

Laying Down Arms, Reclaiming Souls: Sexual Violence against men and boys in the context of the armed conflict in Colombia

Bogotá, London, 19 June 2022 (@RedMujeresVP @AllSurvivorsPro). On this International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales (RMVP), the Focal Groups of Male Victims of Sexual Violence (the Focal Groups), and All Survivors Project (ASP) released a public report based on the main findings jointly submitted to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (SJP) on 17 March 2022.

This report focuses on sexual violence committed against men and boys during the armed conflict in Colombia and the investigation of such violence pursuant to the truth and justice framework established under the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia — People’s Army (FARC-EP – Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo).

Sexual violence was pervasive in the context of Colombia’s armed conflict and was perpetrated by all parties. Recognising the serious nature of this crime, the Constitutional Court of Colombia ordered that it be prioritised by the SJP, the justice component of the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition established under the Peace Agreement.

"Women have been the majority of victims of sexual violence in the Colombian armed conflict, but we have not been the only ones. Men and boys were also victims of this crime and, like us, face obstacles in accessing justice," said Ángela María Escobar, RMVP's National Coordinator. "The Peace Agreement gave us the opportunity to meet each other and start working together so that the Special Jurisdiction for Peace opens the macro case on sexual violence, to ensure that armed actors and society understand that this is a crime and not a cultural practice."

The joint submission documented 75 cases of sexual violence against men and boys that occurred between 1989 and 2015. The cases were initially reported to authorities in Colombia in 2019 and 2021 during three "Collective Complaint Days" organised by RMVP, the Focal Groups and ASP. The joint submission focused on analysing incidents and patterns of sexual violence in the territories with the highest number of complaints received during this process – Montes de María sub-region (13 cases), and Magdalena (41) and Chocó (9) departments. This report outlines the experiences of these men and boys from these three geographic areas. Based on their accounts, the main alleged perpetrators of sexual violence were members of FARC-EP and the paramilitary group, United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC – Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia).

ASP carried out a detailed analysis of 51 of the 75 cases, finding that these victims were typically attacked in their homes; while cultivating their land; or while travelling along roads and highways where armed groups were present and in confrontation. Their experiences were characterised by extraordinary levels of brutality - the vast majority involved anal rape often by more than one person and sometimes in public or in the presence of family members. The testimonies tell of being bound and beaten. In addition, the victims were threatened with violence and death if they reported the incidents. In many cases, sexual violence was accompanied by or took place in the context of other serious violations of international law, including unlawful killings, torture and other ill-treatment, and

extortion. In almost all the analysed cases, victims were forcibly displaced because of the sexual violence, which deprived them of their livelihoods.

Most victims reported severe physical and psychological injuries because of the sexual violence they suffered, for which most had not received any medical or psychosocial support. Indeed, the impact of the experiences of sexual violence on the victims who provided their testimonies has been devastating. Even now, many years after the events, most are still living with the physical, psychological, economic and other consequences of the crimes committed against them.

"Sexual violence against men from the diverse community has been used as a mechanism of terror and punishment for our identity. We are stigmatised because we are accused of provoking the rapes or of deserving them, so many of us prefer not to report, or seek physical and emotional health care. We become accustomed to living sick and humiliated," said members of the Focal Group of diverse community.

For their part, the Focal Group of heterosexual men said: "There is a belief that heterosexual men cannot be raped by other men, this is the main obstacle we face in breaking the silence, we are ashamed and afraid that they will not believe us. Submitting the report to the SJP was the first step, now we hope that the SJP complies with what the Agreement says and opens the macro case on sexual violence".

Under-reporting of sexual violence, against all genders, in conflicts across the globe, typically disguises its true magnitude. In Colombia, the Constitutional Court has referred to a "triple process" of invisibility, silence, and impunity in facilitating sexual violence against women, and the National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH) has noted that in Colombia the silence is far greater in the cases of men and boy victims of sexual violence. Most of the 75 victims whose testimonies were analysed for the joint submission in early 2022 did not report to the authorities at the time of the sexual violence committed against them, for reasons such as that they felt ashamed, did not want their families to know, feared reprisals from the perpetrators, or felt that the authorities would not protect them.

"Cases documented in the joint submission provide a harrowing account of the dynamics and patterns of sexual violence committed against men and boys during the armed conflict in Colombia. They merit the attention of the SJP," said Charu Lata Hogg, Executive Director, ASP. "In the meantime, urgent efforts need to be made to ensure that victims receive medical responses for the harms they suffered."

The report outlines the framework of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international and national criminal law, under which Colombia is required to investigate the crime of sexual violence and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

There is a reasonable basis to believe that the acts of sexual violence perpetrated against the victims whose testimonies were included in the joint submission may have constituted of torture, a crime under international law. The detailed testimonies and impact on the victims' physical and mental health clearly indicate that the perpetrators inflicted severe physical and/or mental pain and suffering on the victims by subjecting them to sexual violence. Based on the evidence and research conducted, including on the existing context of armed conflict in each geographic area at the time of the events, there are sufficient indications that this suffering may have been inflicted for a specific purpose, in particular to intimidate, punish and/or coerce the victims, and sometimes their communities, with the objective of gaining social and territorial control. In the case of the victims with diverse real or

perceived sexual orientation, information suggests that the purpose of the rape may have been to discriminate against them and punish them on the basis of their diverse sexual orientation.

Under certain circumstances, acts of sexual violence may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity. Indeed, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court has found “sufficient basis to believe” that the FARC-EP and the AUC, among others, committed crimes against humanity. According to the OTP, numerous attacks - of a systematic and widespread nature - against the civilian population were perpetrated in different parts of the country, including in the territories of Montes de María, Magdalena, and Chocó.

Full report in English available [here](#); in Spanish [here](#).

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Background

On 19 June 2015, the United Nations General Assembly ([A/RES/69/293](#)) proclaimed 19 June of each year the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, in order to raise awareness of the need to put an end to conflict-related sexual violence, to honour the victims and survivors of sexual violence around the world and to pay tribute to all those who have courageously devoted their lives to and lost their lives in standing up for the eradication of these crimes.

The date was chosen to commemorate the adoption on 19 June 2008 of [Security Council resolution 1820 \(2008\)](#), in which the Council condemned sexual violence as a tactic of war and an impediment to peacebuilding.