



Colombian Women's Truth and Memory Commission

Without women's voice, truth is not complete

Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, Colombia.

<http://www.rutapacifica.org.co/comision.html>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

La Ruta de las Mujeres is a feminist movement actively supporting a negotiated solution to the armed conflict in Colombia, working to make visible the impact of war in the women's life and demand the rights to truth, justice, reparation and reconstruction of individual and collective historical memory to ensure non-repetition. It emerged publicly in 1996 as a response to the serious situation of violence which the women in zones of conflict face, both in rural and urban areas, defending a proposal for the end of the conflict through a political negotiated way.

In the past few years, La Ruta Pacifica has developed an historical memory component through the "Colombian Women's Truth and Memory Commission", an initiative sponsored by various cooperation agencies. The Commission was conceived as a process in which women victims of violence against their lives and bodies are listened to, recognized and supported. It was aimed at reinforcing La Ruta Pacifica's organizational capacities with the goal of identifying and monitoring cases of violations perpetrated against women in the context of the armed conflict through the documentation of 1000 individual cases and cases of collective violations.

The project collected the experience of women victims of violence with a methodology centered on the facts, the subjective experiences and the consequences of the violence, on

the active attitude of the survivors, the meaning they give to the facts, as well as their demands and hopes.

The testimonies collected in La Ruta 's nine regional offices showed the multiple violations suffered by women in the context of the Colombian armed conflict. Murder, massacres, disappearance of relatives, forced displacement, threats and sexual violence constituted a form of permanent violation of their rights.

With the documentation of individual and collective cases of violence perpetrated against women, La Ruta Pacifica wishes to participate in the search for truth, justice, reparation and guarantee of non-repetition of the violence perpetrated against women, thus making a contribution towards the construction of memory, the overcoming of impunity and the reconciliation in Colombia.

WHAT IS THE COMMISSION?

The Colombian Women's Truth and Memory Commission is part of La Ruta 's strategy in the medium term to liven up the negotiation on the Colombian armed conflict with women's voices. The strategy affirms that women themselves are at the core of building peace and reconciliation, and therefore can break the silence in which women have been historically relegated. Its implementation is conceived as a process in which women victims of violence against their lives and bodies are put in the center, as well as their contributions, claims and demands. The Commission set itself as an objective to reinforce La Ruta Pacífica's organizational capacities with the goal of identifying and monitoring cases of violations perpetrated against women in the context of the armed conflict. Equally, this process takes into account the need for a support joint with protection strategies, before, during and after.

The Commission's three phases of work are: diagnostic, collection of information and production of the report, and dissemination of the results.

The first phase was integrated in the training activities of regional coordinators and researchers, in charge of helping in the collection of testimonies from each of the women who took part in the project. In addition, workshops were held to assist women in elaborating their reflections on historical memory and building collective and individual proposals regarding truth, justice and reparation based on their voices. During the second phase information was collected by the researchers, supported by the coordinators, the national coordination and the international support team. In parallel, transcriptions and codifications were done and put into the database. Then, this information was systemized for the production of the final report which is led by La Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres.

Finally, the final phase corresponds to the publication and dissemination of the report's findings, which will include in the first place the restitution to women who gave their testimonies, women's and human rights organizations, academics, State, cooperation agencies, international community and regional, national and international communication media, among others.

If the reality of searching justice, truth and reparation is complex for victims in general, for women victims it is overburdened by obstacles and barriers to accessing their rights to truth, justice and reparation. Women are the ones who bear the consequences of war, not only for

the cultural and social assignments such as taking care of the family, looking for their disappeared or sequestered relatives, searching for ways to survive to forced displacement, sexual violence and other violations against them, the fear, etc. They bear the consequences of war also because they are not free to choose their own conditions and psycho-social affectations regarding their life and their body. They are victims as they work for others (sons, brothers, husbands) but they are not recognized, and their own affectations are not recognized, which often turn into sickness, permanent stress, depression, suicide, poverty, hopelessness, serious affectations in their life project, among other affectations.

