

# BULLETIN: Gender issues and sexual violence in the Colombian armed conflict

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Recognizing the situation faced by female children, adolescents and youth in the context of the Colombian armed conflict is of paramount importance. The situation of girls is often seen as part of a general phenomenon of children's rights violations. More attention is needed, however, to the particular situation of girls, who suffer due to their gender as well as their age. There is a growing consciousness of the reality of life for girls. In the context of the armed conflict, this reality influences their decision to join an illegal armed group (IAG), impacts their experiences within the group, and has implications for the specialized assistance they require after disengaging<sup>1</sup> from the group.



Girls at a picnic event held by the Mi Sangre program.

## The general situation of girls in Colombia

Girls in Colombia live in conditions marked by poverty, inequality and social and economic exclusion.<sup>2</sup> Economic vulnerability and a lack of resources such as savings or property often impel families to migrate in search of opportunities. Families also migrate to avoid violence or recruitment by IAG. Children recruited by IAG often come from poor families who join in search of opportunities or to escape from unacceptable circumstances.

The reality of life for girls is often made invisible simply due to being female. Women experience systematic social injustice and discrimination<sup>3</sup> within a patriarchal power structure that devalues women<sup>4</sup> and expects them to fulfill traditional gendered roles.<sup>5</sup> In this context, girls are limited by traditional conceptions of gender and childhood, including being assigned roles associated with adult women from an early age.<sup>6</sup> For instance, many families don't consider it essential that their children, especially girls, receive an education beyond primary school.<sup>7</sup> This is significant

given that education plays an important role in marking the boundary between childhood and adulthood.<sup>8</sup>

Girls are also vulnerable to physical and emotional abuse, and are more likely to be sexually abused. According to data from the Institute of Legal Medicine, the principal victims of sexual violence are between 7 and 14 years old, although exact figures are difficult to obtain. In 2011, there were 23,000 sexual assault exams carried out, although it is unknown how many occurred in the context of the armed conflict and in militarized areas where sexual abuse by armed forces occurs frequently but is rarely reported.<sup>9</sup> Increasingly, girls are also becoming pregnant at an early age, with negative consequences for their health and psychosocial wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

## Making the decision to join an illegal armed group

Girls In an attempt to escape from conditions of subordination, discrimination and violence, many girls decide to join an IAG. In many cases, the decision is seen as a way to improve their situation. They may be unsatisfied with their limited social and economic opportunities, feel abandoned, or seek to escape violence and abuse experienced within their families. Girls may perceive that the IAG offers protection, or an opportunity to give their lives meaning.<sup>11</sup>

For hundreds of girls from rural areas of Colombia, it is certainly a decision that will significantly change their lives of and the construction of their identities.<sup>12</sup> However, it is an imperfect

<sup>1</sup> IOM uses the term "disengaged" rather than "demobilized" to refer to child soldiers. The concept of demobilization is applicable only to adult populations, and it implies criminal responsibility. In contrast, children and adolescents recruited by illegal armed groups are considered to be victims, as established in Law 1098 of 2006 and confirmed by the Victims Law.

<sup>2</sup> Mercy Corps (2013), "Informe Final de Investigación: Características individuales, familiares, sociales, comunitarias e institucionales asociadas a la desvinculación y a la reintegración de las adolescentes y mujeres jóvenes que han pertenecido a grupos armados ilegales." Bogotá, 20 June 2013, pg. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pg. 8, citing Freedman (2004) pg. 8

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pg. 14, citing Lorenzo (1995) pg. 106

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pg. 9

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pg. 7

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pg. 7, citing Cajamarca (2012), pg. 24

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pg. 8

<sup>9</sup> Tornay, M. C. (2013), Colombia: La violencia sexual impune en el marco del conflicto armado. 3 March 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Mercy Corps, pg. 51

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pg. 18

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pg. 16

decision, limited by the information and resources available to them. Most girls who joined IAG have few resources, come from families that are desperately poor or prone to violence, and lack information about other options. They are also often ignorant of the consequences of their decision: undoubtedly, the reality that awaits them will prove to be one of the worst experiences of their lives.



Hip hop week organized by the “Dreaming is a Right” campaign.

### Experiences within illegal armed groups: roles and power relations

Upon entering an IAG, girls are drawn into a culture of violence and fear, forcing them to put aside their feelings, emotions and dreams, as well as their rights. In this new environment, they will be illegally used in combat, be denied access to education, face health risks and endure sexual abuse, among other rights violations.

Girls play many roles within the armed group, and their recruitment offers a number of benefits for IAGs. As with all children, girls can be easily molded given their stage of development, and girls in particular can be more easily dominated and subordinated. Girls also make good informants since they can more easily pass without notice.

On the surface, power relations within the group could be seen to provide greater equality by enabling girls to take on non-traditional roles and responsibilities. Above all, armed groups require able-bodied combatants, whether male or female. When we examine the situation more closely, however, it becomes clear that this is illusory.

