimony 34, August 14 200).*

There are frequent descriptions of death threats in the testimonies. They make it plain that the threats from the armed groups, especially the paramilitaries, are constantly seeking to exert pressure and control over the women, In particular the directors or coordinators of the women's houses:

*“A declaration from a member of the southeast community who confirmed that the paramilitaries had decided to assassinate all the OFP women and that will start with the coordinator of this community, Patricia Ramirez” (Testimony 44, August 24 2001).*

The testimonies reveal how the paramilitaries continued with their attempts to finish off the organisation, starting with the director of the OFP:

*“On May 10<sup>th</sup> paramilitaries sent a message to the house situated in the north announcing that the director is going to be beheaded and also that they are going to take 20 women from the organisation in order to stop their denunciations” (Testimony 83, May 10 2003).*

The staff member, in her interview, provided further confirmation of these threats saying that she was a victim of threats:

*“I am personally a victim of continuous death threats, which causes me great anxiety and I think that the organisation is in danger” (page 8, line 7)*

### **5.5.2, intimidation**

Intimidation is another way in which violence can be used to influence the women's behaviour. The intimidation is usually designed to cause the women to abandon their present home, to demonstrate hostility to the women's organisations, in this case the OFP, following people and searching for names and lists of their attendance at meetings or demonstrations:

Interviewee 5 described how, through intimidation, the paramilitaries can manage to expel a lot of families from their houses. One of the common ways of intimidating women is to write a pamphlet listing the names of a family with the words like 'wanted to be killed'. The family becomes fearful and is forced to leave at once:

*“The paramilitaries left pamphlets by the side of the river; in the pamphlets were written their arrival in order to settle them and announcing massacres. The pamphlets said: ‘Wanted .....Someone’, even I have received a pamphlet with my name written on it. That was how they pressured people to leave and abandon their homes” (Interview 5, paragraph 6).*

In the testimonies women affirmed that on one occasion when they were going to attend a congress in the city some men came to the reception in the hotel that they were staying and asked for a list of the women who were participating:

*“On the night 14<sup>th</sup> of august at the Hotel Bachue, men who were not wearing any uniform asked for a list of the people who were staying in the hotel that day. When the hotel receptionist asked for their identification, they said belonged to the police. But afterwards, when women went to the police and asked why they wanted that list, the commander of the police denied he had given such an order...” (Testimony 38, August 14 2001).*

Intimidation also occurs at times such as when a number of women are together in a public place as, for example, after a demonstration. Armed groups may intimidate officials and force them to carry out searches or to harass them in other ways:

*“After the demonstration, the women who were not from this area, had to stay the night in the stadium. When they arrived the lighting and the water were turned off. The place was dirty and all their belongings were taken. The guard informed them that he had been pressured by unknown men” (Testimony 39, August 14 2001).*

### **5.5.3, impact on women**

The impacts on the women were many and varied. For example, interviewee 3 had to abandon her lifestyle and her family had to leave the land because of damage done to the soil and crops of their farm:

*“We were forced to leave the house where we lived because the crop spraying started with the intention of destroying the coca plantations, but we had a lot of plantations of banana, casaba and sugar cane, and all of them were burned” (Interview 3, paragraph 2).*

Women suffered the impacts of road blocks, which prevented the delivery of food, creating hunger and further impoverishing the community, and also stopped people moving freely in the area. She described how this meant they had to survive on very limited supplies. For about a month the shops had no food to sell:

*“The paramilitaries closed the main highway in this way to impede the entrance of food lorries, we couldn’t move for about one month and we had to survive with the little food we had because the shops didn’t have anything to sell” (Interview 3, paragraphs 1).*

Interviewee 4 described the physical and mental impacts of the severe beatings she had been subjected to. She related how the beatings by the paramilitaries had almost killed her and had caused her and her daughter to be very afraid of them:

*“They took me in a boat with my eyes covered, then they tortured me, tied me up and beat me until I almost died; therefore my daughter and I were very afraid of the paramilitaries. After hiding for about two years we decided to stop being afraid, because we are not guilty, we haven’t done anything wrong” (Interview 4, paragraph 5).*

*“I am still recovering from the tortures and physical aggression.... Now I still feel incapable to do anything. I still have the pain in my breast and full of anger, loneliness, and the idea of the trauma and that one day they will come to kill me!!!” (Interview 4, paragraph 4).*

She expressed with great sadness what a hard time it had been and all the harm she had suffered all because of a mistake over someone's identity. The armed groups behaved as they pleased.

This impunity with which the armed groups acted made them feel helpless. The women felt caught between the different armed groups which considered they had a right to interfere in the lives of the women. These groups would take over public facilities, steal vital equipment like tools or take food as they pleased. They felt they had a right to suspect the population of disloyalty and of siding with a rival group:

*“...we were between the guerrillas and the paramilitaries, both visited us and both took tools, food and whatever they wanted. Every group wanted to be sure whether we are supporting any of those other groups. The paramilitaries established themselves in the public school for about 15 days, and controlled everyone who passed” (Interview 3, paragraph 3).*

It was evident that the paramilitaries wanted to gain more power with their permanent and obvious presence. She then added emphatically:

*“...when two men asked me where the guerrilla is, they shouted close to me on the floor and pushed me with a gun, since I didn't know what to answer, they were more aggressive..” (Interview 3, paragraph 4).*

The impact of this was all the greater as the women were not necessarily aware of which armed groups was which. Interviewee 3 describes the confusion she felt when armed groups were active in the area, which only added to her sense of unease:

*“At the beginning we didn't know which group was which and we thought it was the guerrillas. But the paramilitaries don't wear uniforms while the guerrillas do... We don't feel calm any more, we are always prevented from doing things and afraid” (Interview 3, paragraph 4).*

The testimonies reveal similar impacts. For example paramilitaries deliberately killed one woman in public and left her body in the street for all to see in order to terrorise the population:

*“Three paramilitaries entered the house of Esperanza Amaris at 7:30 pm in the Versalles suburb, and forced her into a vehicle. Her daughter tried to prevent this but she was left on the floor injured in one arm and the mother was assassinated in front of the Camilo Torres Restrepo School and her body was thrown into the public street” (Testimony 92, October 16 2003).*

The expert also describes the impact the violence has on the women and how this has affected their lives not just physically but also mentally and emotionally:

*“All these threats that women in the organisation have experienced have made a big impact and they feel frightened and constantly in danger” (Page 9, line 44).*

## **5.6, analysis of the testimonies**

Because there were a substantial number of testimonies I decided to code them and provide a table, see table 3 below, to show the numbers of offences.

### **5.6.1, adding sub-categories for the testimonies**

In the course of analysing the testimonies I found that they included statements which required the creation of further sub-categories in the category of ‘experiences with armed groups’ as they covered topics which were not adequately covered in the interviews. Inevitably there is some overlap in categories and topics. As Gibbs & Taylor say new categories can be added to the previous analysed data (Taylor & Gibbs, 2010).

I therefore created the following new sub-categories to the category of ‘Experiences with armed groups’: Assault and attacks, Sabotage of meetings, Assassination, Harassment.

I have already considered testimonies under the sub-categories of Threat, Intimidation and Social Control above. I analyse the new testimony sub-categories below.

Table 4 below sets out the frequency of offences recorded in the testimonies which enriches the data and provides more experiences of violence in the analysis.

**TABLE 4 Sub-categories, frequency of offences in the testimonies**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Threat</b>	<b>Assaults and Attacks</b>	<b>Intimidation</b>	<b>Sabotage of meetings</b>	<b>Assassination</b>	<b>Social control</b>	<b>Harassment</b>
<b>2002</b>	7	3	-	2	2	4	-
<b>2003</b>	23	5	3	1	7	10	1
<b>2004</b>	14	4	4	5	1	15	1
<b>2005</b>	7	5	3	1	5	3	1
<b>2006</b>	8	4	6	-	2	10	3
<b>Total</b>	58	23	16	9	17	42	6

*Source: OFP Testimonies, Barrancabermeja, Santander, Colombia. November 2006*

Note: Assassination includes disappearances and massacres

### **5.6.2, assaults and attacks**

The 23 cases denounced by the women in the testimonies as assault and personal attacks include a variety of different offences from offensive words to aggressions like taking a mobile by force in order to stop her communicating. In other cases the armed groups took leaflets about the organisation or its activities which were to be distributed among the community or destroyed posters. Women who were assisting with a demonstration were prevented from attending and a woman who went to a prison to identify paramilitaries offenders had eggs thrown at her and was insulted by the prisoners. Armed groups confiscated houses and forcibly checked women's personal belongings when they walked in the street. In one case a woman was forced into a car by armed men to be killed in other place.

*“A van with four armed men two with uniform and two without uniform, confiscated the house of a woman member of the organisation and searched it in order to find weapons, but they did not find anything” (Testimony 68, December 9 2002)*



In addition to assaults on individuals or families there were also large scale attacks on communities. Examples of these are attacks on people travelling by bus or boat.

There are more than 10 individual cases concerning attacks or assaults by armed groups on people travelling in public buses. The objective of these brutal attacks is to disrupt bus services for the community and to demonstrate the armed group's power and control of the situation.

*"In Danubio suburb in the northeast of Barrancabermeja the paramilitaries stopped a bus that was taking women to a demonstration. They made the young people get out and made a list to frighten them if they participate in any demonstration." (Testimony 35, August 14 2001).*

Buses were also shot at:

*"On 28th February in the morning, men dressed in army uniforms and some in civilian clothing belonging to a paramilitary group, entered the suburbs La Esperanza, Chico and Progreso. Near the First of May suburb, where the OFP have a women's house, the paramilitaries shot at a public service bus that was passing by at that moment" (Testimony 13, February 2001).*

Another case involved shots being fired at a small boat in the river which was carrying members of an international commission of peace.