This adds to the ignorance and lack of legitimacy and recognition from the part of the State and a society which has become indifferent to a reality that is reflected like in a mirror in the daily life of the country. Reparation policies have been limited to means of economic compensation which, in addition to being small, in comparison to the suffering and the effective reconstruction of one's life project, places an extra burden on the women who, given their conditions of precariousness and poverty, have to manage to go and claim it, which the State takes for granted as a reparation for victims.

For women, the search for truth and memory based on their own experiences and feelings means deconstructing the pain, it means telling, as they say, "like a space for us, telling our truth, because over there only the truth of the perpetrators has been heard"¹. The Colombian Women's Truth and Memory Commission is a contribution by La Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres to look for new ways, in other social sectors, to search truth, which needs to be told by victims. It is as well a contribution to raising awareness on the situation of women as the ones bearing the consequences of war, told from their own experiences.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTING VIOLATIONS AGAINST WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

"The silence around violence against women impoverishes the meaning of the word justice and feeds impunity."²

In Colombia, during many years the individuals and organizations fighting for the defense of human rights have documented the impact of the armed conflict and the consequences of sociopolitical violence on the Colombian population. However, there are few surveys documenting the specific effects of the violence in the women's body and life, the responsibilities that are imposed on them and the important vulnerabilities to which they are subjected, which destroy their dignity and ignore their rights.

"The Historical Memory of facts of violence is an ensemble of narratives, feelings, subjectivities, experiences, resistances, alterities, which condense to self-recognize as political subjects of the evolution of war and political repression and recognize the cruelties, manipulations, indifference and social permissiveness regarding the facts."³ The aim is for the country's history to collect the memory of anyone affected by the conflict, to contribute

¹ Woman victim of the Naya massacre in southern Colombia.

² Memoria de Mujeres – Guía para documentar y hacer visible el impacto de la violencia contra mujeres, jóvenes y niñas, en contextos de conflicto armado.

³ Documentación y memoria de las violencias contra las mujeres en el marco del conflicto armado, page 23.

clarifying the facts and to be used as evidence in the judicial processes⁴, by continuing to document the narratives from the women's voices, from their experiences, from "the visible and invisible marks they keep in their bodies as a place of affirmation of patriarchy, of the suffering from a war that was not chosen, of the dead, disappeared, massacres, sexual violence, femicides, displacement, of the looting disaster for humanity that is war"⁵

In this context of violence, it is urgent to document the violations suffered by women. It is necessary to document as a strategy to make visible the impact of the armed conflict violence on women and girls, with the aim of preventing it and searching for justice and protection of human rights. So that the historical truth being built faces its moral obligation to look at the serious consequences of war on women victims.

From a feminist perspective: differences in investigation

Some of the various affectations on men and women stemming from human rights violations are related to the subjective aspects that limit possibilities of denunciation and investigation because of their impact on intimacy and personal life. But they are also related to objective elements and difficulties like the lack of political will, from the part of the State, governments and public officers, to tackle this problematic, together with a socio-sexual patriarchal culture that erases differences and uniforms their treatment.

Despite a large part of the victims organizations' demands relate precisely to women, in many cases women are the ones who have the most difficulties to put forward claims and proposals, either because of their social status which makes it difficult for them to participate in collective processes, that are generally lead by men, or because of their important family responsibilities, or because of their vulnerability in front of the State's procedures. In other cases, violations of women's rights (relating to forced sterilization or sexual violence for example) subsume in other violations and frequently become invisible, as in the case of the Ituango massacre (Colombia) in which the last witness before the Inter-American Court referred indirectly to the violations that took place during the massacre by saying "... and they mistreated women", when there was no possibilities of investigation⁶.