The power structure is still based on a masculine logic that values physical strength and force. Also, although all members are given combat responsibilities, girls and women are often

assigned domestic work, such as cooking and nursing, according to a traditional gendered division of labor. Finally, and most importantly, girls and women continue to be used as sexual objects.<sup>13</sup>

This dynamic impacts the construction of girls’ identities and imposes patterns of behavior. Girls soon learn that in order to survive they must maximize their utility within the power relations of the group. To do this, girls must either become more harsh and cruel in armed combat, in line with the masculine ideal, or make use of their femininity to establish relations with their supervisors or other male group members to rise through the ranks or to secure privileges such as protection, food, and rest.<sup>14</sup>

Conditions within the armed group, far from improving their situation, promoting gender equality and helping girls to develop autonomy in their lives, actually encourages girls to depend on providers and protectors in pursuit of security.

### The female body: objects of control, discipline and violence in the armed conflict

The situation of armed conflict increases the violence that women and girls already experience, bringing a greater sophistication to practices of violence.<sup>15</sup> The manner in which girls rights are violated in conflict is based on the underlying gender relations and patriarchal power structure, which perceives of women as inferior to men, or in some cases as the object or property of men.<sup>16</sup> The armed conflict strengthens patriarchal culture, based on the logic of domination-submission in which women and girls are victims based on their gender, with the added dimension of armed methods of control and domination.<sup>17</sup>

In the context of armed conflict, the female body becomes a political field marked by power relations and is defined, disciplined, dominated and violated by armed actors.<sup>18</sup> The militarization of territories and daily life and the use of extreme violence to weaken the enemy make women and girls even more vulnerable.<sup>19</sup> Sexual violence can be used as an instrument of

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pg. 24, citing Coalico 2009, pg. 93

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. pg. 20

<sup>15</sup> Tornay, citing the Office of the Ombudsman

<sup>16</sup> Mercy Corps (2013), pg. 22, citing Humanidad Vigente (2012), pg. 27

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pg. 21

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. citing Fundación Plan 2012, pg. 93

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. citing Cajamarca (2012) pg. 93

social control, creating fear in the victim and destroying the social fabric of local communities. In this context, gender-based violence can be seen as a symbolic control of the feminine to reinforce and strengthen the male warrior.<sup>20</sup>

Displacement generated by the armed conflict increases vulnerabilities to sexual violence, and sexual violence itself is often a cause of displacement.<sup>21</sup> This particularly impacts women and children, who make up 80% of displaced populations. The conflict also has a particular impact on afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, as they are the majority in those territories that are most impacted by conflict.<sup>22</sup>

Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations and others in highly militarized territories are more vulnerable to sexual violence. This is due to the arbitrariness of abuse by all parties to the conflict, and general impunity for perpetrators. There are reports of sexual violence employed by IAG as well as the Colombian Armed Forces against civilian populations,<sup>23</sup> and such abuses are generally underreported due to fear of reprisals.<sup>24</sup>

There are reports that members of the Armed Forces have abused and sexual exploited girls and adolescents. An estimated 89% of victims of sexual violence by Armed Forces are girls and adolescents under 17 years of age.<sup>25</sup> In addition to sexual violence, there are reports of victims being forced to use contraceptives or to abort if they become pregnant. There is evidence that these are often widespread practices rather than isolated crimes, and the responsibility and punishment should therefore fall on both the perpetrators and their superiors.<sup>26</sup>

### Sexual favors and violence in illegal armed groups

This dynamic of gender-based sexual violence has particular impacts on girls who join an IAG. In addition to the rigors of combat and daily life that all child combatants must face, girls experience particular hardships including sexual violence. Girls recruited by IAGs are frequently victims of serious and repeated acts of sexual violence. Living in a daily culture of violence and fear, they are pressured to trade sexual favors for protection and privileges, endure sexual abuse and harassment by superiors and other group members, and in some cases become sexual slaves. At the same time, there is a stigmatization of sexual violence, so that victims are unable to talk about it.

Girls who belong to an IAG and engage in sexual activity are exposed to numerous health risks.<sup>27</sup> Many are too young to have sex, as their bodies have not fully developed, and they are usually forced to use contraceptives for which their bodies are not

physically prepared for. Girls who become pregnant are forced to interrupt the pregnancy or abort, procedures that are riskier for young girls.

### Abandoning or escaping from the illegal armed group: recovery and reintegration

Throughout their experiences in the armed group, girls experience violations of their bodies and rights. Other members of the group exercise power over them, limiting and negating their rights, their identities, and their mobility. This loss of power can result in reduced self-esteem and self-confidence.

Reintegration into civilian life represents a transition that requires specialized assistance, using a differential approach that is sensitive to girls' experiences and needs. Disengaged girls should be supported through a transformative process that helps them to better understand and construct meaning in their lives and to understand their value as girls, able to control and transform their lives and destinies, and to know, demand and defend their rights as women and citizens.<sup>28</sup>



Beneficiary of an early childhood project in Cauca.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. citing Humanidad Vigente, 2012, pg.10

<sup>21</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (2014), Displacement continues despite hopes for peace. 16 January 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Tornay (2013)

<sup>23</sup> El Espectador (2013), Violencia sexual contra menores, una estrategia de guerra.

<sup>24</sup> IDMC (2014)

<sup>25</sup> El Espectador (2013)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch (2003). "You'll Learn Not to Cry: Child Combatants in Colombia."

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pg. 29