*"An International commission made up of 11 persons from Norway and the Peace Brigades with the OFP directors were in a boat which passed a paramilitary control point on the river. Shots were fired and they were told to stop, fortunately the pilot didn't stop. When they arrived in the port they denounced this to the careless authorities" (Testimony 96, January 24 2004).*

Attacks and assault of this sort do not occur only on buses or boats; they also take place in people's homes. Armed groups storm homes taking men and grown up children from the families in their operations, leaving the women alone with the little ones without a father.

*"Mr. Garzon, husband of the one of the women leaders of the OFP, was taken from his house by two men, who wore gags and covered up their heads, and put into a taxi by force" (Testimony 88, 27 August 2003).*

### **5.6.3, harassment**

Armed groups harass women in an attempt to create fear. This sub-category includes women being called, abused or threatened in telephone calls, being followed by strangers

who also watched where they were living or houses they were visiting. The men also followed them when they were with other people. Calls may not be made to the person herself but to another who is told to pass on the message as in the case below:

*“On the 21<sup>st</sup> June 2006 At around 10am Maria Jackeline Rojas Castañeda, the general co-ordinator of the OFP was participating in a radio broadcast of Radio UNO, which is a part of the national radio station. A man said to the radio controller ‘Say to this bitch daughter of a whore of the OFP that we are listening and we are preparing a coffin for her tongue’ (Testimony 135, June 21 2006).*

Following people around and photographing them can be part of a wider campaign of harassment designed to cause anxiety and fear:

*“On 28<sup>th</sup> February 2006 at 8.30 in the morning Graciela Alfaro, a member of the OFP, who had already been forced to move to Bogota for her security, was photographed with a friend by two people in the district of Bosa Central. This happened fifteen days after a man had constantly appeared in places she used to frequent. Since 2003 Graciela had been persecuted for her defence of human rights and her testimony about the murder of her friend Esperanza Amaris” (Testimony 124 February 28 2006).*

#### **5.6.4, sabotage of meetings**

This was a term used in the testimonies which includes actions by the paramilitaries already noted in the sub-category forced to do things. It also included other actions such as destroying leaflets and documents produced by the OFP. Once again these practices are intended to gain control over communities and to create fear. In this case below paramilitaries forcibly recruited women and men to take part in an event to sabotage an OFP meeting:

*“the paramilitaries were in the suburb forcing women and men to enter a bus to be taken to a place, in front of the Infantas Club, a place where the International and national meeting of the OFP was taking place, in order to do a sabotage”... (Testimony 41, August 15 2001).*

In the case below a ‘self-defence’ group, another name for paramilitaries, took and burned programmes for International Women’s Day:

*“On 7<sup>th</sup> March at 10.15pm in the Kennedy suburb in the north east part of the city men dressed as civilians who identified themselves as a self defence group intimidated members of the OFP organisation because we were handing out programmes for International Women’s day. They took them and burned them. They also tried to search the women claiming these were normal procedures but the women refused to allow this” (Testimony 17, March 7 2001).*

### **5.6.5, assassinations**

The testimonies reveal how the leaders of communities and organisations and their families are targeted for assassination and may be accompanied by threats against the family not to reveal what has happened. The murders are often committed in front of the victim's family or their dead body is left in a public place, often with signs of torture, as in the following cases:

*“In the Northeast region of the city, Mr. Dimas Diaz 35 years old, husband of Ana, staff member of the OFP was in his house with his family around 7 pm, two people presumed to be paramilitaries entered his house and killed him in front of his family” (Testimony 120, April 26 2005).*

*“In the afternoon the dead body of woman NN was found in the street. It showed signs of torture. She was identified two days later by her parents and by the OFP organisation as a member of the organisation” (Testimony 126, March 22 2006).*

*“Mr Henry Campo was taken when he was entering his house by three men identified by paramilitaries in the La Nueva Esperanza neighbourhood; after threatening his relatives if they denounced this fact. He was found in the Las Parrillas neighborhood with strong signs of torture” (Testimonies 78 and 79, April 30 2003).*

The armed groups carry out these murders to try to get people to leave their jobs in organisations like the OFP. Dead bodies are left in public places by the armed groups, places that in the past were used by the community for their enjoyment, places which people are now afraid to go to.

*“Two relatives of a woman from the organisation were taken by force in a boat, after 3 days their bodies were found with other dead men near the Magdalena River in a high degree of decomposition”. (Testimony 119, February 20 2005)*

### **5.7, the interview with the OFP staff member**

I have referred to the interview with the expert, the staff member of the OFP, in particular sections of the analysis. However, her interview related to the context in which the violence occurred. In particular she referred to the arrival of armed groups in the 1980s. The area became a strategic zone with different armed groups competing for territory and control:

*“My experience with the armed groups in the area refers to the eighties when the paramilitaries entered this city. We also identified the presence of other armed groups that operate clandestinely.*

*Then started the persecution of union leaders and the massive displacement of families that are located in strategic areas” (Page 8, line 10)*

None of the women I interviewed had been involved in union or other political activity but they had still experienced all sorts of violence. The staff member noted how the violence affected all sectors of society in the department of Santander. Women were caught up in the war whether they like it or not. They were targeted by each armed group to prevent them assisting a rival group, to use them for gathering information or to force them to do things for the group, including sexual services. Key to this was the control exercised over women, often in ways which were difficult to identify:

*“We notice that the control of the women in the way they behave, how and what to wear, to go out or not, is something that doesn’t seem to be evident but women feel it in their daily lives” (Page 9, line 1).*

This control was enforced by repeated threats and, sometimes, assassination to ensure obedience.

## **5.8, interpretation**

Interpretation is the final and most important step in the analysis of data (Loos 2013). In this section I will interpret the material I have collected on the basis of my research questions. As stated earlier I first set out a theoretical research question as below:

What kind of violence do Colombian women experience in civil war?

To answer this I devised the research questions listed earlier, which I will answer in turn.

Before doing that, however, I will make some general comments on the data and what women understand violence in a civil war to be. As was pointed out in chapter 2 violence is not just about physical harm. The concept of symbolic violence provides a much wider understanding of violence and its impacts. Nikolić-Ristanović, in her study into violence against women in the Balkan wars, demonstrates how women understand violence in a much broader sense to include violence against the emotions and how they felt the violence done to others, particularly family members, as violence done to them. She notes that women experience war in a different way to men, passively rather than as active participants, with greater feelings of helplessness. They were particularly affected by mental violence.

These points are borne out by my interviewees, who were not participants in the war except as victims with little or no control over events. Interviewee 3, for example, was confused at first about which armed groups was which, thinking that the paramilitaries were guerrillas. She described how they were caught between the two sides, both of which accused them of siding with the other and both of which stole their food and equipment. One interviewee, interviewee 5, did distinguish between the guerrillas and the paramilitaries saying there was greater security with the guerrillas. The violence was often dangerously random, as interviewee 3 related when she described the indiscriminate shooting by paramilitaries, or used without any reason, as with the beatings endured by interviewee 4 when paramilitaries wrongly identified her daughter. Interviewees described how they couldn't feel secure, were always afraid and were being forced to move from place to place. A key point in many stories is the death of a husband or partner followed by threats, being forced to move and poverty. The lack of support from a husband or a community was keenly felt.

It is interesting to note that interviewees referred to the change they experienced after becoming involved with the OFP. The testimonies, which in many cases involve OFP members or staff, reveal the extent of the threats and killings endured by both ordinary civilians and members of organisations like the OFP. Nevertheless, all the interviewees refer to the importance of belonging to a supportive and united community. So despite the continuing violence they and others connected with the OFP experienced they were able to feel more in control and less helpless.

### **5.8.1, how do women experience the effects of civil war?**

When considering how women experience the effects of civil war it is necessary to think back to the descriptions provided by Nikolić-Ristanović. Women are not in control of the situation, they are by and large passive and left feeling helpless as events overtake them. The women I interviewed expressed similar sentiments. They felt pushed from place to place, overwhelmed by fear, they lost their tranquillity, felt alone and abandoned, they found their communities were unable to help them. They experienced a multiplicity of violence.

The husbands of three of the women interviewed had been killed and another one injured by armed groups and the women had also had children or other family members killed. The trauma of these deaths weighed heavily on the women adding to their stress. In addition, the

loss of a partner meant they were now solely responsible for looking after their children. But the women also had to adjust to new circumstances, to threats and controls imposed by armed groups and to greater poverty. These events were part of a wider set of experiences of violence piled one on top of the other.

These feelings of abandonment is in contrast to the feelings of empowerment the women described when they found support from the OFP. One of the women also expressed her greater sense of security when she met her new husband. Violence has to be understood not just in terms of the events, the threats or acts which hurt, but also in terms of the situation women find themselves in. The threats and violence continued even after the women joined the OFP, as both the interviews and the testimonies show, but the women no longer felt alone. This does not mean they were safe. The staff member herself reported how she felt the organisation was in danger and later had to leave her job when the threats became too serious. But the women gained a sense of resilience when they were part of a community or gained a partner. They still experienced violence but were no longer so easily made to feel helpless and abandoned.

### **5.8.2, in what way do Colombian women take part in the civil war?**

The women in my study were not active as participants in the civil war. However, they were forced to do things by those who were participants. These could include anything from domestic jobs such as cooking to being forced to provide sexual services. The fact that the women were not active participants did not mean they did not face suspicion from armed groups that they were collaborating with another group. The interviewees described how these suspicions could result in the death of a family member, beatings and constant fear. The testimonies also demonstrate how groups and individuals which are considered a threat by an armed group are targeted, even if they are not participating in the war. Groups which support victims or advocate peace are considered a danger because they threaten the interests of those backing the armed groups. Reports by both national and international human rights groups report how the armed groups will attack political and community leaders, trade unionists, human rights activists or simple peasants and common people they believe are active or passive collaborators of the opposite group. (CINEP, 2002, AI, 2001, Mesa de Trabajo Mujer y Conflicto Armado, 2001). The testimonies show how men related to those working in the OFP are targeted.

