



## COLOMBIA: Compound structural vulnerabilities facing Christian women under pressure for their faith

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**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

November 2018

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[www.opendoorsanalytical.org](http://www.opendoorsanalytical.org)



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## Preface to in-depth series – Rationale and structure

### Why a special in-depth country series on Women and Persecution dynamics?

Throughout history, women have been targeted in order to destroy whole societies. The means by which they are under pressure for their faith can become such a normalized part of culture and daily discrimination that they may be overlooked as an effective method of slowly, invisibly and sometimes legally undermining an entire community. Whether attacks are through structural inequalities or outright violence, as documented in Open Doors' World Watch List 2018,<sup>1</sup> they almost always occur in a wider context of violence against women and the inferior status of women: The lower the status of women in a society, the worse will be the violence against women in persecuted groups.

Dr Mariz Tadros provides a recent example of these intersecting vulnerabilities in Iraq:

the suffering of women from religious minorities has reached proportions greater than that of the general female population on account of their systematic targeting. It is distinct from the assault on Iraqi women on account of the politics of the intersection of gender with religious identity....

We may choose to see the sexual enslavement of women belonging to religious minorities, whether sold as slaves, detained for ISIS fighters' sexual exploitation, or in forced marriages as part of a broader spectrum of gender based violence.

True, it is. But it also needs to be seen as targeted genocide.<sup>2</sup>

While each of the reports in this series focuses on the situation of Christian women, this targeting is not unique to them: It happens to women in almost every religious minority, from Hindus and Ahmadis in Pakistan and Yazidi women under Islamic State, to Muslim women in the West. It is also not to say that all attacks or discrimination against minority Christian women are persecutory: Motive is complex and difficult to prove. However, at the core of religious persecution lies the unequal power relationships between people of different faiths: At the core of violence against women lies the unequal power relationships between men and women. For someone who belongs to two minority groups, the compounded vulnerabilities can make life doubly difficult, even deadly.

Global patterns exist in how women are persecuted, primarily focused on their differences to men and what they represent in their community and family. These attacks utilize culturally-enshrined notions of inferiority, purity and honor. Often they are not reported or measured as persecution, especially if they are viewed as normal within the culture or not seen as 'typical'

<sup>1</sup> "World Watch List 2018." *Open Doors Analytical*, 2018, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-2018/> (password: freedom).

<sup>2</sup> Tadros, Mariz. "International Women's Day: Solidarity & Iraqi Religious Minority Women." *Institute of Development Studies*, 8 Mar. 2015, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180328132609/https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinion/international-women-s-day-solidarity-and-iraqi-religious-minority-women>.

persecution. Underpinning them are deep-rooted societal assumptions regarding women's identity and nature: Crimes committed against women are more likely to engender shame and ostracism than those committed against men, and attackers rely upon this community response. Men are not blamed for being tortured: If a woman is raped she is far more likely to be blamed by both men and other women. Her whole family may be dishonored and fractured by her perceived loss of purity. Her family or community (even her church) may indirectly add to the persecution and trauma she has suffered through their response to her. Shame, coupled with lack of voice and resources, stops many women reporting violence, discrimination or persecution, including to (largely male) church leaders, so even the Church may not hear about persecution which affects women.

### Spheres of pressure<sup>3</sup>

The reports are split into three sections: Domestic, societal and state spheres. However, the complex and interwoven nature of these spheres means that no section or sub-section can be seen outside the context of the others. The complexity will be mapped for each country in a diagram of pressures.

### Categories of pressure

The pressures faced by women fall into three broad categories, which are integrated into each of the sections mentioned above:

1. *The direct targeting of Christian women for persecution.* These are not intended by aggressors purely as an attack on an individual woman, but on the men who are supposed to protect her, on the children who rely on her, and on the community of which she is an inextricable part.
2. A) *The areas in which all women within a culture face challenges,* but in which Christian women are particularly vulnerable. Many women may face sexual violence, but Christian converts are more likely to face it. Women's voices may not be listened to in court: Christian women's particularly not, creating complete impunity for attackers. These are areas in which persecution is a matter of the differential between the experience of all women and that of Christian women.

B) *The areas in which Christians are discriminated against,* but which have a disproportionate effect on women (and thus the whole family). Women disproportionately use public systems and community resources: It is women who collect water and food and

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<sup>3</sup> Please note that the term "pressure" in this paper is used in a broader sense than in standard WWL methodology and includes violent acts targeting women. In WWL methodology, "pressure" denotes non-violent persecution experienced in all areas of a Christian's life (Private, Family, Community, National and Church life) and "violence" is defined as "the deprivation of physical freedom or as serious bodily or mental harm to Christians or serious damage to their property" (and related incidents), which can potentially occur in all areas of life. For further discussion concerning this distinction, see: WWL Methodology, updated November 2017, pp. 17-21, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WWL-2018-Methodology-LONG-VERSION-November-2017.pdf> (password: freedom).

access medical services either for their children, or, much more than men (and in different ways to men) for themselves during their reproductive years.

3. *The harmful factors all/many women in a country face*, and in which the Church is, sadly, sometimes complicit, but which cannot be seen as persecutory factors in and of themselves (such as child marriage or lack of education). They do, however, create compounded disadvantages which impact women's ability to thrive, as outlined in *Gendered Persecution: World Watch List 2018 Analysis and Implications*.<sup>4</sup> Exposing half (or more than half, given global statistics) the members of a church to these difficulties means that when persecution does come, the whole Body is less resilient. These issues may not appear to be related to persecution, but they are pressure points which weaken the whole Church. Persecution reinforces the social, cultural and institutional discrimination that women face in their daily lives and vice versa.

The reports focus on the intersecting vulnerabilities of women, however this is not to present them as 'natural victims' nor to reinforce ideas of the inevitability of violence against them. Nor is it to deny their agency – either in their ability to survive, find means to overcome persecution and be contributing members of their churches, or their complicity in perpetuating the hardships suffered by other women. Recognition and reinforcement of women's agency and resilience is key to healing and overcoming the challenges they face.

The distinct nature of how women are put under pressure for their faith ought not to be fatalistically accepted or ignored as inevitable or culturally neutral: Its strategic nature, and the incremental difference between *how* it happens to Christian as opposed to non-Christian women, needs to be taken into account if the whole Church is to tackle the persecution and daily discriminations which undermine women and, by extension, the Church.

Please note:

- 1) The symbol \* indicates that names have been changed for the purposes of security.
- 2) WWL is the abbreviation for the annually published Open Doors World Watch List.

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<sup>4</sup> Fisher, Helene and Miller, Elizabeth. "Gendered persecution: World Watch List 2018 Analysis and Implications." *World Watch Monitor*, 2018, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Gendered-persecution-WWL-2018-analysis-and-implications.pdf>.

## 1. Introduction: The situation in Colombia

After decades of armed conflict and organized crime, coupled with a strongly ‘macho’ culture, women in Colombia continue to face a great deal of violence and pressure. While, for Christian women, this is not necessarily directly because of their faith, they face danger when their faith compels them not to submit to armed and criminal groups, or to current social and political mores, and they may be forced into colluding in situations which directly contravene their faith.

In addition, for those who are from indigenous communities, coming to a Christian faith can be seen as a repudiation of the indigenous beliefs and way of life, prompting action from the community against women and girls who convert.

### 1.1 Broader context for Christians in Colombia<sup>5</sup>

WWL Year <sup>6</sup>	WWL Points	WWL Position
2018	56	49
2017	53	50
2016	55	46
2015	55	35
2014	56	25

Figure 1: Open Doors World Watch List points and global ranking of Colombia, 2014-2018.

While the population of Colombia is estimated to be 95.1% Christian (87.5% Catholic),<sup>7</sup> this does not mean that Christians who are active in their faith are free from persecution. Figure 1 makes clear that, while Colombia’s position on the global World Watch List has fallen dramatically since 2014, the number of pressure points for Christians it scored has changed little, despite recent developments in the armed conflict (this is due more to the increase in other countries’ positions than to any great changes in the situation for Christians in Colombia).