With regards to this Colombian Women's Truth and Memory Commission's objective of documentation, it is important to highlight that La Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres used various strategies in its recovery work of women victims' historical memory, with a feminist perspective in providing support to women:

- Making women victims visible;
- Making explicit the devastating effects of the conflict violations in the women's life and body;
- Generate a social and political space for women to transmit their pain;
- Document the stories and facts told by women, individually and collectively;
- Mobilize in order to denunciate and make visible the silence and inequity that fall on women victims;
- Collect and present proposals from women victims to the State, governments and armed actors, in order to reduce the consequences of war in the countries and cities;

⁴ Memoria de Mujeres – Guía para documentar y hacer visible el impacto de la violencia contra mujeres, jóvenes y niñas, en contextos de conflicto armado, page 12, 2006.

⁵ Documentación y memoria de las violencias contra las mujeres en el marco del conflicto armado, page 23.

⁶ Violencia Política contra las Mujeres (1954)-1989). Report for the Truth and Justice Commission – Paraguay, by Adriana Lugo Ferreira.

- Take in and accompany women in their proposals for reparations and means of non-repetition.

How is it useful for women to document their case?

For women who have suffered directly from the impact of violence, remembering this experience can turn into a too heavy burden in their life because they do not have any other option than to keep living the present without having healed the pain from the past. Many women do not share what happened to them because they are afraid of the pain that the traumatic memory can cause or because they feel obliged to not speak in order to not take risks and protect their families. However, to forget harm them as well: silence and appearance of normality with regards to women's human rights violations are other forms of violence, which make the women feel more alone, more vulnerable and sometimes also responsible and with feelings of guilt towards the facts they have been victims of⁷.

In this sense, to share an experience of violence and to know that there are other women who have gone through the same situations help those who have suffered to lighten this burden. In this way, the account can contribute strengthening the person as a survivor, help her starting her grieving in cases of loss of relatives or friends. The account of the facts can be a motivation to keep moving forward. To say what happened is a form of helping to restore dignity.

The core intention of the Commission was to collect memories by going back to the women's voices, which have been made invisible, both by society and by the various State's bodies. With the accounts of the women who took part in the Commission, the aim is to retrieve the truth about the Colombian armed conflict based on their voices, the silent voices of those who face the consequences of war: women.

COLLECTON AND ANALYSIS OF TESTIMONIES

The process of collection and analysis of testimonies of the Colombian Women's Truth and Memory Commission included two major moments: the documentation of the cases and the codification and systematization.

Documentation

The process of documentation had three phases: the preparation for the collection of testimonies, the process of documentation in the regional offices of La Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, and the transcription and shipment of the interviews forms.

Phase 1: Preparation for the collection of testimonies

The goal of this phase was to organize the training activities of the regional offices coordinators and the researchers, who were in charge of helping in the collection of testimonies from each of the women who took part in the project.

⁷ Memoria de Mujeres – Guía para documentar y hacer visible el impacto de la violencia contra mujeres, jóvenes y niñas, en contextos de conflicto armado, 2006.

The selection of the women responsible for taking testimonies was based in their proximity with La Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, as when the person leading the interview is a person of trust, the woman being interviewed might have a less defensive attitude, have less fear, and might tell things that she would otherwise not tell a stranger. In contexts like the Colombian one, where there is a systematic practice of human rights violations, memories are limited by fear, and working with interviewers whom the women trust is very important in order to overcome the fear and generate conditions enabling the sharing of atrocious facts.

At the same time the documentation team was trained and given a series of recommendations for them to be able to deal with possible situations that could come up when collecting the women's testimonies, like: promoting a favorable environment, explaining the objective and procedure, knowing when to record and take notes, among others. They were also given recommendations for realizing the interviews.

When working with people affected by human rights violations, situations of tensions are frequent. In this sense, the researchers were warned that there could be blocking and stress during the interviews, giving them advice about how to act in such situations.