The staff member of the OFP also pointed out how, when the paramilitaries entered Barrancabermeja, they targeted trade unionists. The war is not just waged against others who are fighting, like the guerrillas, but against sectors of society which seek change and also against those who are just in the way, like the women I interviewed.

### **5.8.3, what kind of violence do women report?**

Violence is not necessarily about physical hurt. Three of my interviewees described how they had suffered physical harm, one who was raped and then forced into sexual slavery, a second who was severely beaten in order to extract information and a third who was attacked by paramilitaries looking for guerrillas. But all reported being pushed from place to place, being threatened and being made to feel afraid.

At the heart of the experiences reported by the interviewees was the loss of family members and displacement. As Nikolić-Ristanović makes plain women's experience of violence takes a multiplicity of forms. The killing of a husband, for example, is often followed by displacement, poverty, becoming solely responsible for looking after a family. All of this is compounded by the threats and controls imposed on women. This was particularly evident in the interviews although displacement did not feature as much in the testimonies, except in the cases where whole communities were forced to move.

Displacement is experienced 'as a violent experience that produces radical and abrupt changes in individual and collective lives' (Osorio 2008). All the women interviewed had experienced forced displacement. One had to move to find a job but was later forced to move after her husband was killed by an armed group, while another had to move when her crops and farm were destroyed by anti-coca spraying. The so-called war on drugs and the militarisation of the countryside are an integral part of the civil war and this kind of collateral damage receives little attention.

In the testimonies I found cases of collective displacement, two whole communities from two villages in the area of research have been victims of massive displacement with the acquiescence of the authorities. Women interviewees identified paramilitaries as the main perpetrators of these offences in their fight for territorial control and to defend the interests of landowners or multinational companies, among others (Gruner, 2001, Codhes, 2000). The OFP staff member also identified the paramilitaries as the armed groups behind what she

describes as ‘the massive displacement of families that are located in strategic areas’ (page 9 line 17).

This thesis is concerned with understanding women’s experience of violence in a civil war so it is also important to understand the context of the displacement to see how this may ease or exacerbate their stress and suffering. Given that women are, for the most part, inactive participants in the war they depend on the assistance of authorities when they face these forms of violence. However, their displacement takes place against a background of violence perpetrated by competing armed forces. According to some estimates up to five million people have been internally displaced in Colombia revealing a state of chaos in which it is hard to know where to turn to for help. The state is an active participant in the violence and provides little assistance to those who suffer in its wake. In many cases state forces and agencies act in complicity with paramilitary forces or with death squads as interviewee 5 and some of the testimonies point out, and operations like crop spraying occur with little concern for those who may be affected, all of which adds to the sense of helplessness and abandonment felt by women.

#### **5.8.4, how do women survive as heads of households?**

Losing a loved family member was highlighted by some of Nicolic-Ristanovic’s interviewees as the worst kind of violence they could experience. When this family member was a husband or partner not only did the woman have to cope with the trauma of the death, often in violent and distressing circumstances, but she also found herself left as the sole carer and provider for the family. And as has been pointed out above this also often happened at a time when the family was forced to move, circumstances which are highlighted in the interviews I carried out.

The disintegration of families or separation from other members of the families causes great psychological and emotional damage in women. Being alone leaves women feeling unprotected and insecure and, particularly in a patriarchal society like Colombia, brings changes in their social status. Being displaced means they have to establish themselves in a



new social environment. As Lerner (1986) states 'women became a marginal social group which could only with great difficulty affirm itself in the new social environment'<sup>67</sup>.

Once again the women experience several forms of violence at the same time. The interviewees reported how, after their husbands or relatives were killed, they had to move, they were impoverished, they felt insecure and threatened. Being alone, being afraid, being poor and struggling to feed their children are themes running through all the interviews. All but one of the interviewees had become a sole parent and in that case her husband had been seriously injured. Being alone meant children were in greater danger. The first interviewee did not suffer the death of her husband but she described how her family had been destroyed, how she was already a lone parent when armed men came and took her children away by force, something she was unable to prevent. Now she spends her time searching for her children. She had experienced the difficulty of having to provide for her family on her own. Not being able to protect them had caused her great pain. For the women I interviewed being alone meant experiencing constant fear and insecurity. The second interviewee related how, after her husband was killed, she and her children were frightened and wanted to escape from the armed groups in the area. Eventually she formed a relationship with another man which gave her some security.

Being alone also resulted in increased stress and tension in the home. Interviewee 4 suffered from poverty and the stress of bringing up three children on her own, so much so that it resulted in her behaving aggressively towards her daughter and caused tension between her and her daughter who left home and then suffered sexual abuse at the hands of an employer. The husband of interviewee 5 was killed by paramilitaries and so was her daughter's husband so now the two surviving widows live together with the daughter's children but she is unable to live in her own house because of the threats from paramilitaries. Having a husband or a partner did not prevent the women experiencing violence, in most of these cases the husbands were killed. But a husband the women felt greater insecurity and felt more vulnerable to threats and fear. This is highlighted in the case of interviewee 2 who felt protected when she met her new husband and in the greater security and strength the women felt when they joined the OFP. Once again this emphasises how, for women, violence is an

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<sup>67</sup> Cited in Mrvick-Petrovic "Separation and dissolution of the family" in "Women and Violence in War, Wartime Victimization of refugees in the Balkans." Edited by Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic, Ceupress Budapest, p.136

accumulation of factors and how women experience violence as an attack on the emotions as mental violence, creating feelings of fear and helplessness.

#### **5.8.5, how do women experience the actions of the armed groups?**

There are a multiplicity of armed groups, the armed forces of the state, several guerrilla organisations and a variety of paramilitary groups. It is worth noting that while most of the interviews and the testimonies concentrate on the paramilitaries as the most violent several interviewees state that they do not distinguish between the different armed actors. One interviewee refers to being caught between the guerrillas and the paramilitaries and several note how the different groups are always suspicious that civilians may be connected with a rival group. The army and police are seldom mentioned in either the interviews or the testimonies although in both the authorities are considered to be complicit or in alliance with the paramilitaries. As has already been stated in earlier chapters this is no idle speculation as paramilitary forces have been created by the state as part of its counter-insurgency strategy, even if at times the state has taken action against particular paramilitary groups. The apparent inactivity of the state's forces simply begs the question as to how paramilitary groups can be able to operate in such a brazen fashion, as for example in setting up road blocks to prevent food being delivered to towns without action by the state's forces. Operations like crop spraying, referred to in one interview, involve the army as part of its US backed war on drugs. One interviewee refers to the guerrillas in more positive terms and considers they were protecting the people's interests but also notes that they force people to take part in demonstrations to show support. As is noted elsewhere guerrillas lost support by their tactic of kidnapping, often ordinary citizens, as a way of raising funds. As non-combatants the women feel at the mercy of violent groups and sometimes are unable to even recognise which is which, all of which bears out the evidence from other studies which reveal how women feel helpless when confronted with a state of war.

It is plain from the interviews that the armed groups instil fear and anxiety in the women just by their presence. Particularly where the paramilitaries were concerned the women reported every kind of violence, from murder to beatings, from harassment to death threats, from random shootings to enforced hunger. Maybe the best way to characterise their experience of the armed groups is social control. Even their killings and the way they leave the bodies of their victims on public display demonstrated their desire to control territory and

those living in it. Interviewee 5 sees this as a drive on the part of the paramilitaries for ‘territorial control’. It has already been noted elsewhere how women are targeted by armed groups who are seeking to control communities and the way interviewees felt they were being constantly threatened bears this out. The extraordinary measures taken by paramilitaries in blocking roads to prevent food deliveries, as reported in interview 3, or the forced removal of whole communities, as reported in the testimonies, show how this control is not just applied to individuals. Interviewee 3 provides another instance of the impunity with which paramilitaries are able to act as those who give orders<sup>68</sup>, when they took over a school for two weeks.

The interviewees, testimonies and the OFP staff member all refer to direct physical violence in the form of beatings or assassinations of women. The testimonies in particular provide examples of women being assassinated and their bodies being left in a public place as part of an attempt to stop women being involved in the OFP. More usually this takes the form of death threats as interviewees, testimonies and the staff member reported. In addition there are forms of harassment, surveillance, taking photographs, following women around, interference with demonstrations and attempts to prevent the distribution of pamphlets and leaflets, all designed to control women’s activities. As Konstantinovic-vilic puts it, social control is a form of psychological violence where women feel under permanent surveillance and control, with restrained freedom of movement and without the possibility of leaving (Konstantinovic-vilic, 1995:120).

However, in the case of women this social control takes more traditional forms. It is part and parcel of the controls exercised in a patriarchal society in which women’s behaviour is closely regulated. The OFP staff member noted how when the paramilitaries took control of Barrancabermeja they imposed controls on how women could dress, when they could go out and what they were allowed to do. Interviewee 3 makes the same point referring to the controls on dress and behaviour imposed by the paramilitaries.

But this also takes the form of sexual control or abuse. The staff member and Interviewees 1 and 3 referred to the expectation on the part of the paramilitaries that women should ‘please them’. Interviewee 1 described her experience of being raped and then required to provide sexual services for the paramilitaries. Enslavement, particularly in sexual terms, affects

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<sup>68</sup> Manual de 1987, pg. 307, in Paramilitarismo de estado op cit, Cinep

women psychologically, women experiencing this fear become more vulnerable and, in order to survive, feel they have to accept these situations. This enslavement reflects the gender relationships in which men exert power over women based on the patriarchal concept that women are less strong than men and that 'she is emotional and not rational' (Kelly & Radford 1998:59).