Despite the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Colombia faces both the consequence of six decades of armed conflict, ongoing corruption, violence and drug trafficking. Whilst many FARC members have disarmed, some dissenters have not, and other rebel groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), paramilitary groups, criminal groups (BACRIM) and drug cartels still exist and exert control over areas where the Government is absent. Christians often face violence and threats for evangelising or for resisting armed group and drug cartel activities and are forced to pay a protection ‘tax’. Some priests and Christian leaders have been killed, especially where governmental authority is lacking and Christian leaders are the only authority and attempt to provide a mediating function between armed groups or gangs and the civilian population. Widespread corruption entrenches poverty and undermines attempts to restore order and

<sup>5</sup> “Country Dossiers: Colombia.” Open Doors Analytical, *Open Doors*, May 2018. All World Watch Research country dossiers are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/country-dossiers/> (password: freedom).

<sup>6</sup> The reporting period for each “WWL year” is the November to October period directly prior to the year of publication. E.g. for WWL 2017, the research analysis covered 1 November 2015 – 31 October 2016 and was published in January 2017.

<sup>7</sup> *World Christian Database*, 2017: <https://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/>.

improve lives post-conflict: Colombia ranks 96/180 on Transparency International’s 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index,<sup>8</sup> and the failure of the Government to protect the population from organized crime leaves active Christians and others who are targeted particularly vulnerable to violence.<sup>9</sup>

Colombia has eighty-one ethnic groups, comprized of 84.2% mestizo and white, 10.4% Afro-Colombian, 3.4% Amerindian indigenous groups.<sup>10</sup> Within indigenous communities, Christianity is seen as a threat to traditional beliefs, customs and identity, and Christian converts may face violence and ostracism. Both this and the threat from armed groups prevent Christians in these areas from meeting and exercising their faith freely, and Christian leaders and missionaries also face increased danger including imprisonment, torture and the confiscation of property.

Christians, and in particular Protestants, are increasingly vocal at a public and political level, but face growing intolerance from hard-line secularists, especially when giving their opinions about legislation and public policy concerning gender, marriage and unborn life. They are often indicted for violating Church-State autonomy, and the media has ridiculed them for their views.

## 1.2 The situation of women in Colombia

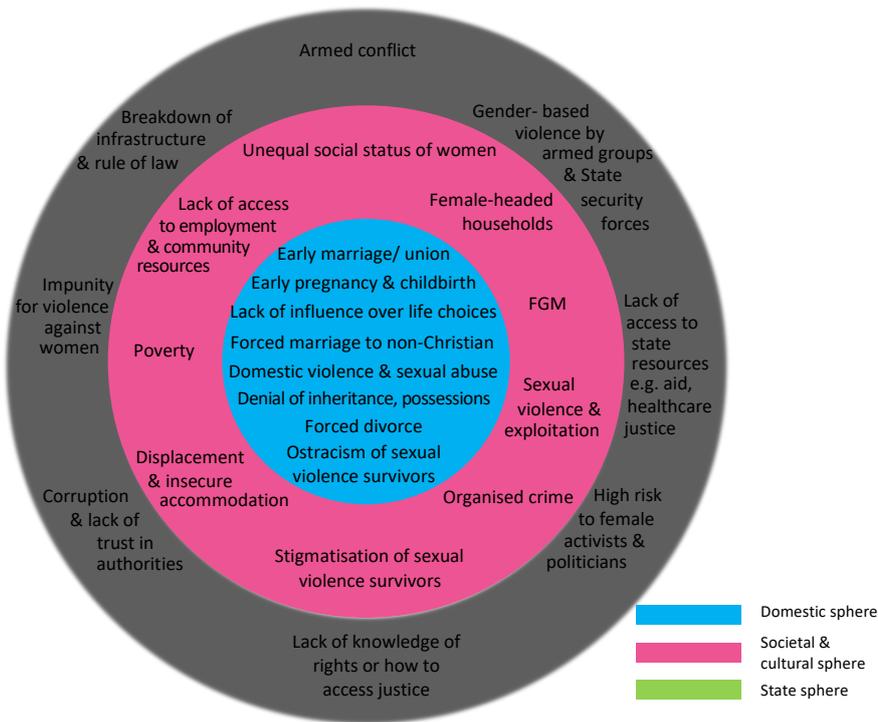


Figure 2.: Areas of pressure faced by Colombian women in general, and Christian women in particular.

<sup>8</sup> “Colombia.” Transparency International, available at: <https://www.transparency.org/country/COL>, accessed 17 July 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Ramirez, Rossana. “Latin America: Organized corruption and crime – Implications for Christians.” Open Doors International/ World Watch Research Unit, *World Watch Monitor*, May 2018, p.3., available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Latin-America-Organized-corruption-and-crime-2018.pdf> (password: freedom).

<sup>10</sup> “Colombia.” The World Factbook, *Central Intelligence Agency*, available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/co.html>, accessed 29 Sept. 2018.

Colombia ranks 92/188 in the United Nations' Gender Inequality Index,<sup>11</sup> amidst high levels of discrimination, stereotyping and gender-based violence, particularly in the home and in society: Colombia has the tenth highest rate of femicide in the world, much of it at the hands of intimate partners.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 2 above highlights some of the issues and difficulties faced in varying degrees by Colombian women in the domestic, social and cultural and state spheres, some of which may be exacerbated for those who are active in their Christian faith and therefore risk falling foul of those who would seek to oppose Christian activity.

Colombian women face vastly differing levels of discrimination depending on demographic factors such as rural/ urban habitancy, ethnicity and level of wealth and education. However, the position of women and girls cannot be seen in isolation from the years of conflict, which have brutalized and displaced the population on a mass scale: 7,671,124 people remained internally displaced in March 2018<sup>13</sup> (one of the largest displaced populations in the world) with people continuing to be displaced by the activity of armed groups and criminal gangs occurring since the peace agreement. 80% of those displaced are women and children.<sup>14</sup> Widespread gender-based violence has been perpetrated by armed groups and paramilitaries, drug and people trafficking cartels and State security forces. Nor can their situation be disconnected from rampant corruption or the added difficulties faced by minority groups such as Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples, including conflict over land rights and life-threatening lack of access to medical care and natural resources such as drinking water:

Afro-Colombian and indigenous women are among the most affected populations. In addition to the humiliation and violence they suffer due to their gender, they are also subject to the ongoing racial and cultural discrimination towards their communities that dates back centuries. In these populations, where women play a central role in the spiritual life of the community, violence against these women is not just a matter of individual harm—it threatens the culture itself.<sup>15</sup>

The treatment of women varies widely amongst different indigenous groups: some, such as the Wayuu, have a strongly matriarchal structure, while others are restrictive of women, and gender-based violence, including harmful traditional practices, is more common.

Due to the fact that Christian activities often involve care for vulnerable groups, social action, resistance of criminal and armed group activity, peace efforts and, increasingly, political action,

<sup>11</sup> "Gender Inequality Index." UN Data, *United Nations*, 2015, available at: <http://data.un.org/DocumentData.aspx?id=381>.

<sup>12</sup> "Colombia: Women, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and the Peace Process." *ABColumbia, Sisma Mujer and US Office on Colombia*, Nov. 2013, p.1, available at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ABColumbia\\_Conflict\\_related\\_sexual\\_violence\\_report.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ABColumbia_Conflict_related_sexual_violence_report.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> "Colombia." *United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)*, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/colombia.html>, accessed 17 July 2018.

<sup>14</sup> "Violence Against Women in Colombia: A Report to the Committee Against Torture." *World Organization Against Torture (OMCT)*, July 2004, p.170, available at: [http://www.omct.org/files/2004/07/2409/eng\\_2003\\_04\\_colombia.pdf](http://www.omct.org/files/2004/07/2409/eng_2003_04_colombia.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> "In Colombia, Women Affected by Conflict are Agents of Social Change." *International Centre for Transitional Justice*, 6 Nov. 2014, available at: <https://www.ictj.org/news/colombia-women-affected-conflict-are-agents-social-change>.