Phase 2: Process of documentation in the regional offices of La Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres

In each of the nine regional offices a documentation group included a team of three researchers and one data-entry person. The rhythm for the collection of information was different in each of the regional offices but, once the process started, the interviews were done in a systematic way, finishing the 100 interviews attributed for each region before the date agreed upon.

In order to facilitate comparing testimonies and conducting interviews, a methodology was put in place based on seven questions for the collection of the testimonies:

- What happened?
- When and where?
- Who is responsible for it?
- What effects had this event in your life?
- What did you do to cope with it?
- Why do you think it happened?
- What do you think should be done for it not to happen again?

These questions were intended to recover the whole experience. Some made reference to the facts, some to the subjective experience and the consequences of the violence, the active attitude of the survivors, the meaning they give to the facts, their demands and hopes.

Regarding the interviews, it should be highlighted that they were recorded, which was key for the phases of data-entry, analysis and documentation of the violations. The recording and later transcription of testimonies allowed a more reliable analysis and made it possible to keep the women's voices for future investigations.

Documentation of individual cases: Depending on the particular circumstances of each regional office of La Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres, the process had different rhythms in the implementation of the planned activities. However, all regions complied with the planned number of interviews.

Documentation of collective cases: Each of the regional offices of La Ruta did as well interviews for the documentation of one collective emblematic case that took place in the area. Various criteria were taken into account for the identification of each case:

- Differential added-value of the case
- Security of the women interviewed
- Previous process of the women's group
- Number of women participants: between 10 to 15 women

The execution of the interviews was made through focal groups / workshops in the respective regional offices, in order to identify the violations suffered, the individual and collective impacts, and the individual and community ways of coping with those violations.

The work in groups opened a space to *develop the content* (objectify the facts, corroborate information, get a more global overview, rebuild orally the collective history), *strengthen the process* (maintain a collective process and build a claim for reparation, reinforce the feeling of identity or draw lessons for new generations) and *develop mutual support* (recognize feelings, give each other strength, take decisions, give a collective meaning to the experiences). However, both the positive aspects and the risks of group work must be recognized. In this sense, on one hand, the focal groups are appropriate for investigation of collective events, as they facilitate the reconstruction of facts which have been experienced in a collective way through a dynamic of consensus and the group makes it possible to speak in a context of trust and corroborate the views of the participants. On the other hand, there is the risk of the "false consensus" phenomenon, when some people say something and it is accepted as true without corroborating it in a clear way.

A specific methodology was put in place for the collection of the information on the collective case, which was focused on sharing experiences by way of ludic activities, of corporal and verbal expression, with the support of a facilitator. From an individual perspective, the violations suffered by the women participants and their relatives, the meaning of being a woman / being a relative of victims of violations, the meaning of the impact suffered and the ways of coping with the violations were identified. The purpose of these workshops was to collect the difficulties as well as the strengths of their experiences and learning.

Phase 3: Transcription and shipment of the interview forms:

Taking into account the large number of testimonies recorded and the geographical dispersion, it was necessary to establish ways to manage and gather the information. Together with the recorded interview, the researchers filled in a form for each victim, in which was included the most significant information about the testifying victim and about the victims in her family environment. For this reason, the total number of forms is greater than the number of interviewed women.

Each regional office, on the basis of the number of interviews and of victims from each interview, sent a different number of forms, from which can be concluded that many women interviewed have lost more than a loved one or their relatives have also suffered violations.

Codification and systematization of information

Codification of the interviews

The analysis of the women's documented experience included in the testimonies collected during the project was supported by Atlas.ti, an IT tool whose objective is to facilitate the qualitative analysis of, mainly, large quantities of written data. This computer program makes it possible to integrate all the information at our disposal, facilitating its organization, search and recovery, making links between elements and using models by means of graphic representation. It allows as well selecting all the information available in each one of the codes (items) and joining various codes if it is deemed necessary (family of codes).