Other offences such as harassment, being forced to do things and sabotage can be interpreted as demonstrations of control over communities and means of exercising authority by creating fear and insecurity in women. Walter considers intimidation is 'acts that are not violent but which control through fear' (Walter, 1972:18). This is the tactic of the armed groups, by limiting women's choices to make them feel they have no alternatives and to make them feel like prisoners. The effects of this kind of violence against women are seen in how they are constantly aware of the presence of the armed groups and of how their human rights are being violated and how they feel unprotected and isolated.

These personal experiences are aggravated by the social constructions of gender roles and the sociological factors that involve women in particular situations. So when considering all the forms of violence women experience it is necessary to bear in mind this difference in the experience and perception of the genders. The patriarchal structures of Colombian society, based on the Spanish hierarchical system, which reinforce not only men's domination over women but also men's rule over other men through social divisions and organisational hierarchies (Hearn, 1992) are orientated towards violence (Hearn, 1996:45). The violence experienced by women has to be understood in the context in which men assert their power and control over women by the means of psychological and symbolic as well as physical violence.

Just as Nicolic-Ristanovic noted how women understood and experienced violence in a different way to men so Hanmer also comments 'women's perception on violence differs greatly from that of men, this violence reflects their social position relative to men in society generally' (Hanmer 1996:8). She states that women's definition of violence has to do with 'the impossibility of avoiding being involved in the offense and being unable to control the process and outcome' (ibid).

In this way the women in my study perceive the offences by the armed groups as behaviours designed to control, dominate and express authority and power. These controlling

behaviours affect women's psychological stability and undermine women's sense of personal worth and competence. The general atmosphere of fear and impoverishment which reigns in the area damages the integrity of the women, in particular their emotions which, as one of Nolic-Ristanovic's interviewees noted, are the most important part of a woman.

## **Chapter 6, conclusions**

### **6.1, introduction**

My research was designed to discover women's experience of violence in the civil war in Colombia. I focussed on the area around the city of Barrancabermeja in the Department of Santander in north central Colombia.

The research is of an exploratory nature because, as I have already pointed out, there has been a lack of research into women's experience of violence in a civil war in Colombia and because of the difficulties of carrying out this kind of research in a time and location of war.

I asked the following theoretical research question: What kind of violence do Colombian women experience in civil war? I then devised a set of research questions to explore the specifics of women's experience: How do women experience the effects of civil war? In what way do Colombian women take part in the civil war? What kind of violence do women report? How do women survive as heads of households? How do women experience the actions of armed groups?

I interpreted the data in chapter 5 on the basis of these questions. In the following sections I discuss my findings, contributions and recommendations.

### **6.2, key findings**

I will consider what my research has revealed about violence against women in a civil war in Colombia, the nature of the violence, how women perceive the violence and the context and the impacts of the violence. The violence women experience takes a multiplicity of forms which overlap and reinforce each other so that the murder of a family member will contribute to her displacement, impoverishment and vulnerability to exploitation, fear, intimidation and harassment.

#### **6.2.1, gender and violence**

Women's experience of war differs from that of men and is related to their status and role in society. Even violence itself tends to be defined in terms of gender, as the kind of violence which happens to men. Nikolić-Ristanović (2000) makes the point in her research that women's understanding of what constituted violence included a much broader range of things

than she had expected. Men are more likely to be killed, tortured or physically harmed. Women are more likely to survive but in surviving experience things which are often not regarded as acts of violence in themselves. For instance, women are likely to have to endure the pain of losing those close to them, close family members who are killed by an armed group. The death of children is particularly traumatic. The violence done to others is also violence done to them. Women are repeatedly displaced and forced to move, they have to live with the controls, threats and harassment by armed groups which are fighting over territory. The women I interviewed discussed their experience of violence in these terms. This is not to say they did not experience direct physical violence but their experience of war tends to be passive, an assault on their mind and emotions.

Moreover, the death of close male family members can have social and economic consequences for women. Women's situation and status is often dependent on their relationships with men, with a husband, father or other male relatives. The death of men, in particular fathers or husbands, can have profound consequences for women, leaving them alone and impoverished and such deaths were repeatedly referred to by my interviewees as marking important changes in their lives.

It has already been remarked how armed groups target women in order to control communities. Violence occurs in a wider social and political context and particularly in a patriarchal society like Colombia women are subject to masculine control and violence, including domestic violence, as part of everyday life. In a state of civil war these conditions are more extreme. My research showed how armed groups use psychological violence, threats, intimidation and harassment, to create fear and force obedience. For women this is often seen as mental violence or violence against their emotions, which creates feelings of helplessness and depression. Paramilitary groups in particular reassert traditional controls on women, imposing codes of dress and behaviour, requiring them to get permission to do things or to go out, controls over their behaviour in public places. They also force women to perform domestic or sexual services for them. This is not just to exploit them but to emphasise women's status as being under the control of men, to prevent them acting independently, from being involved with political or social campaigns, to isolate and marginalise them.

Gender based violence is a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men. Among other things, the violence the interviews and the testimonies revealed included forced recruitment as a domestic and sexual slave, intimidation by being followed and controlled in the street, death threats, assassination, beatings, humiliation and mistreatment, witnessing the suffering of others, restrictions on freedom of movement, being deprived of the necessities for survival, eviction from their homes and expulsion from the countryside. In a situation of war the already existing marginalisation and discrimination experienced by women is aggravated. Gender based violence is a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedom on a basis of equality with men. The experiences of the women I interviewed revealed not just physical violence and sexual exploitation, as described by some of the interviewees, but also a complete lack of respect and domineering behaviour on the part of the armed groups.

#### **6.2.2, loss of family members**

Some of the women I interviewed experienced direct physical violence. However, all had experienced the loss or serious injury of husbands or other close family members. This violence was deeply felt by the women and was one part of a series of violent events they reported. As has already been pointed out, women experience a multiplicity of forms of violence which contribute to often dramatic and damaging changes in their situation. Being alone has particular consequences for a woman in terms of her status, her safety and her capacity to survive and care for her family making her more vulnerable to abuse and discrimination. The death of a husband or of significant male relatives can be the start of a series of bad experiences and misfortunes.

In the cases of the women I interviewed losing their husband, father, brother, or older children, resulted in a different and unstable life. Not only did they suffer the trauma of the death or injury of their family member but, particularly with the death of a husband, they then had to face daily threats and obstacles alone, principally from paramilitaries, in their searches for lost relatives, for food, for somewhere to live, in their efforts to provide for their children. As both interviewees and testimonies reported the killers of their relatives would leave the bodies of their victims on public display for the women to find or would display notices or pamphlets threatening them with death, in order to induce further fear.



The women related how they were constantly concerned at the appearance of strangers, of people coming and going who might be spying on them. I noted in my field notes how the women would stop talking when a stranger or someone of whom they were suspicious appeared. They could also be killers, people responsible for the murders of family members or others in the community, neighbours who lived side by side with them.

Often losing male family members would result in impoverishment or a further deterioration in their conditions of life. Women on their own would become more vulnerable to being forced to do things for an armed group or to sexual exploitation or assault. Families would experience greater stress. One woman reported how this led to her becoming aggressive to her daughter who then left home only to suffer abuse at the hands of the woman she went to work for. The women described how being alone made them feel vulnerable and unprotected, living in a state of fear and insecurity. Often it was only when they found help and support in a new relationship or from an organisation like the OFP that they began to feel secure again and able to resist.

While the loss of older family members was traumatic and had serious economic and social consequences, the loss of children caused deep sorrow. Nikolić-Ristanović (2000) reported one of her interviewees as saying this was the worst thing that could happen to a woman. Two of my interviewees reported the loss of their children, one who was killed in indiscriminate shooting by paramilitaries and another who reported that her children were kidnapped by paramilitaries, probably as forced recruitment. Kidnapping is practised by both paramilitaries and guerrillas and was one of the reasons guerrilla groups lost support among the population. The interviewee whose daughter was killed said the only reason the paramilitaries allowed her husband to be treated for his injuries, caused when he was holding his daughter, was 'because I had my dead daughter with me'. The woman whose children were kidnapped described her family as 'destroyed' and referred to all the violations she had suffered 'since the day they took my children'. It is hard to imagine the pain of those two circumstances.

### **6.2.3, displacement**

Displacement may not feature as one of the more serious forms of violence in the predominant narrative on war. One reason for this may be because women and children make up the overwhelming majority of those displaced. Displacement is mainly experienced by

women. In the interviews I conducted being forced to leave their home was repeatedly referred to by the interviewees as one of the most serious consequences of the civil war. The sense of being on the run, being chased from place to place, of not having a secure place to live and build a new life contrasted with the feeling of belonging the women revealed once they had found a refuge with the OFP.

A civil war is not just about a conflict between armed forces. It involves a struggle for control of land and resources. Armed groups, particularly in the case of Colombia paramilitary forces, act on behalf of interest groups, landowners or corporations, both local and international, to remove communities or individuals who are in the way of those interests. In some cases, as with the attacks on coca plantations, the government also acts in ways which directly force people to move. In other cases it happens in the face of the government's silence, because the government in a highly militarised society like Colombia is interested in assuring the land is available for profitable activities. Thus displacement is not just a consequence of civil war, an unfortunate collateral effect, it is the war itself. For instance, terror is used through explicit or veiled threats to force notaries to legalise property deals or transfers via a front man, or testaferro. Paramilitaries enforce the transfer.

The women I interviewed provided instances of paramilitary groups taking over public buildings, setting up roadblocks, preventing the delivery of food to a town for weeks at a time. For such things to happen without the intervention of the state's armed forces points to either a state which has ceased to function or to complicity between the state and the paramilitaries, a complicity which one of my interviewees referred to. The testimonies refer to two instances where whole communities were forced to leave their homes and one of the interviewees told of the paramilitaries taking over the village of San Rafael de Chucuri and committing massacres to clear it of 'abnormal people'. The result of events like this is the forced removal of people from the countryside to urban areas to allow mining, oil production, ranching or other businesses to occupy the land.