Christian women could be particular targets for all the forms of gender-based violence which affect other women. Neither are they immune to the general social attitudes and context which prevail in Colombia, including the 'macho' culture (particularly prevalent in rural areas) which places women and girls at risk of discrimination and danger even within their homes, communities, churches and workplaces.

## FORCED TO MARRY

IN COMMUNITIES WHERE MARRIAGE IS SEEN AS A MEANS TO SOLVE CONFLICT, CHRISTIANS MAY BE FORCED TO MARRY IN ORDER TO KEEP THEM WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF THE COMMUNITY'S CULTURE. SORAYA\*, A 15 YEAR OLD GIRL AND HERNÁN\*, A 14 YEAR OLD BOY FROM THE INDIGENOUS ARHUACA TRIBE, WERE SUMMONED BEFORE THEIR COMMUNITY AND GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO RECANT THEIR FAITH AND BE ACCEPTED BACK INTO THE COMMUNITY, OR FACE FORCED MARRIAGE TO SPOUSES WHO PRACTICE THE TRADITIONAL ARHUACA RELIGION. THE CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES WERE ABLE TO FLEE THE AREA AND SOUGHT SHELTER THROUGH OPEN DOORS, BUT OTHERS ARE UNABLE TO DO THIS.

## 2. Domestic sphere

The home and family should be a place of safety and nurture, but for many Colombian women and girls it can be the most dangerous place to be. In the World Organization Against Torture's (OMCT) 2003 report to the UN's Committee Against Torture, they summarize the position of women thus:

Traditional stereotypes place women primarily in a role as caretakers and value the family over all else. Women are often viewed as sex objects and are taught from an early age to be submissive, objects of desire. Additionally, these stereotypes lead to a gendered division of labor at an early age, with girls being tasked with domestic chores in the home and boys having more time for playing and being away from the house.<sup>16</sup>

This is subject to considerable variation across different communities and cultures within Colombia. Whilst not all stereotypes and gender roles in themselves constitute gender-based violence, some may have the potential to create the context in which gender-based violence can more easily occur and be deemed justifiable.

The World Bank (2015) record that 72.1% of Colombian women aged 15-49 participate in three decisions within their household: their own healthcare, major household purchases and visiting family.<sup>17</sup> While this is a rise from 60.3% in 2000, it still leaves a relatively high percentage of women who are unable to make basic decisions affecting their own lives. For younger women and those with less education this number is likely to be even higher.

<sup>16</sup> OMCT, 2004, p.164.

<sup>17</sup> "Colombia: Women participating in the three decisions (own health care, major household purchases, and visiting family) (% of women age 15-49)." Demographic and Health Surveys, World Bank, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.DMK.ALLD.FN.ZS?locations=CO>, accessed 19 July 2018.

## 2.1 Marriage

The legal age for marriage in Colombia is eighteen, but, with parental consent, girls can marry at twelve and boys at fourteen. The age differential in itself reveals inequalities in how gender roles are perceived: girls may be seen as an economic burden to their families (particularly during crises such as conflict or displacement), while boys are an economic asset due to their ability to earn more; ensuring a girl's perceived purity and controlling her sexual behavior is often deemed more important than for boys. Early marriage is internationally viewed as harmful to girls and, given that it is far more common for girls to marry early than for boys, it is also viewed as a form of gender-based violence.<sup>18</sup> It is also strongly correlated to ideas about gender roles and women's subordinate status and sexuality.

Five percent of Colombian girls are married by the age of fifteen. 23% are married by the age of eighteen.<sup>19</sup> Early marriage, especially to older men, is known to increase rates of domestic violence and to decrease women and girls' ability to negotiate issues such as the number, spacing and timing of pregnancies and childbirth. Most girls are taken out of education upon marriage, affecting their ability to earn a living and increasing economic dependency on their husbands. This in turn reduces the likelihood that they will be able to leave the marriage if it is abusive, or to survive independently if their husband migrates or is away fighting, becomes ill/disabled or dies, or if they are displaced, all of which have been major issues during Colombia's decades of conflict.

Displacement in itself is an added risk factor for unmarried girls, who, once displaced, may marry early in order to secure food and housing.

The dangers of early pregnancy and childbirth to girls and their babies include pregnancy and labour complications, obstetric fistula and increased risk of infection. Pregnancy and childbirth complications are the leading cause of death amongst girls aged fifteen to nineteen globally,<sup>20</sup> and infant mortality is far higher for the babies of adolescent mothers than for those of older age groups regardless of access to medical attention.

For the Church, the impact of this issue is two-fold. The health, safety, education and general well-being of girls and women in the Church is affected if they are married and give birth young, and if they are unable to make decisions about fundamental aspects of their lives such as healthcare. The wider strength of families in individual churches is undermined if these practices are widespread amongst congregations. In addition to this, Open Doors research has found instances of Christian girls from indigenous groups, which are legally semi-autonomous from the national Government, being forced to marry men from their community as a means of ensuring

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<sup>18</sup> "Why Is Child Marriage a Form of Violence against Women and Girls?" *Girls Not Brides*, 7 Oct. 2014, available at: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/why-is-child-marriage-a-form-of-violence-against-women-and-girls/>.

<sup>19</sup> "Child Marriage: Colombia." *Girls Not Brides*, available at: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/colombia/>, accessed 18 June 2018.

<sup>20</sup> "Adolescent Pregnancy." *World Health Organization*, 18 Feb. 2018, available at: <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy>.

non-Christian children result from the union. This also keeps them from their Christian faith, which is seen as a threat to the indigenous community and their beliefs and culture (see box<sup>21</sup>).

## 2.2 Domestic Violence

On average, 2-3 women are killed every day in Colombia. While this is far lower than the male homicide rate, as in most countries, many of the women die at the hands of husbands, boyfriends and relatives.<sup>22</sup> World Bank data for 2010, the last year for which statistics are available, states that 37.4% of Colombian women and girls aged 15-49 were subjected to physical and/ or sexual violence within the previous twelve months.<sup>23</sup> In the same year, Colombia's Presidential Advisory Office on Gender Equality (CPEM) reported that 1,444 women were killed, 74% of those by intimate partner violence. 84% of sexual assault victims were women; of those, 59.14% were assaulted in their homes.<sup>24</sup> Massive underreporting of abuse makes this a difficult crime on which to gather data, but most studies are reasonably consistent on the numbers: an Oxfam report (2009) quotes the National Survey of Demography and Health from 2005.

66% of women have been the victims of verbal violence; 39% have suffered physical violence; 12% have been raped by their partner and 6% by some other member of the community. In Colombia, women are victims of 95% of all cases of spousal violence, indicating that their most intimate environment is also their most dangerous rather than being a factor of protection. Half of women who suffer aggression fall into the age range of 15 to 24 years.<sup>25</sup>

For women who have been displaced, the problem is even worse, with 48% having suffered domestic violence and 9% having been raped by someone other than their partner. Human Rights Watch describe the added difficulty that domestic abuse in the context of displacement creates:

Humanitarian assistance programs for the displaced do not adequately take into account how domestic violence can pose a barrier to accessing aid. To access humanitarian assistance, including food, housing, and health care, families must officially register as displaced. When a husband registers the family in his name, as is often the case, victims of domestic violence can feel trapped. Women can change their registration after leaving abusive husbands, but women often do not know this. Several domestic violence victims

<sup>21</sup> Unpublished Open Doors research, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Darkin, Elly. "Making Femicide Visible." *The Bogotá Post*, 10 Mar. 2017, available at: <https://thebogotapost.com/2017/03/10/making-femicide-visible/>.

<sup>23</sup> "Proportion of women subjected to physical and/or sexual violence in the last 12 months (% of women age 15-49)." United Nations Statistics Division, *World Bank*, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.VAW.1549.ZS>, accessed 18 July 2018.

<sup>24</sup> "Colombia: A Step Forward for Women Toward a Life Without Violence." *Peace Women*, 9 Mar. 2012, available at: <https://www.peacewomen.org/content/colombia-step-forward-women-toward-life-without-violence>.