For the analysis of testimonies, a guide of codification (thesaurus) was developed, which enables to extract the information without leaving any relevant aspect of the testimonies without being "captured" by the analysis. Having a list of codes wide enough contributes to responding to the experience included in the testimonies and at the same time having a guide that is easy to use for the persons in charge of codification and for the analysis phase (a list too exhaustive or detailed runs the risk of being too complex for the persons in charge of the codification or of separating many things in an excessively detailed form when the similarities or differences are being analyzed later during the analysis phase).

The importance of the qualitative codification lies in the selection of the narratives, phrases or texts that describe the various items to record. This allows joining the narratives of the women's experience in the various items, providing an outlook of those expressions and experiences in order to be able to analyze them jointly.

The forms database

A database was created for the analysis of the interviews forms with the main objective of presenting all the information recorded in the form of the testifying victims and of the victims in their family environment.⁸

The database has two aspects: the content and the structure. The content includes the definition of the basic things that are going to appear, and what information is going to be included in each of these "things". The "things" that are going to appear are the fundamental elements forming the core of the information system. In any system of collection of information on human rights violations is included a controlled vocabulary with various categories. The controlled vocabulary archive includes the list of types of violations, the perpetrators, the impacts and the type of reparation expected by the women victims giving statements. With respect to the database structure, it comprises various complex links between the entity archives.

The quantitative codification is about pointing out the presence or absence of the various items from the interview form (marked as yes or no, or absent in the forms). The intent with this is to see how frequently the elements have been pointed out. This codification will be later included in the database in order to be able to retrieve the frequencies and crossings of variables in a quantitative form.

⁸ The database was created with the human rights programm HRDAG (Benetech), which develops technologies of human rights investigations. For more information, please visit www.hrdag.org.

Once the information has been collected, processed and recorded in the database, reports are being generated from the database which then serve as a basis for the final report of the Colombian Women's Truth and Memory Commission.

Although the quantitative codification is made on the basis of the information collected in the forms, in particular in the part about effects, coping mechanisms, causality and reparation, the first qualitative codification will come from a list of codes (thesaurus) used to complete and check the forms. With this list of codes and what is included in the forms, the data-entry team will enter the data into the corresponding database. In this way, the materials used are the forms and the supplementary list of codes provided by the qualitative codification.

THE MOST WIDESPREAD FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN CONTEXTS OF ARMED CONFLICT ⁹

For the documentation of the violations suffered by women, i.e. for the definition of the violations to consider, the main violations of human rights and international humanitarian law have been examined, taking into account the definitions from the United Nations and other contributions of feminism for the same categories, like the Vienna Convention of 1993 and Resolution 1325 of the United Nations Security Council, as well as the Convention Belén do Pará. The categories that have been taken into account are the following¹⁰:

- a) Violence against women
- b) Sexual violence against women
- c) Forced displacement
- d) Femicide
- e) Control over the women's life
- f) Confinement¹¹
- g) Massacre¹²
- h) Extrajudicial execution
- i) Forced disappearance
- j) Torture
- k) Increase in domestic violence
- l) Kidnapping
- m) Arbitrary detention
- n) Hostage taking
- o) Persecution for social and political participation and leadership
- p) Prohibition of mourning
- q) Denial of justice

⁹ Manual sobre la perspectiva psicosocial en la investigación de derechos humanos, Carlos Martin Beristain, page 55.

¹⁰ For detailed information, please see: <http://www.rutapacifica.org.co/descargas/comisionverdad/formasgeneralizadasdeviolencias.pdf>

¹¹ Violation of the right to free circulation and residence.

¹² Violation of the right to life and personal integrity.

TEAM

- National Coordinator of La Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres:1
- Regional Coordinators: 8
- International Adviser: 1
- National Adviser: 1
- Advice and coordination: 1
- Communication: 1
- Administration:1
- Researchers (interviews): 27
- Data entry: 9
- Codification (atlas.ti) 3
- Systematization (martus): 2
- Investigators (analysis and writing): 8