For the women I interviewed displacement was tied up with the destruction of their families, the death of close family members at the hands of armed men claiming the right to execute those they suspected of collaborating with their enemies, whether they had done so or not, the loss of a job or a source of income like a farm and a constant state of fear and anxiety.

They might not even know who had forced them to move as their knowledge of who was fighting for what was often rudimentary, a fact which reflected the chaos of the war itself.

#### **6.2.4, assassination, threats and intimidation**

As has already been remarked, armed groups are known to target women in order to control communities. Once again gender plays a part. In war, because men are killed, are actively involved in the war or are forced to flee for their safety, many communities in war zones are principally composed of women, old people and children. It is the women who are left behind because they are not active participants and because they are caring for the young and the old. However, the fact that women are not involved as active participants in the civil war, and sometimes do not even know which group is which, does not prevent them being targeted by armed groups who remain suspicious that they will assist their enemies. The women I interviewed referred to this suspicion as one of the reasons armed groups would harass or threaten them. One was severely beaten because paramilitaries thought, wrongly, that her daughter was associated with guerrillas. Others reported how male relatives or husbands were killed or injured for the same reason. Guerrillas were also suspicious of non-combatants and forced people to show solidarity when a leader was killed in battle with soldiers.

Threats and intimidation come in many forms. They could be overt warnings in the form of written death threats or shots fired at houses, farms, buses or boats, including indiscriminate shooting, all of which were reported by the interviewees and in the testimonies. Interviewees described how armed men would force their way into their houses demanding to know where the guerrillas were and would hit them if they did not provide information. The bodies of victims of assassination would be publicly displayed to frighten relatives, or the population at large, looking for loved ones. In other cases people on the way to a demonstration could be taken off a bus and a list made of all those present or strangers would appear asking questions.

Actions like creating roadblocks or other demonstrations of power, like the occupation of public buildings, are designed to intimidate whole communities. The testimonies reveal how, time and time again, the acts and threats of the paramilitaries were designed to deter women from attending meetings or demonstrations, to close down offices or OFP houses or to force staff to leave their employment. The expert witness, the OFP member of staff, revealed how

she had been targeted in this way, eventually being forced to leave as the danger became too great.

As the expert witness pointed out the actions of the paramilitaries were aimed at groups which threatened or were in the way of powerful interest groups. What might be experienced as 'indiscriminate' violence by the women I interviewed had a purpose which the women also understood. As one of them put it 'the paramilitaries are interested in territorial control'. The expert witness made the same point when she described how when they first occupied Barrancabermeja the paramilitaries had persecuted trade unionists and caused the 'massive displacement of families that are located in strategic areas', all of which was reminiscent of the point made by Chomsky that the real target of the war is not the guerrillas but civil society (Giraldo, 1996).

#### **6.2.5, feelings of fear**

The everyday experience of the women I interviewed was of fear. Fear comes from the continuous threats, the perpetration of massacres and disappearances and the continuous presence of the armed groups especially the paramilitaries who declare their power and the control of the zone and over the population in their pamphlets. Creation of fear in the civilian population was a deliberate tactic of the paramilitaries as one interviewee put it: 'paramilitaries enter and insert an atmosphere of fear with all the violence'.

Women frequently had to worry about sudden house searches, usually performed by unknown armed men, who sometimes wore masks to conceal their identities, as stated in the denunciation-testimonies. Sometimes it was claimed these search parties planted weapons, which served as a pretext for arrest, physical and psychological abuse and detention. The whole procedure was ridden with fear and insecurity. All the interviewees recounted the fear and anxiety they experienced as did the expert witness, who referred to the constant death threats bringing 'the idea of insecurity',

In addition to the intimidation women experienced on the streets and in their homes paramilitaries also made threatening phone calls, would follow people around or take photographs to harass and frighten women. The interviewees repeatedly describe the state of fear they have lived with over many years with statements like 'We don't feel calm anymore, we are always prevented and afraid' and 'In the place I lived suddenly you could hear shooting and screams and a lot of movement of people. But I was always afraid to go out to search'. The

denunciation-testimonies provide similar evidence of the verbal and symbolic threats women suffer which are frightening and disturbing.

#### **6.2.6, social control and other restrictions experienced by women**

Women experience forms of control and restriction which are not applied to men, particularly in patriarchal societies like Colombia. In times of war, when violence becomes the common practice, these attitudes become more pronounced. Both the expert witness and some of the interviewees commented on the way women were controlled in terms of their behaviour, their dress, their freedom to move around. Although men would also experience restrictions on their movements in an area controlled by an armed group these controls applied particularly to them as women. One of the interviewees described how she had to stay in touch with her paramilitary captors by using a walkie talkie. She had been forced to work for the group and was also being sexually abused. In order to monitor her activities she was required to report where she was and what she was doing.

The constant presence of armed men, roadblocks, the occupation of buildings, strange men walking round all contributed to this sense of being controlled. The interviewees reported feeling they were constantly being watched. When the husband of one of the interviewees was badly injured she said they had to pass more than eight roadblocks to take him to hospital. On another occasion she reported how paramilitaries prevented lorries from bringing deliveries to the town and said they weren't able to go out at all.

The way interviewees stopped talking during the interviews when they saw a stranger brought this home to me. Indeed my own experience of being questioned by a taxi driver made me feel very uneasy. One woman described how she felt she was being slowly killed, she had no tranquility.

Guerrillas and paramilitaries would appear at different times, both expecting to receive support, supplies or information. Being caught between these different armed groups meant the women were constantly subjected to the psychological violence of being suspected that either they or their relatives were supporting the other side. Women who were exposed to this form of violence felt helpless as they could be beaten or killed if they were disbelieved. In both interviews and testimonies women reported how they were threatened not to tell anyone if they were beaten or a relative was killed.

The interviewee who had been forced to provide domestic and sexual services for paramilitaries provided the clearest example of how this control operated and also the best example of how her life changed when she was able to find a home with the OFP. With the paramilitaries she said 'I was very afraid to go out because I was always under threat. If I don't do what they want, I was forced to cook for them and to please some of them, they beat me'. However, since joining the OFP she felt she had returned to some kind of normality: 'Now that I am with this community, I feel protected by the OFP and I feel part of the community'.

#### **6.2.7, women's involvement in the civil war**

Most women are not directly involved as fighters in this civil war. Only one of the women interviewed had a relative, her father, who was involved with an armed group, a guerrilla group. For the most part women are passive actors, victims of displacement and cruel violence, simply because they live in an area which is being fought over. The situation in the region of Urabá provided by Martin (2000) is similar to that of Santander where he says there has been 'a rush of all kinds of private interests on the zone, everybody trying to get hold of a part of the available resources' (Martin, 2000:169). This competition to gain control of resources has fuelled the civil war resulting in the terrorising and displacement of the civilian population, particularly women. As Meertens puts it: 'since more than two decades women are victims of displacement due to the increasing attacks of armed actors that are involved in this war and women are the ones that as political subjects, suffer the indirect effects of the political violence' (Meertens, 1995:49). The civilian population is at the mercy of the armed combatants. Guerrillas have kidnapped civilians to raise funds. Paramilitaries seek to impose order by instilling fear in the communities they want to control, especially in women who are made to feel vulnerable and powerless and expected to be obedient to male power.

#### **6.2.8, the other side of civil war**

In a time of war public attention is usually focused on rape as it is often considered a synonym for violence against women in war. Rape is a tactic and a kind of torture used in civil war, as is recognised in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of 31<sup>st</sup> October 2000, which causes lasting psychological harm to the victim. Talking about such a trauma needs a protected environment for which there is no space in a prolonged civil war. The continuing threats to their lives and their exposure to the civil war environment after being raped forces women to move on.

Rape is about power and sexual violence is an instrument used by armed groups to demonstrate their power. Societies with a patriarchal culture such as Colombia support the power of men over women as was discussed in Chapter 2. Within the family the role of the man is nurtured by the behaviour of the father. Men then reproduce this type of behaviour in other spheres. In this way men take it for granted that they have the right to use all sorts of sexual violence against women who are considered to be willing and available. Poor women from lower social classes in particular are victims of sexual violence. As an example of this, we see in the latest study into sexual violence in Colombia by UNIFEM (2010) that there is social and institutional tolerance of the sexual exploitation and abuse of girls under 14 years old. Women and girls are blamed for this abuse on the grounds of their behaviour or dress and in line with this armed groups, especially the paramilitaries, impose rules of conduct on women and girls claiming they are acting to protect them when in fact they use sexual abuse to intimidate and dominate women.

Talking about the experience of sexual violence to a stranger is often difficult for women. This may be because women who have survived these experiences are trying to rebuild their lives and to keep going in order to support their children and other family members. Talking about such a trauma may only be possible in a safe environment when they know that the family has enough to survive and when the woman feels safe herself. The interviewee who suffered rape and sexual enslavement referred to this alongside the kidnapping of her children and her control by a paramilitary group. Often this kind of abuse does not occur on its own but is part of a sequence of events and abuse. Indeed it may be that victims do not see it as the most severe form of violence they suffer. One of Nicolic-Ristanovic's interviewees said rape was nothing to the loss of a child or a loved one (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000:29). The trauma caused by such appalling forms of violence as the kidnapping of children, displacement, enslavement and rape within such a short time as described by this interviewee is hard to imagine. Now she says she is moving from place to place searching for her children, searching for a job, surviving.