<sup>25</sup> San Pedro, Paula. "Sexual Violence in Colombia: Instrument of War." *Oxfam*, 9 Sept. 2009, p.10, available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bp-sexual-violence-colombia.pdf>.

said they felt they had to choose between staying in abusive households or losing humanitarian assistance necessary to survive.<sup>26</sup>

Although some indigenous communities such as the Wayuu and Misak have a more matriarchal structure, the hyper-masculinized and patriarchal culture across much of the country produces attitudes which perceive women and girls as sexual objects and yet conversely expects them to be submissive, allowing for violence against them to be condoned. Women are blamed for bringing it upon themselves: it is her responsibility not to provoke the violence, rather than a man's responsibility not to perpetrate it. Lawyer Isabel Agatón describes it as a crime committed by "men who believe themselves to be the masters of a woman's life, liberty and autonomy."<sup>27</sup>

This is further reflected in many women's lack of influence regarding the numbers and spacing of children they have: something integral to their own health, ability to earn, and the overall economic welfare of the family. Whilst not disregarding women's own choice not to use contraception, OMCT report that "Women's access to contraceptive methods is hindered by traditional views that see the desire to use birth control as a sign of infidelity or "corruption" on the part of the wife... It is reported that decisions concerning the number and spacing of children a woman will have are taken almost exclusively by husbands."<sup>28</sup> (While they do not disaggregate this, women's influence over pregnancies in other countries, and therefore most possibly in Colombia too, does vary according to levels of wealth and education and the rural/urban divide.) A survey conducted in the period 2000 - 2009 found that 12,885 women were forced by a family member to have an abortion and 12,948 women to be forcibly sterilized.<sup>29</sup>

While domestic violence was already a deep-rooted problem prior to the recent conflict, decades of fighting and gang violence have exacerbated the problem, both by reinforcing the macho culture and normalising violence. Men who come home from fighting are often traumatized and suffer a perceived loss of identity after having been in a position of power as a combatant. They may struggle to find employment and provide for their family (especially if displaced) and find that traditional gender roles have been disrupted when the women they left behind have supported the family and run the household.

Per capita, Colombia also has one of the world's highest rates of acid attacks, leaving survivors with lifelong scarring and pain. There are approximately one hundred attacks per year,<sup>30</sup> although many may also go unreported and even untreated due to the cost. According to acid attack survivor and activist Gina Potes, 87% of Colombia's acid attack victims are women, while 90% of perpetrators are men. "Usually it is someone from the victim's inner circle, a husband or

<sup>26</sup> "Colombia: Obstacles to Care for Abused, Displaced Women." *Human Rights Watch*, 14 Nov. 2012, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/11/14/colombia-obstacles-care-abused-displaced-women>.

<sup>27</sup> Darkin, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> OMCT, 2004, p.179.

<sup>29</sup> Amparo Sanchez, Olga; Lopez Vivas, Jose Nicolas; Rubriche Cardenas, Diana and del Pilar Rengifo Cano, Maria. "First Survey on the Prevalence of Sexual Violence against Women in the Context of the Colombian Armed Conflict 2001-2009." *Campaign Rape and other Violence: Leave my Body Out of War*, Jan. 2011, pp.20, 22, available at: [https://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/vaw\\_violenceagainstwomenincolombiaarmedconflict\\_2011.pdf](https://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/vaw_violenceagainstwomenincolombiaarmedconflict_2011.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> "A Worldwide Problem." *Acid Survivors' Trust International*, available at: <http://www.asti.org.uk/>, accessed 20 July 2018.

the father of her children, who cannot accept being turned down or left. The attitude is ‘If I can’t have you, then no one else can either.’”<sup>31</sup>

The importance placed on a woman’s physical appearance as a source of her value is also apparent in Colombia’s relatively high rate of aesthetic/ cosmetic procedures: Colombia has the world’s seventh highest rate for cosmetic surgery and non-surgical cosmetic procedures in absolute figures,<sup>32</sup> despite having the 29<sup>th</sup> largest population (this is only procedures carried out by a registered doctor: many are carried out by non-medical professionals, sometimes with lethal results.)<sup>33</sup> If it is the case that this attitude connecting women’s appearance to their value is prevalent in the Church, it makes both women and men susceptible to not seeing women’s true value in God, which in turn weakens both relations between men and women and also faith in God.

One survey on sexual violence in armed conflict studied the regulation of women’s social lives as a means of gender-based violence. The survey defined this as:

the act or group of acts by which, through the use of force or threat thereof, the perpetrator seeks to establish social strictures for conduct and behavior. Among these restrictions can be found the control of sexual life and regulation of relationships. Examples of this control include prohibiting women from dressing in a certain way, prohibiting women from assisting in certain public events, or from having certain relations under the threat of punishment, and establishing different forms of control over the lives of the victims with the objective of regulating, among others, their social relations and sexual behavior.<sup>34</sup>

The authors of the survey found that the use of these restrictions was present at the hands of both family members and also illegally armed actors and State security forces, demonstrating that the means of controlling women and perpetuating violence against them often overlap and reinforce one another.

The extremely high numbers of women facing domestic violence mean that it is statistically present amongst Christian families, especially as the macho culture which contributes to violence is known to exist within the Church as well as outside it (although some churches, notably Pentecostal, have taught equality between men and women, leading to a decrease in violence and marital breakdown).<sup>35</sup> Domestic violence, even when it does not lead to homicide, shatters the family unit, regardless of whether or not they stay together or from which source within the family the abuse comes. It causes not only physical injuries but also trauma,

<sup>31</sup> Tegel, Simeon. “Colombia cracks down on a horrific wave of acid attacks against women.” *USA Today*, 20 Jan. 2016, available at: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/01/20/globalpost-colombia-acid-attacks-women-law/79065014/>.

<sup>32</sup> “The International Study on Aesthetic/Cosmetic Procedures Performed in 2016.” *International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery*, 2017, p.24, available at: <https://www.isaps.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/GlobalStatistics2016-1.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> De Beauvoir, Charlotte. “Quest For Beauty in Colombia Sometimes Ends in Tragedy.” *NPR*, 7 May 2017, available at: <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/05/07/526863774/quest-for-beauty-in-colombia-sometimes-ends-in-tragedy>.

<sup>34</sup> Amparo Sanchez et al, 2011, pp.25-27.

<sup>35</sup> Llana, Sara Miller. “In Colombia, Women Use New Faith to Gain Equality.” *The Christian Science Monitor*, The Christian Science Monitor, 19 Dec. 2007, available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1219/p01s03-woam.html>.

depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and an inability to function in everyday life, including parenting and employment. Relationships between abused and abuser, and between abused and non-abusing family members, are fractured. A church cannot be strong against external pressures when the families of which it is comprised are fundamentally broken.

### 2.3 Conversion within marriage

Given levels of domestic violence and violence against those who carry out social action, and, within some indigenous communities, treatment of those who convert,<sup>36</sup> it is sadly unsurprising that women who convert may face abuse, rejection and restrictions by their husbands (see box<sup>37</sup>).

Some indigenous communities will put great pressure on the non-Christian spouse to divorce or separate from their newly-converted spouse in order to avoid the conversion of the rest of the family.<sup>38</sup> Following this, if there is community ostracism, women may face isolation, possible displacement and poverty. Due to the greater discrimination facing women than men, they are more vulnerable than men if this happens.

#### ABUSE FOLLOWING CONVERSION

SOFÍA\* GREW UP AS A CHRISTIAN, BUT ABANDONED HER FAITH WHEN SHE MET HER FUTURE HUSBAND. SHE LATER TURNED BACK TO GOD, WHEREUPON HER HUSBAND, A JUDGE, BEGAN TO ABUSE HER, THREATENED TO END THE MARRIAGE AND TO TAKE THE CHILDREN AWAY FROM HER. FOR A TIME, SOFÍA PRACTICED HER FAITH SECRETLY. HOWEVER, WHEN HER HUSBAND TRIED TO FORCE HER TO SIGN A DOCUMENT SAYING SHE WOULD NEVER TAKE HER CHILDREN TO CHURCH, SHE REFUSED. SHE LOST CUSTODY OF THE CHILDREN AND WAS FORCED TO GIVE HIM COMPENSATION.

ANOTHER WOMAN, ISABELLA\*, ALSO SUFFERED ABUSE FROM HER HUSBAND FOLLOWING HER CONVERSION.

## 3. Societal and cultural sphere

Despite the peace agreement with FARC, violence remains widespread across Colombia. Entrenched gender inequalities mean that women often bear the brunt of this in both attitudes and practices, particularly those women who face additional vulnerabilities such as displacement, unemployment or the historical prejudices against indigenous and Afro-Colombian people.

### 3.1 Female Genital Mutilation

In 2007, a new-born girl from the Emberá people died as a result of complications from female genital mutilation. Until this point, very few people knew that FGM was practised at all in

<sup>36</sup> In addition to the forced marriage detailed in the preceding section, both men and women are ostracized, face denial of basic services and violence.

<sup>37</sup> Unpublished Open Doors research, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Unpublished Open Doors research, 2017.

Colombia. Such is the secrecy surrounding it that few Emberá knew either: while the practice appears to be widespread amongst the 250,000-strong group, most girls are cut as new-borns and do not find out about it until their own first daughter is born and cut. Men may never know that their own wives and daughters have been cut. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have called it a 'silent epidemic'.<sup>39</sup>

Working alongside Colombian public health officials and the UNFPA, many Emberá leaders have now agreed to stop FGM in their communities. However, reaching some of the more remote communities is much harder, and others refuse to allow outsiders to engage with the community. In other communities, midwives, having learned about the health consequences of FGM, have simply started to sterilize their equipment rather than stopping altogether. Four girls died in one community, Risaralda, in 2014.

There is some evidence that FGM is also practised in some communities in Guajira state and amongst the Arhuaco, Cogui<sup>40</sup> and Nasa<sup>41</sup> peoples and some Afro-Colombians<sup>42</sup> as well. Due to the autonomy of these communities, however, it is difficult to know how widespread the practice is.

FGM involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia, and can lead to severe infection and haemorrhage, shock and lifelong complications such as infertility, obstructed labour, recurrent infection and pain as well as trauma. The remote location of some indigenous communities, and the secrecy surrounding the practice, means that medical help is not easily accessible. Girls who die may simply be buried without authorities knowing either that she was born or what the cause of death was.

For churches, awareness that this practise may occur amongst some indigenous believers is key to supporting those who live with the consequences and being able to stop it from being performed upon future generations of girls. The trauma and pain caused by FGM affects relationships within families, particularly between spouses, leading to tension within marriages. Additionally, female believers may face great pressure to have FGM performed on their new-born daughters, especially if this is seen as a way of maintaining cultural identity.

### 3.2 Sexual abuse and harassment

Sexual abuse and harassment at a societal level is a pervasive problem in Colombia. It is extremely difficult to find concrete statistics on this due to shame, normalisation and

<sup>39</sup> Scott, Lucile. "A silent epidemic: The fight to end female genital mutilation in Colombia." *United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)*, 9 Feb. 2016, available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/news/silent-epidemic-fight-end-female-genital-mutilation-colombia>.

<sup>40</sup> "FGM in Latin America: Colombia's Embera tribe." *Al Jazeera*, 7 Oct. 2017, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/aljazeeracorrespondent/2017/09/fgm-latin-america-colombia-embera-tribe-170919053458243.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Cosoy, Natalio. "'Cut with a blade': Colombia indigenous groups discuss FGM." 12 Oct. 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-37374006>.

<sup>42</sup> Brodzinsky, Sibylla. "For Colombia's Emberá, telling outsiders about FGM is worse than cutting girls." 19 Nov. 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/nov/19/colombia-embera-female-genital-mutilation-mystery-myth-misgiving>.

underreporting, but data collected by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in 2008 found that 35.6% of the women who visited mobile clinics reported having been the victim of sexual violence at least once in their lives. For women going to regular clinics the figure was 22%.<sup>43</sup> Similarly to domestic violence, this is linked to the macho culture and the sexual objectification of women and girls. Again, the problem is exacerbated by armed conflict and by high levels of drug cartel and other criminal activity. The overflow of violence against women from the armed conflict into everyday life is described by a spokesperson for the International Organization for Migration (IOM):

“We discovered that when there is a large armed presence, it’s possible that the armed actors are the ones who start sexual violence, but then everyone rapes.... Teachers, police, everyone. It’s like a merry-go-round of abuse that is completely hidden.”<sup>44</sup>

(While there are many overlaps, the dynamic of sexual violence within the context of armed conflict, and the laws surrounding it, differ in some respects from its occurrence outside conflict, so it is dealt with separately in Section 4.3 below.)

Women face sexual violence because they are linked to criminal groups and gangs in some way (sometimes indirectly via the men around them or the area in which they live) and also simply because they are women. Sexual violence may be used by individuals or criminal groups to punish or humiliate women and girls, their family or a group they are associated with. It may be direct exploitation through prostitution and sex trafficking, or for no obvious reason other than a generalized context of violence against women.

Statistics as to how many women have faced sexual violence in the broadest sense (other than intrafamilial violence) are not generally disaggregated, but rape statistics alone settle at around 6% of women and girls having been raped by someone other than an intimate partner, or 9% for displaced women.<sup>45</sup> Some studies suggest that girls aged 12-17 are the most vulnerable to sexual violence,<sup>46</sup> with 8% of displaced girls having been raped before the age of fourteen.<sup>47</sup>

The actual numbers are likely to be higher: Sexual violence is widely underreported. OMCT reports that

The trauma of rape is exacerbated by cultural views that link women’s sexuality to notions of family “honor.” Women victims of rape face stigmatization and rejection by their families when they are raped. Particularly, husbands reportedly feel betrayed when their wife is raped, as though she provoked the crime, and it can lead to the breakdown of the marriage.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the Church’s condemnation of violence against women, for a Christian woman this cycle of blame, shame and ostracism may be even worse than for other women. She may face not only

<sup>43</sup> *Oxfam*, 2009, p.29.

<sup>44</sup> Friedman-Rudovsky, Jean. “The Invisible Army of Women Fighting Sexual Violence in Colombia.” *Cosmopolitan*, 24 Oct. 2016, available at: <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/politics/a5278013/domestic-violence-sexual-abuse-colombia/>.

<sup>45</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> OMCT, 2004, p.175-176.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.170.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.176.

what other women would face but additional pressure in being seen as sexually impure and potentially no longer fit for marriage.

Blaming and shame also mean that many women do not report sexual attacks against them. Some may be too traumatized to do so. Many also fear retaliation from attackers, often facing threats should they go to authorities. The authorities themselves are widely mistrusted, and women report facing blame by authorities,<sup>49</sup> insensitive questioning, not being believed,<sup>50</sup> being told that the attacks are 'normal' or not being given medical examinations for so long that all forensic evidence is gone.<sup>51</sup> It is thus seen as easier to remain silent, often continuing to live in the same area as the attacker(s), the fear of repeated attacks constantly present.

Trauma, chronic depression and fear are common amongst survivors, exacerbated by shame and ostracism. Relationships are severely strained by this, adding to the likelihood of family breakdown (and thus further isolation). In addition, physical injuries, chronic pain, pregnancy, self-induced abortion, sexually transmitted infections and increased risk of mortality are also suffered by survivors. Sexual violence is also a primary cause of displacement, with two in ten displaced women having fled following attacks or threats of attacks (particularly when there is no assistance from authorities), many having to move multiple times.

Certain groups of women and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. Those who have been displaced face higher levels of sexual violence than others, even while sexual violence may have been the cause of displacement for in the first place.

According to figures reported by the High Commission on Human Rights in 2005, sexual violence continues during displacement: 52% of displaced women have suffered some form of physical abuse and 36% have been forced to have sexual relations with strangers. This does not only affect adult women. Displaced girls are forced to have sexual relations or to marry prematurely in order to obtain food and shelter. This lack of security and the constant threats cause many women to decide to return to their place of displacement or displace yet again in search of safe haven.<sup>52</sup>

Oxfam's report goes on to state that 32% of pregnancies in the displaced community involve girls between the ages of 12 and 17.<sup>53</sup>

Other groups targeted for rape include "women who lead organizations that defend human rights, murders and rape of women who are heads of their households in the absence of a man, imposition of homophobic norms via the rape of lesbians and the execution of women with HIV/AIDS, among other forms of sexual violence."<sup>54</sup> Given the resistance, social activism and community work carried out by Christians, it is likely that Christian women can be added to this list as well.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.177.