The women I interviewed, including this interviewee, talked about their everyday survival strategies in a civil war. They were all facing a multiplicity of forms of violence so seeing herself as a survivor rather than a victim is also a way to talk about rape and to overcome that trauma as part of her attempts to cope with the experience of the civil war. But rape was not what this interviewee highlighted. She described how her family had been destroyed and said:

‘I have experienced all kind of violations, threats from the paramilitaries, sexual abuse since the day they took my children. It was with aggression and by force.’ All this was described as happening ‘since they day they took my children’. The horror of when her children were kidnapped stood out in her memory as the starting point of her suffering. As she said: ‘this situation makes you to be different from before’. All the interviewees had suffered this aggression and force which had destroyed their families and their lives and made them different from before.

### **6.3, consequences of violence**

In order to understand more about the violence women experience I will explore some of the consequences my interviewees reported.

#### **6.3.1, women heads of household and their special needs**

In a civil war the violence experienced by women is aggravated when their families are decimated or destroyed. The loss of family members is traumatic, particularly the loss of children. All of my interviewees described the killing or kidnapping of family members by armed groups. Two reported the kidnapping of children or brothers and how they were still searching for their loved ones. Another interviewee’s daughter was killed when paramilitaries were shooting indiscriminately.

The loss of family members often has wider consequences. Losing a husband, father or brother can leave a woman on her own as the sole head of a household. Even the loss of children can affect a family’s economic situation. One interviewee described how as a single mother her children helped her in the market to sell vegetables.

Being a single parent leaves women disadvantaged even in times of peace and prosperity. Women earn less and often lack qualifications and skills so the loss of a male breadwinner is usually a serious setback for a family. My interviewees continually referred to their poverty and the difficulty of find a job or of surviving on their own with their children.

But in a time of war they also have to endure the stresses of worrying about the safety of their children on their own. The threats, intimidation, house searches, roadblocks and the other harassment they suffer has already been described. As has already been pointed out women and children make up the great majority of those who are displaced. Their status, or lack of it, as single women, widows or just women on their own with children makes them and their children vulnerable to abuse and to the debilitating effects of depression and fear.



As one of my interviewees put it: ‘we know the conditions to survive, that is not being involved with anyone and not to speak to anyone’, or another: ‘I was very afraid to go out because I was always under threat’, or a third: ‘we don’t feel calm anymore, we are always prevented and afraid’.

### **6.3.2, consequences of being displaced on women and their families**

I have already discussed how women experience displacement as a form of violence. They are forced to accept the abrupt physical and mental rupture with the area and the social group where they grew up as well as the violent, arbitrary expropriation which leads to immediate impoverishment, the loss of social networks and family and collective life projects. This situation is aggravated by the psychological effects not only of being ejected from their home environment but the stresses and difficulties of adapting to the new environment where they are forced to settle.

As individuals women have to suffer the humiliation of being displaced and are forced to beg in the places in which they have to settle. Their status in their new home is uncertain and sometimes degrading. For example, a woman from a rural area may only have been a peasant and may not have been very literate, but at least her social status was known. Once she becomes a displaced person she has no connections or networks to relate to and she is left rootless and unsure of who she is and how she fits in to the local society. As a consequence of displacement women and families have to go through a new acculturation process. They have to get to know and adapt to changes in their culture, to new social habits and ways of doing things.

### **6.3.3, consequences for communities**

The violence perpetrated against women has wider effects than just on individuals. As has been pointed out women are targeted in order to control communities. The whole community is affected by the insecurity in the area, people live with stress and anxiety they no longer trust each other because the whole environment is filled with fear and suspicion. Neighbour distrusts neighbour and sometimes members of the same family distrust one another. The controls imposed by armed groups on women, particularly by paramilitaries, are designed to re-establish traditional hierarchies. As adult women often make up the majority in such communities acting to enforce traditional standards on them helps to re-establish other forms of dependency on local bosses and power structures. Elements which opposed these structures, such as trade unions, women’s organisations or human rights groups, are targeted

and terror and threats are used to prevent women becoming active in these groups, as the testimonies and the expert witness make plain.

One of the ways the government of Colombia, the various armed groups, other nations and international bodies seek to legitimise their actions is to concentrate on the war on drugs. The only comment my interviewees, the testimonies or the expert witness make on this topic is the report about the damage done to ordinary farms by spraying. The reality is that the corruption of the drugs trade affects precisely the groups and institutions which claim to be at war with it, the political classes and the paramilitaries. Even guerrillas, who for a long time were careful about their involvement with drug traffickers, have in some cases taken up trafficking themselves or in others taken advantage of traffickers to tax them to raise funds. These campaigns against drug traffickers affect the lives of ordinary people while the criminals themselves are, in many cases, financing politicians, integrated into the paramilitary groups, seizing land and operating death squads alongside the army and the police.

The impact on communities is the depopulation of rural areas, the impoverishment of the civilian population and increased migration to the cities. Women in particular are left stranded and unprotected in towns and villages which are controlled by armed and violent factions while local and national authorities either ignore or are complicit in the actions of these groups.

#### **6.4, contributions to existing research**

This study has sought to contribute to a more detailed understanding of the social and political conditions of Colombia at the present time. With the help of feminist studies it was possible to make women's voices heard, to undertake qualitative research and to provide a further analysis to help develop theories based on the particular experiences of women in civil war.

##### **6.4.1, sociology**

From the sociological point of view, first of all, this research has contributed to the definition of violence against women within the particular conditions of Colombian culture, its government and local authorities and the various armed groups which operate in the country. It has illustrated how women experience violence and how this violence is not just physical but is mental, emotional and symbolic as a means of imposing control and power as Bourdieu

(1990) and Martin (1999) have argued. This research confirms many of the points made by Nikolić-Ristanović (1995, 2000) as to how women perceive and experience violence in her studies on the war in the Balkans.

Second, even though under patriarchal structures the traditional role of women inside the family is dominated by male power (Kantzara 2006), as a result of the civil war many women become heads of households and single parents with all the burden of supporting their families on their own, a fact which will create a new profile in existing social and cultural patterns.

#### **6.4.2, criminology**

Regarding gender and crime in the area of criminological studies Morris (1987) has said half the population is traditionally ignored<sup>69</sup> while Giddens (1989) stressed that 'many textbooks in criminology still include virtually nothing about women, save for sections on rape and prostitution and most theories of deviance similarly disregard women almost completely' (Giddens 1989:139).

In general in the area of criminological studies violence in war is still mainly defined in terms of the experience of men. In Colombia there has been little work done on gender and violence against women except for a few feminist writers and social scientists. This thesis contributes to the understanding of the gender relations which operate in civil war conditions revealing the discrimination and multiple offences perpetrated by armed groups, in particular paramilitary organisations.

#### **6.4.3, human rights**

In the field of human rights the problem of taking effective action on violence against women remains. As Bunch (1995:175) put it: 'Understanding this notion contributes to building the political will that denounces this kind of violence in our lives and in our communities, both at the local and state levels. To achieve a successful turnaround we have to reexamine the ways women's human rights have been categorized and dismissed as a "private" matter.' Her comment that 'we need to promote the concept that individual states share the responsibility to confront women's human rights issues, particularly violence against women' (ibid:175) is of particular significance in the case of Colombia where women experience the kind of violence described in this thesis on a

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<sup>69</sup> Cited by Giddens in Sociology 1989, p.139

daily basis. International human rights groups do not focus their work on the impacts of violence in a civil war on women and rely very much on the work of local women's organisations. This research provides a case study of the offences against women in specific conditions of war in Colombia.

Despite the fact that the conflict in Colombia meets the criteria established by authors like Posada Carbo (2000) in terms of the scale of the violence and its nature for it to be considered a civil war Colombian academics, including Posada, refuse to adopt this definition. This demonstrates how even the definitions of violence are subject to internal political dispute which in turn leads to a failure to take proper measures to respond to the violence and to the suffering of those most impacted. This study confirms observations concerning the nature of the civil war in Colombia made by Martin (2002) which have focussed on Urabá, and contributes to the examination of the needs of those affected and how women's situation in civil war is ignored.

In analysing the data I observed that there is a high level of inaction or complicity by national and local government authorities where the acts of paramilitaries are concerned whereby, because of the chaos that reigns and the influence and activity of some external agents, together with the lack of information and communication, different agencies, interest groups and armed actors behave with impunity according to their own interests.

The women interviewed stressed their lack of awareness and recognition of the armed groups and their uncertainty and confusion as to what was going on in the region. They revealed a lack of confidence in the authorities which they considered to be either negligent or complicit in the actions of the paramilitaries. In addition the careless spraying of crops as part of the coca elimination programme only adds to the suffering of the people and their mistrust of the authorities. Therefore, the nature of the violence against women in civil war is related to women's perceptions of war in the wider context of managing to survive, being displaced and becoming the head of a household.

This research confirms the findings reported by NGOs and international organisations in their description of the particular circumstances which women experience, such as the physical assaults, threats, murder or relatives, displacement, their social conditions and their vulnerability. These reports have made recommendations to the Colombian Government, in

order to put an end to this situation. Very little, however, has changed in this respect. The armed groups continue with their offences and women remained unprotected.

As the Colombian NGO Mesa de Trabajo Mujer y Conflicto Armado stressed in its XI report of 2009 women continued to be victims of threats, harassment, sexual violence, murder and other crimes. In particular they note that those women who work for human rights in their communities are targeted.

This thesis is an important contribution to the understanding of the real situation of local women and one which makes their experiences visible and public as feminist reconstructions of reality.

#### **6.4.4, methodological studies**

In the area of methodological studies this research has sought to advance the understanding of the particular characteristics of Colombian women, to improve techniques of interviewing and to be sensitive to them in their different communities, to understand their particular social contexts and in this way to help develop proper or particular theories about women in Colombia and Latin American countries or at least to help them shape their own realities. As Nikolić-Ristanović said of her research ‘Starting with the personal experience of women, we considered that the best definition and meaning of violence, and thus, of the subject of our research, can be given by those who have survived this war (Nikolić-Ristanović 1995: 23).

#### **6.5, areas in need of further study**

There is a need to study the nature of gender relations in Colombia in detail and in particular women’s experience of violence. This study makes a start but there is a serious lack of research in this field, which is badly needed if Colombia is to profit from recent moves towards peace.

#### **6.6, legal and practical measures**

It is essential that government authorities, scholars and researchers accept the reality of violence against women and the need to act to uphold women’s human rights. It is not enough to make declarations. As has been noted by human rights advocates without co-ordinated action to integrate women’s rights into all aspects of government policy and

legislation progress will not be made. Social infrastructure to provide for the welfare of women and children needs to be created in an integrated way

### **6.7, some recommendations to the Government, local authorities and NGOs**

In the first instance it is plainly important that the civil war is brought to an end and peace and security be provided for the population as a whole, a responsibility which rests on all parties to the conflict. However, it is also important that the Colombian authorities end the state of impunity which exists so that armed groups, including armed forces of the state, are held to account for the violence they perpetrate.

Violence needs to be understood in all its forms, not just in terms of physical harm, but also in the trauma women experience as survivors and victims of the Colombian civil war as described in this thesis.

The primary responsibility for bringing about the changes rests with the Colombian Government, but it is essential that regional and local authorities play their part in creating policies and enforcing laws to protect women and uphold their rights. In the meantime support is needed for those who have been displaced, who have suffered rape and sexual assaults and who need assistance in recovering from the trauma of living through the civil war.

Government and local authorities should:

- Provide secure shelter for displaced people and their families and the necessary medical assistance to help them overcome the trauma they have experience;
- Prosecute the perpetrators of violent acts during the civil war and end impunity;
- Return people to land or homes from which they have been forcibly removed;
- Act to ensure that programmes such as crop spraying do not affect the wider population and to compensate those so affected;
- Fund and support Non-Government Organisations providing assistance to the victims of the civil war;
- Provide support for organisations promoting and providing legal assistance in asserting women's rights;

- Promote gender equality through education in schools, in the community and through the media to challenge the stereotypes that empower men over women;
- Prosecute the perpetrators of domestic violence and ensure that domestic violence is no longer seen as a private matter;
- Empower women within their communities through education and job creation.

Non-Government Organisations have a critical role to play. Many like the OFP already do so under extremely stressful conditions, without the support of authorities or in the face of hostile action by the same authorities and armed groups. It is essential that authorities at all levels uphold the rule of law and provide NGOs with the necessary support so that they can do their work.

In this respect it is important to recognise the existence and the role of organisations like the OFP in the assistance and care of violated women in the region. One of the most important features of the interviews I conducted was the sense of abandonment, insecurity, hopelessness and isolation the women experienced. However, they all commented on the sense of belonging and optimism they felt once they came to be involved with the OFP and recounted how they felt protected and secure after being so violated. The contrast in their experience of being alone and then finding a community is a comment in itself of how women experience civil war. Their involvement with the OFP provided hope of healing and a reason to continue living.

NGOs should focus on the following support strategies:

- Providing safe environments both inside and outside areas of conflict;
- Building supportive communities;
- Job creation and schemes to resettle people on land;
- Providing secure supplies of food, clean water, medicines and clothing;
- Health care, including psychological care;
- Protection from sexual exploitation.

Colombian society is undergoing great change in its social, economic, cultural and political structures. Its cities are overcrowded, millions are displaced, many having

experienced appalling trauma receiving little or no assistance. Productive rural areas have been abandoned or have been seized by powerful groups to exploit for their own gains, while local communities are destroyed. If action is not taken then peace will not be achieved and the government will continue to lose credibility and control.

International organisations and NGOs have carried out important research on violence against women, Amnesty International, the UN and OXFAM among others. They have made important contributions both in their research and findings and in the recommendations they make to the Colombian government. However, they are dependent on the work done by local groups who provide them with information and cases to report on and to assist them in providing practical assistance. The responsibility rests on the Colombian government and other Colombian institutions to remedy this situation. In Colombia still there is still a lack of this assistance.

## **6.8, a final word**

Finally, as Lavrin 1993 stressed, regarding the experiences of women, 'protagonismo means to live one's own life, to speak for oneself and take account of one's own actions. It can be a personal or a social experience. Therefore protagonismo allows women to translate their experiences into collective political consciousness and political participation' (Lavrin 1993:30). We have to remember it is because women have fought for their rights that violence against women is beginning to be taken seriously. This can serve as a way for women to organise themselves and inform others about their situation in order to formulate policies and to measure state responses.



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## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview Questionnaire**

#### **1. Name, age and civil status**

#### **2. Questions**

- i. Could you please tell me your experience of living in your previous home and how long did you live there?
- ii. Could you please tell me your experience of losing members of your family or any other relatives?
- iii. Could you please tell me what has happened to your family since then?
- iv. Could you please tell me whether you have experienced any changes or any particular situations in the area where you now live?
- v. Could you please tell me what kind of violence you have experienced personally
- vi. Could you please tell me about any other experiences of violence that have happened to relatives or to other people you know?
- vii. Could you please describe your feelings of fear?
- viii. Could you please tell me about your experiences with armed groups?
- ix. Could you please tell me of any other experiences or feelings related to your life within the community?
- x. Are there any other experiences of violence you would like to tell me about?

## **Appendix 2**

### **Description of the Interviewees**

The first interviewee is a 34 year old mestizo woman who had been displaced from a small town in the Department of Valle de Cauca, in south-west Colombia some years earlier. She is a single mother with two teenage sons. She was the first woman participant and we had to travel to where she was living in a village some way outside Barrancabermeja. She was involved in voluntary work in the OFP's restaurant providing lunch for workers. She was not ready for the interview when we arrived and I had to wait for about 10 minutes. In the meantime the director prepared an empty room for the interview. At the beginning it was difficult because she was shy and very emotionally disturbed. When she started to speak she cried intensively for about 5 minutes; she said her situation was very critical. Everything started when the paramilitaries took control of the city of Barrancabermeja. They forced their way into her house and took both of her sons away and forced her to work for the armed group. She was given a walkie-talkie so that they could check up on her and keep her under their control. Her experience of serving and attending to the needs of the paramilitaries was very difficult for her. Her job was to cook for the paramilitaries who would often turn up without warning. She was not allowed to speak to anybody. She was constantly very afraid. She said that she thought she was about to die. Later, she said, she managed to escape from the place where she was being imprisoned. She told me about all the violence that she suffered when her sons were taken away by the armed group. She explained the difficulties she had encountered in getting to the place where she was now and in particular about her struggle to find her two sons who are still missing.

The second interviewee is a 25 year old Afro-Colombian woman from the Department of Chocó in the north-west of Colombia. She was a widow who was now living with another man. She has four children. We had to travel some way as she was living in a village on the other side of the city of Barrancabermeja. In the countryside we found a group of small houses that the director of the OFP had applied to use. The houses were not completely built but they were each able to accommodate a family of five or six people. She said she had applied to live in one of these houses with her husband when they settled in the area but he was killed by an armed group. The interview took place in her house. She was taking care of a small child. There were three interruptions, one for about fifteen minutes when she had to

do things for her children who needed her attention. The second interruption was for ten minutes because some strange men were passing nearby and she explained that we had to be careful because the area was controlled by armed groups. The third interruption occurred when a neighbour knocked on her door to ask for something. This only lasted a couple of minutes. During the interview I noticed she was very calm and I asked her why she was so calm. She said she had learned how to survive in a very difficult environment and to do this she had to keep silent, not speak to anybody and not go out for any reason except to buy the food.

The third interviewee is a 21 year old mestizo woman who came from the Department of Antioquia where she was living with her parents. She was located not very far from the second interviewee in an OFP house. We travelled for about 10 minutes to the south of the municipality where she was working on a farm with her husband. She was able to take time away from the farm so we were able to undertake the interview without interruptions. She had a very sad story to tell and this caused her to shed many tears, especially when she referred to the death of her small daughter and her husband's injuries. Her daughter was killed by a paramilitary who was shooting at her husband, who was wounded. He was accused of belonging to the guerrillas. She also suffered from being forced to move, first of all because the government was using crop spraying against coca plantations, which also destroyed their farm, and because both guerrillas and paramilitaries constantly stole their crops. The paramilitaries also controlled them by restricting their movement. They even tried to prevent her burying her dead daughter and taking her husband to the hospital. These circumstances, with the death of her daughter and the injury to her husband, forced them to leave.

The fourth interviewee is a 45 year old mestizo woman, who is from the city of Barrancabermeja. She is a widow and as a way of surviving she helps to provide food in the OFP restaurants. She was working in the OFP restaurant situated in the centre of the city and we conducted the interview there. I had to wait 15 minutes until she was available to start the interview. There was also an interruption of about 10 minutes because she said there were a lot of people coming and going and passing by. As with the other interviewees she was concerned about people in the area who she didn't know or who she feared were paramilitaries. This made her very nervous. She told me she had been a victim of domestic violence by her husband, who was threatening to sexually assault her daughter, which had forced her daughter to leave the house. Her husband later died. The saddest and most

dramatic part of her story was her experience with an armed group of paramilitaries who came to her house searching for her daughter claiming she belonged to the guerrillas. She said that at that moment she saw death and in order to defend her daughter she preferred to put up with torture and beatings. After asking her where her daughter was and finding she was not there the paramilitaries kidnapped the mother. She was taken away and subjected to vicious torture to get her to say where her daughter was. She said the beatings she received made her think she was going to die. After a week someone came and said the person they were looking for was not her daughter. She was then released, badly injured, with a warning from the paramilitaries not to tell anyone what had happened. She hid in her house for two months until her daughter returned and told her to go to the OFP to make a statement. From then she began to recover. She still had pain in her breasts where she had been beaten and was very sad throughout the interview.