<sup>50</sup> Bargent, James. "Sadism, Death and Abuse: Women and War in Buenaventura." *Insight Crime*, 16 May 2014, available at: <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/sadism-death-and-abuse-women-and-war-in-buenaventura/>.

<sup>51</sup> Friedman-Rudovsky, 2016 and *Human Rights Watch*, 2012.

<sup>52</sup> *Oxfam*, 2009, p.3.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.12.

Whilst both men and women face extreme brutality and killing by criminal groups, that faced by women and girls often has a specifically gendered dimension to it. In 2012, the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada quoted reports from Medellin:

The Ombudsperson [of Medellin] denounces in his report the use of sexual violence against girls and women as a [translation] "strategy of war and social control" in some neighbourhoods of the city. Women are [translation] "used as a disputed prize" by warring groups that seek the "social control of the bodies and lives of women and girls". In an article published in *El Mundo*, a Medellin-based newspaper, it is reported that gang members consider women as [translation] "objects" for sexual favours, in the majority of cases (29 Aug. 2011). The US 2010 Country Reports for Colombia indicates the presence of a "pattern of systemic sexual violence against women and girls by some armed actors" and that this sexual violence "remained one of the main causes of forced displacement" in 2010 (8 Apr. 2011).

The Ombudsperson also pointed out the presence of [translation] "invisible frontiers" in neighbourhoods where local gangs dispute territory for economic and social control (Medellin 25 Oct. 2011). According to the Ombudsperson, when women are related to gang members, the armed conflict has a [translation] "disproportional impact" on them when compared to men, since women become targets of "attacks and retaliations" (*ibid.*). According to the Director of Funsolcom, continuous displacement is very common; in some cases, women have been displaced three or four times (Funsolcom 14 Sept. 2011).

The Ombudsperson's report also notes that 18 percent of forced disappearances in the city are [translation] "children and juveniles, the majority of them female, who are also victims of homicides, threats and sexual violence" (Medellin 26 Sept. 2011, 18). The municipality of Medellin reported 94 homicides of women between January and July of 2011; 52 percent of them are considered [translation] "femicides", that is, "assassination of women based on their gender" (*ibid.* 25 Nov. 2011).<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps one of the worst examples of the violence by drug gangs was seen in Buenaventura in the years 2013 - 2015. The highly gendered nature of the crimes against women, and the extent to which female bodies are symbolic in the violence, is described by Bargent:

Women and girls with their heads, limbs and breasts cut off, the parts publically displayed, left in trash bags or thrown into the sea. Women that are raped, and left dead with objects inserted in their vaginas. Members of an armed group that cut off a woman's buttocks and used them in a game of soccer.<sup>56</sup>

These killings, and the torture which precedes them, are another reason why the rate of sexual violence against women is likely to be higher than official statistics reflect:

in spite of the signs that often are found on the bodies of women who are victims of sexual violence, this crime rarely is mentioned in autopsy reports. Traditionally, those crimes have not been considered as serious as murder, forced disappearance or torture. The logic behind

<sup>55</sup> "Colombia: Whether women who head their own households, without male or family support, can obtain housing and employment in Medellin; government support services available to female-headed households in Medellin; violence against women in Medellin." Research Directorate, *Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada*, 1 Mar. 2012, available at: <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/11/07/COL103929.E.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Bargent, 2014.

this omission is that sexual violence has been relegated to the private domain and treated like a lesser crime and therefore is not a subject for analysis in autopsies.<sup>57</sup>

Organized crime and gang activity are also responsibility for much sexual exploitation, prostitution and human trafficking, which is often tied into the drug trade. Girls as young as ten are used as concubines by gang members or passed around between gang members (so common that this is often seen as acceptable, or at least normal). Some are presented as ‘gifts’ to those at the top of drug cartels and armed groups. Some are promised money or drugs in exchange for sex and others are sold into prostitution and/or have their virginity auctioned to the highest bidder, many of whom are foreign sex tourists, primarily North American. Many girls simply disappear – killed or trafficked out of their home area.

In areas where organized crime is unavoidable, families are forced to sell their daughters:

The girls’ families, caught in a cycle of poverty and fear, have little option but to watch their daughters disappear. If they accept the gangs’ advances they receive protection and financial help to ease the dire poverty in the comunas [slums]. If they reject them then they can either flee their homes or live in fear that every passing motorbike could be carrying an assassin, and every knock on the door could signal another name added to the list of [those who have] disappeared.<sup>58</sup>

Christian families who refuse to allow the gangs to take their daughters may well find themselves in this situation, alongside families who have refused to take part in other gang activity such as drug trafficking or simply turning a blind eye to crime. Church attendance can be seen as loyalty to an authority other than the gang who runs the local area, with Church leaders potentially afraid to address the issue amongst parishioners because they too are under threat. Given that attacking female family members is a common method used by gangs as a means of threats, revenge or intimidation (women and girls are seen as an easy target), it is reasonable to deduce that Christian families are at risk of violence against their female members on this basis too.

In a World Watch Research report on organized crime in Latin America, Ramirez (2018) points out that

Christians become a target for violence and persecution through their faith-based activities. These activities – which include preaching against criminal ways of life – oppose the very basis of mafia existence. Christians know full well that they can therefore become targets. Fear, caused by the atmosphere of illegality, impunity and violence, can therefore inhibit Christians from freely expressing their faith.

Christians and their message of peace, justice and hope are thus seen as a threat to the anarchy imposed by the criminal groups’ ideologies and activities. First, Christian engagement in activities aiming to eradicate violence and injustice openly contradict the interests of criminal groups seeking to further their illicit operations through upholding their power over society. Secondly, Christian advocacy and evangelization reach out to both potential supporters of criminal activities and members of criminal groups, together with

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<sup>57</sup> Oxfam, 2009, p.13.

<sup>58</sup> Bargent, James. “Children, Sex and Gangs in Medellin.” *Insight Crime*, 16 Dec. 2013, available at: <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/children-sex-and-gangs-in-medellin/>.

their families. Thus, Christians are regarded as a disturbing factor, creating disobedience within gangs and causing controversy within the families of criminal leaders.<sup>59</sup>

Some of these exploitative networks are street-level gangs controlling local neighbourhoods, while others are highly organized international networks. Colombia is a country of origin for trafficking into the sex trade, and women and girls (and some boys) are trafficked within Colombia, across the region and as far as North America, Europe and East Asia.<sup>60</sup> Some reports estimate that as many as 35,000 Colombian women and girls are trafficked abroad every year,<sup>61</sup> with displaced women and girls particularly vulnerable, lacking support networks, income or local knowledge.

Within the country, the United Nations have pointed to the intersection between armed conflict, illegal business activities and violence against civilian girls and women. Paramilitary groups are known to have bought girls from organized criminal groups in cities and taken them to rural areas where the paramilitaries run large-scale mining or agricultural (often coca-growing) businesses and Bouvier explains that, “The paramilitary demobilization has in turn given rise to new regionally based criminal bands known generically as bacrim (bandas criminales) that deploy paramilitary tactics of intimidation, terror, social cleansing, and sexual violence to prevent challenges to the status quo.”<sup>62</sup> ABColombia et al also assert that, “As a direct consequence of the culture of violence and poverty resulting from the armed conflict, it is estimated that between 20,000 and 35,000 children have been forced into commercial sex work.” State security forces have denied bearing any responsibility to act.<sup>63</sup> These factors, compounded by the targeting of Christians, is a pertinent an example of the dangerous intersectionality of violence against women with religious persecution.

As combatants are disarmed and return home, many seamlessly join criminal gangs or form new ones, ensuring that gang activities are likely to continue, even increase, in years to come. The addition of ex-combatants brutalized by conflict and used to being in control of local populations can only mean more violence for women and girls, and more fear and devastation for their families.

### 3.3 Restricted movement and dress codes

While it is known that enforced dress, behavioral and movement rules are used in the context of domestic violence (see Section 2) and that armed groups in Colombia’s conflict (see Section 4.3) have used such restrictions on women and girls,<sup>64</sup> it is possible that these restrictions may also be used by criminal groups in order to impose control, given the overlap between

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<sup>59</sup> Ramirez, 2018, p.6.

<sup>60</sup> “Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014.” *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)*, Nov. 2014, available at: <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/children-sex-and-gangs-in-medellin/>.

<sup>61</sup> *OMCT*, 2004, p.178.

<sup>62</sup> Bouvier, Virginia. “Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia’s Peace Process.” *UN Women*, 4 Mar. 2016, p. 5, available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2017/women-colombia-peace-process-en.pdf?la=en&vs=17>.

<sup>63</sup> *ABColombia et al*, 2013, p.9.

<sup>64</sup> *Oxfam*, 2009, p.12.

(demobilized) armed and criminal groups, and the way in which criminal groups seek to control areas and communities. In addition, for many women, moving around the area freely is impossible simply due to the risk of violence.

For Christian women, the inability to freely attend church or other meetings due to the risk of violence takes a heavy toll on their ability to find support in fellowship, exercise their ministry or simply be trained and encouraged in their own faith. When this applies to all the women in a congregation, it can have a strong impact on a church's ability to function.

### 3.4 Female-headed households

In 2015, 36% of all Colombian households were headed by a woman,<sup>65</sup> and there is little reason to believe that this number has dropped significantly. A 2007 study found that widows outnumbered widowers by 6 to 1.<sup>66</sup> Women may find themselves heading a household due to displacement; single motherhood (particularly as a result of sexual violence or teenage pregnancy, when she may be ostracized); widowhood, divorce or abandonment; the illness, injury or disability of their husband, partner or father, or his absence when he is away working or fighting. Within indigenous groups, women may be separated from their family and wider community upon conversion to Christianity, leaving them to raise children without support networks and in an economically precarious situation (while this also happens to men, given the added discrimination faced by women, they are more vulnerable in this situation). Armed groups have also been known to separate families in order to encourage them to recant their faith.<sup>67</sup>

Overnight, a woman may find herself having to provide for her family and negotiate an environment dominated by men, in which she faces not only the usual discrimination of being a woman described in this report, but also difficulties in finding dignified and adequately-paid employment and increased vulnerability to violence, abduction and displacement. In the absence of a man, female-headed households are particularly vulnerable to violence and to the forced recruitment of children into armed groups and criminal gangs. Bouvier states that, "While cumulative statistics on the number of widows are not available, in the southwestern department of Putumayo, women's groups note that one out of every 10 women is a widow, and 62 per cent of Putumayan women have lost an average of two children due to conflict-related violence."<sup>68</sup> In addition to direct attacks, women who struggle to find decent employment and support their family are vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation.

Proving their claim to land or property, possibly inherited from or left in their care by their husband, may be impossible due to lack of documentation, especially given cultural prejudices which benefit men in inheritance and land ownership, leaving women potentially homeless and

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<sup>65</sup> "Colombia: Female Headed Households (% of households with a female head)." Demographic and Health Surveys, *World Bank*, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.HOU.FEMA.ZS?locations=CO>, accessed 18 July 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Llana, 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Unpublished Open Doors research, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> (Bouvier, 2016, p.7)

without livelihood. Women therefore often find it harder than men to access credit and to buy and sell land.

For those who are displaced, the situation is even worse:

The Ombudsperson of Medellin (Personería de Medellin) notes, in his Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Medellin.... that 70 percent of the total numbers of complaints of interurban forced displacement in the city were made by women who head their households; and in 59 percent of the cases, the cause was violence perpetrated by relatives, gangs and illegal armed groups (ibid., 51). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Ombudsperson of Medellin indicated that it is [translation] "difficult" for a displaced woman to relocate in Medellin under "dignified conditions" (Medellin 25 Oct. 2011). He explained that "discrimination and stigmatization" against them occur "very often", even within their own neighbourhoods, due to their place of origin and because they are seen as "competition for the access to local aid and services" (ibid.).<sup>69</sup>

By its very nature, displacement is traumatic, but women who are displaced have often also lost all their belongings, including house, animals and identity papers. Being isolated and away from home means that women may not know where or how to access basic services such as medical care, aid or access to justice. Afro-Colombian and indigenous women are disproportionately represented amongst those displaced and face compounded layers of discrimination on the basis of race and/ or tribal group, and possibly language, finding it even more difficult to access aid necessary to basic survival.

For the Church, high numbers of female-headed households has meant more women in leadership,<sup>70</sup> allowing their leadership giftings to flourish under difficult circumstances. But it also means a higher number of vulnerable women whose levels of trauma, bereavement and physical need affect their ability to exercise their faith and ministry and can place strain on churches struggling to survive. When the prevailing macho culture exists within churches as well, this can negate church communities as a safe refuge for women. Trauma, grief and displacement are deeply isolating and disorienting experiences: without social and spiritual support from their church, women will continue to be vulnerable and the overall resilience of the church to external pressures is lowered. Conversely, when women who head households are well-supported, they can add to the resilience and ministry of the church.

### 3.5 Access to employment

Despite educational attainment which is at least as high as that of men and Constitutional guarantees against discrimination, Colombian women are routinely paid less for the same work and find it harder to gain meaningful employment, often ending up in casual labour or domestic service roles. Colombia has a female labour force participation rate of 59%, compared to 83% for men (2016),<sup>71</sup> a female unemployment rate of 11.4% (of economically active women)

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<sup>69</sup> Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2012.

<sup>70</sup> Llana, 2007.

<sup>71</sup> "Colombia." Gender Data Portal, *World Bank*, available at: <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/country/colombia>, accessed 22 July 2018.

compared to only 7.1% for men (2017)<sup>72</sup> and a gender income gap of 20% (2012).<sup>73</sup> Oxfam (2009) state that “a majority of the jobs that women can access are of lower quality and discriminatory, obliging them to stay in the worst paid and most precarious forms of employment. As a consequence, a majority of women are forced to look for alternative sources of income in the informal economy, where they also average half of what men make.”<sup>74</sup> Additional factors in employment discrimination include that suffered by those who are Afro-Colombian or indigenous (who may not speak Spanish), as well as women who have survived acid attacks: the lifelong disfigurement means that many struggle to find any employment at all.

For families struggling to survive economically, particularly those with female heads of households, women’s inability to earn enough to survive can be catastrophic. In one of the world’s most unequal countries, this will vary widely according to region and between urban and rural areas (41.9% of rural women-led households live in poverty and 9.6 per cent in extreme poverty<sup>75</sup>), but it is still clear that employment discrimination against women can have a devastating impact on entire families.

Much of this is due to a culture which expects women to raise children and men to be breadwinners (despite a relatively high percentage of female-headed households). Globally, this attitude also tends to view women as a threat when they earn as much as or more than men, and/ or to see their work as less deserving of equal pay.

The additional impact of this attitude is the stress and shame felt by men who are unable to earn enough to provide for their family, which in turn contributes to incidences of domestic violence. Conversely, for a woman unable to earn enough to survive, this may mean the difference between being able to leave an abusive relationship and being forced to stay in a violent and potentially lethal family environment.

In addition, women may be forced into exploitative employment and relationships, involving recruitment into armed groups, organized crime, commercial sex work and dependent relationships where they are forced to provide sex in exchange for food and housing. This is particularly true for displaced women, who do not have the social support and local knowledge upon arrival in a new location.<sup>76</sup>

On a wider scale, poverty and income inequality are contributors to conflict and gang activity, fuelling both anger and desperation at the situation and making those who struggle to feed their families vulnerable to recruitment. Creating a context in which women can earn enough by legal and dignified means is vital to securing peace and a reduction in armed group and criminal gang activity. This includes giving women more say in family finances, public policy and localized economies (especially where agricultural land is communally owned and farmed).