The fifth interviewee is a 35 years old single mestizo woman from the department of Bolivar in the northern part of Colombia. She had suffered displacement. This interview was also held in the same restaurant. A friend came with her to the interview as she was very frightened. The friend sat in during the interview but didn't say anything. She had suffered the loss of almost all the men in her family and had many painful stories. Her father had joined the guerrillas. Her two brothers were taken by paramilitaries and had disappeared. The man she had been living with was killed by the paramilitaries and his body was thrown into the river. We had one interruption for about five minutes because a group of suspicious men came in saying they were looking for someone. During the interview I could see her tension and fear. She said that she has had death threats because she keeps searching for her brothers. She said that she is not going to rest until she finds all of them.



## **Appendix 3**

### **Field Notes**

I didn't know what to expect when I set out for Barrancabermeja in the Department of Santander. I arrived safely and took a taxi to get to the OFP office. To my surprise, because I was still naïve about what I would find, I was asked who I was and what I wanted by the driver, along with other inquisitive and impertinent questions. I still did not understand exactly what was going on and why he was asking me so many questions. I had not expected anything like this and it made me feel nervous to be questioned in this way.

On the way to the house I saw the area was much the same as many countryside regions of Colombia, with lots of poverty, a lot of men standing around in the street and in the squares selling food and things. Others were passing by and looking around at what was going on and checking on who was coming and going.

The OFP office was in a large house in the centre of Barrancabermeja. I had to wait on the ground floor in a room on my own until someone came to collect me to take me to see the director. I went in a very old elevator up one floor to get to the director's office. When we talked she gave me a briefing about the area. She said the majority of the people in the area were working for oil companies. The unions, which were strong, were often on strike. The paramilitaries had killed many of the union leaders which had left many women as widows.

She told me she had found five women who were willing to be interviewed. She said she would have take me on her motorbike as the women were located in different places and this was the easiest and quickest way to get around. Things moved very quickly so I didn't have time to ask her any questions, I just waited for things to happen. On the way I tried to keep an eye on the countryside as we drove along to see if I could get an idea of what the place was like. The whole area seemed to be very poor, rural and isolated with bad roads and small houses and fields.

When I met the first interviewee I found that she was very emotional and was unable to restrain her tears. She continued crying for some time. I was very moved and I didn't know what to say. She told she had had a very unlucky life and was waiting to find her two sons who had been taken by paramilitaries. I found her story of being obliged to work for the

paramilitaries and to do what they wanted very upsetting. I had not expected the interview to be like this.

On the way to the second interview, which was along a very rough road, I found myself thinking how difficult life must be for these women and wondering how they could survive under these conditions.

However, I found the second participant was much calmer. She was looking after her children and seemed not to be so worried about her situation. She told me that she had learned how to cope with the threats: “I learned how to behave with the armed groups, if I don’t say anything to them and do what they want, then I don’t have problems.” At first I thought that perhaps she had some relatives who were involved with the paramilitaries who might offer her some protection. But when I asked her about whether she had any involvement or any relationship with the armed groups she said she didn’t know any of them. Each woman responded had her own way of responding to the situation she found herself in.

The third interviewee I met was a quiet and very sad young woman. Her daughter had been killed by an armed group. Even though she cried when she told me her story she remained calm. She was determined to tell her story and said she wanted to let as many people as possible know about the situation there.

There was a delay before the fourth interview began because the woman was working. While I was waiting in the OFP house I watched the people who were coming into the restaurant, which was in the house. There were a lot of people, mainly men, coming in for their lunch. It was very basic. They served soup followed by a dish of rice, potatoes and chicken with salad. Some came in with a pot to collect a dish to take away. There were about ten tables which could seat four customers each.

The OFP provided meals for workers and the women who were cooking and serving were OFP residents. When the fourth interviewee appeared we left the restaurant and went to sit in a corner of a room outside the restaurant. At the start of the interview she was confused because I had a computer, which I was using to record the interview. It made her suspicious and she thought you were a spy. The other interviewees had not been bothered about this. She was a bit reluctant to speak but I reassured her that I was genuine. She seemed to me a very sad woman and this was reflected in her face. What she had suffered had made her ill. When

we stopped for ten minutes because she was worried about some people who had come into the restaurant I could see that she was nervous. She was very fearful and her experiences had had a lasting impact. Later it occurred to me that she had problems in expressing herself because perhaps she didn't want to remember. I noticed that it took an effort for her to tell me her story. She did this because of the support she had received from the organisation and she wanted to help them publicise the bad things that were happening.

The last interviewee came to the office with a woman friend. I didn't understand why she felt she needed someone to accompany her. But she said that she had received death threats and she could not go anywhere on her own. When she said this I understood how nervous she was. She was very clear in answering my questions. Her friend was always trying to calm her down. She always had one eye on the entrance and behaved as if she was in a hurry.

I then went to the OFP office in the same building to interview the director as my expert interviewee. She was also a bit nervous. It seemed all of them were very aware of people coming and going who were observing them. They didn't want to tell me anything about what was happening at that moment. The director was very clear in her statements. She talked about the region and the community she worked for, which gave me a strong sense of her commitment. She talked about the community as if it was her family. I noticed that she was very careful when she talked about the women and discussed individual cases.

When I was returning by bus to Bucaramanga, which is the capital of the Department of Santander, I was able to see the destruction the region had suffered. Houses had been knocked down, walls were pockmarked with bullet holes, trees had been cut down.

In the bus I thought a lot about the impacts on the women I had interviewed and all of these experiences. It took me some time to recover. Since everything was new for me it took time to understand all the troubles that these women were experiencing. In particular I found it difficult to grasp the lack of freedom they felt. When I was on the bus it occurred to me that none of the women, except the first one, told me that they didn't have enough food to eat or that they had difficulties in getting medical treatment. On reflection I was surprised by this because they were all poor women. Of the four other women only the fourth interviewee mentioned that she was under medical treatment because of the beatings she had received to her breasts but she did not mention anything about any difficulties in getting medicines or

other problems. It occurred to me that perhaps this is part of our culture, we suffer in silence and we don't say what we really need.

Another point that occurred to me is that people's silence has negative results. They stay silent because they are frightened. Many members of the family may witness the cruelty of the armed groups but they do not feel able to declare what has happened to them to the authorities. The women are very frightened that they will be accused of belonging to one or other armed group. Sometimes they do go to the authorities, but this often achieves little. One interviewee said that when she did decide to make a statement to the authorities apart from writing a report they did nothing.

During my visit I noticed the disintegration of families and the atmosphere of fear that reigns in the area. The poor conditions of the people also reflected the situation of violence. The presence of armed groups in the area, the lack of confidence in the authorities among the population created a general atmosphere of fear and tension.

## **Appendix 4**

### **Testimonies**

I translated eight testimonies from the Spanish into English as further examples of the material.

26 The paramilitaries have been saying to people living in difference barrios (poor districts) of Puerto Wilches that the women's house is under threat... "It is possible we will bomb it." "The OFP has to finish because it is finished." (May 27 2001)

27 There rumours were designed to create fear among the women and to reduce their participation in the OFP." (May 27 2001)

53 On 21<sup>st</sup> November armed men (paramilitaries) went to Dora Guzman's house in order to threaten her family and that of Gloria Amparo Suárez, in particular the lives of their sons, all less than 9 years old. (November 21 2001)

100 On 21<sup>st</sup> July 2004 neighbours of the Women's House on the Torcoroma Barrio reported that at around 9pm on 20<sup>th</sup> July while we had been celebrating our organisation's anniversary two paramilitaries had gone around the block threatening people with guns and had told them to close their houses and shops and to go to sleep. A person from the neighbourhood had called the police who had organised a search and arrested two men, Jorge Acevedo Alvarado and Raul Sanabria Duarte, for threatening the local people. The police said the two men had not had any arms on them but had been wearing lots of shirts, one on top of the other. They told the media that they were extortionists although they were identified as paramilitaries when they threatened people. Many of those living in this area are former or present workers of the Ecopetrol company, of banks and private companies as well as members of the police, army and SIJIN, the security police. Earlier an army unit, Armada 007, which was notorious for killing many union leaders in Barrancabermeja, used to operate in this area. (July 20 2004)

101 On 5<sup>th</sup> October an international seminar called Women against War. The rooms where the participants were staying at the Hotel Sport were searched and all their belongings were left in a mess but nothing was taken. This sent a clear message of harassment. The hotel claimed to know nothing. Later they heard that the same had happened to seminar participants who had been staying in other hotels. (October 5 2004)

116 On 24<sup>th</sup> January 2005 at 5.30 in the morning, when the woman in charge of cleaning the OFP head office arrived at the building she found two paramilitaries nearby. Full of fear she quickly opened the door and immediately closed it. The two men then started to knocking and kicking the door. At 6.30am on the same day the woman in charge of the cooking arrived at the kitchen which is situated next door to the headquarters. She saw the same two paramilitaries and recognised one as a man called 'Ojito', which is an alias, who was a chief assassin who had committed murders in Barrancabermeja. She knocked on the door and entered the building quickly. They then saw the paramilitaries looking into the building. This made them panic and they called the rest of the OFP team and the International Peace Brigades. (January 24 2005)

126 On 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2006 the body of an unidentified woman was found with marks of torture. The body was identified two days later on 24<sup>th</sup> March by her parents, Alfonso Agudelo and Marisbel Peñaloza, and by members of the OFP as Yamile Agudelo Peñaloza, a worker for the OFP. (March 22 2006)

129 A woman coordinator of one of the restaurants of the OFP was stopped in front of her work and papers she was carrying were knocked from her hands with a warning to leave the organisation, and further she was not to have any more any contact with the OFP's women, a fact that frighten her and made her escape (April 1 2006)