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<sup>72</sup> “Colombia: Unemployment, female (% of female labor force) (modeled ILO estimate).” International Labor Organization, ILOSTAT, *World Bank*, Nov. 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Sánchez Segura, Martha Lucía. “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Public Administration: Colombia Case Study.” *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*, 2012, p.7, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=CO>.

<sup>74</sup> *Oxfam*, 2009, p.8.

<sup>75</sup> “Colombian women growing coffee, brewing peace.” *UN Women*, 13 Oct. 2017.

<sup>76</sup> *Oxfam*, 2009, p.17-18.

Churches can be key to this, helping women (especially displaced women) to find training and employment, and promoting women's voices at a community level. The impact on the faith of a woman who cannot support herself or her family, or who is forced into illegal activity and/or survival sex, is huge, and she becomes easy prey for those who would undermine the Church. When churches are able to support women (including psychological, social and spiritual support for those who have been forced into illegal or degrading work or relationships) and promote decent employment and wages, it not only has an impact on the immediate Christian community but also weakens the wider influence of groups which seek to attack the Church.

## 4. State sphere

Excerpts from the Colombian Constitution, 1991 (revised 2015):<sup>77</sup>

### *Article 13. Equality*

All individuals are born free and equal before the law, shall receive equal protection and treatment from the authorities, and shall enjoy the same rights, freedoms, and opportunities without any discrimination on account of gender, race, national or family origin, language, religion, political opinion, or philosophy.

The State shall promote the conditions so that equality may be real and effective and shall adopt measures in favour of groups that are discriminated against or marginalized.

### *Article 19. Freedom of religion*

Freedom of religion is guaranteed. Every individual has the right to freely profess his/her religion and to disseminate it individually or collectively. All religious faiths and churches are equally free before the law.

### *Article 25. Right to work*

Work is a right and a social obligation and enjoys, in all its forms, the special protection of the State. Every individual is entitled to a job under dignified and equitable conditions.

### *Article 40. Women's participation*

The authorities shall guarantee the adequate and effective participation of women in the decision-making ranks of the public administration.

### *Article 42. The family*

Family relations are based on the equality of rights and duties of the couple and on the reciprocal respect of all its members. Any form of violence in the family is considered destructive of its harmony and unity, and shall be sanctioned according to law.

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<sup>77</sup> "Colombian Constitution 1991 (rev. 2015)." Constitute Project, *Oxford University Press Inc.*, available at: [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Colombia\\_2015?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Colombia_2015?lang=en), accessed 24 July 2018.

*Article 43. Gender equality, female heads of households*

Women and men have equal rights and opportunities. Women cannot be subjected to any type of discrimination. During their periods of pregnancy and following delivery, women shall benefit from the special assistance and protection of the State and shall receive from the latter food subsidies if they should thereafter find themselves unemployed or abandoned.

The State shall support the female head of household in a special way.

*Article 49. Health provision*

Public health and environmental protection are public services for which the State is responsible. All individuals are guaranteed access to services that promote, protect, and restore health....

An Act shall define the terms under which basic care for all inhabitants shall be free of charge and mandatory.

*Article 67. Education*

The state, society, and the family are responsible for education, which shall be mandatory between the ages of five and fifteen years and which shall minimally include one year of preschool instruction and nine years of basic instruction.

Education shall be free of charge in the State institutions, without prejudice to those who can afford to defray the costs.

Strong Constitutional guarantees exist to protect women from discrimination in all areas, and Colombia has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. These frameworks are backed by increasingly specific and proactive laws, including those prohibiting trafficking in persons (Law 7479, 2002); covering the right of women to a life free from violence (Law 1257, 2008); on victims and land restitution (Law 1448, 2011); on domestic violence (Law 1542, 2012) and on acid attacks (Law 639, 2013).

One of the most recent of these, the Law Against Femicide (Law 1761, 2015) recognizes the killing of women “because of her womanhood or due to gender identity motives” as a specific crime, distinct from general homicide and carrying a higher penalty. It recognizes the context and concomitant circumstances in which violence against women often occurs, including unequal power relations between men and women (including personal, economic, social and political), domestic violence, control over life choices and sexuality, violence intended to terrorize or humiliate others connected to the woman herself and the underreporting of violence against women.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> “[Law Against Femicide](http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/fr/countries/americas/colombia/2015/law-against-femicide).” Global Database on Violence Against Women, *UN Women*, 2015, available at: <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/fr/countries/americas/colombia/2015/law-against-femicide>.

Implementation of these legal frameworks, however, is lacking, despite widespread violence and discrimination against women. The 2013 concluding comments of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women<sup>79</sup> regarding the submission of Colombia's report to the Committee expressed concern that the legal framework "stands in sharp contrast to the situation of women across the territory of the State party, as its implementation is highly ineffective."<sup>80</sup> They also criticized the "high prevalence of violence against women, in particular domestic and sexual violence, despite the comprehensive legal framework to address violence against women" and "persistent impunity with respect to the investigation, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators of acts of violence against women."<sup>81</sup>

Indigenous areas are legally semi-autonomous from the central Government, and little is documented about the protection of women within these areas. However, incidences of forced marriage (see Section 2.1 above) and FGM (see Section: 3.1 above) would indicate that, while women are often valued for their unique contribution to the life and harmony of the community, they lack protection from harmful practices in some indigenous groups.

As of 2018, women hold 20.9% of parliamentary seats<sup>82</sup> and Ivan Duque has appointed a female Vice-President and made half his new cabinet female. However, for both women and Christians involved in politics and public life, either as parliamentarians or as lawyers, activists and journalists, their work carries a high risk, whether they act at a national or community level. In 2011, Open Doors documented the murder of a pastor's wife who had been sharing the Gospel and was also the local leader of a State-sponsored women's programme providing food and education subsidies to indigenous and displaced families,<sup>83</sup> and 2018 saw the self-imposed exile of State Deputy Angela Hernandez. Hernandez, a Christian, had been receiving threats since 2016 for her stance on LGBTI+ and abortion policies. While threats *per se* may be received by both male and female politicians and activists, it is notable that those received by women take on a gendered dimension: Hernandez was threatened with acid attacks on her face (a crime with predominately female victims) and was told that she and her baby would be attacked when she went into hospital to give birth. Female activists face not only death, but also gender-based violence such as rape and gender-specific mutilation.<sup>84</sup>

Like Hernandez, Christian women may be seen as a particular target due to their stance on particular issues. Not only do they face the vulnerabilities of other women, but due to the perception of women as those responsible for passing values on to the next generation, they

<sup>79</sup> Colombia submitted their [ninth periodic report](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1424860/1930_1519126837_n1741212.pdf) to the Committee in 2017, available at: [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1424860/1930\\_1519126837\\_n1741212.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1424860/1930_1519126837_n1741212.pdf). At the time of writing, the Committee's response had not yet been published.

<sup>80</sup> "Concluding observations on the combined seventh and eighth periodic reports of Colombia." Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Committee), *OHCHR*, 2013, Paragraph 8, available at: <http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsoVqDbaslinb8oXgzpEhivgyLAgwfWstHTJnC3S6jwXcwIW2FqboZWymnx7H2%2b2A1AHLEEKuLaou09yEUKsJbmArZbjltGHK2msRVxqkC9BoaPpYr%2fcdQbu5%2bpgjHcmltg%3d%3d>.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, Paragraph C/15.

<sup>82</sup> "[Women in National Parliaments](http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm)." *Inter-Parliamentary Union*, available at: <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>, accessed 31 July 2018.

<sup>83</sup> "Colombia Pastor's Wife Murdered by Guerrillas." Internal document, *Open Doors*, 14 Mar. 2011.

<sup>84</sup> Tamayo, Adelaida. "[Colombia Should Celebrate its Women Activists](https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/08/colombia-should-celebrate-its-women-activists)." *Human Rights Watch*, 8 Mar. 2018, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/08/colombia-should-celebrate-its-women-activists>.

are blamed for perpetuating the existence of ‘traditional’ attitudes towards abortion and LGBTI+ policies. In addition, where Christian women’s faith prompts them to be involved in activism on other social issues, such as poverty, drug rehabilitation or peace, this is likely to make them the object of threats and violence from those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

#### 4.1 Healthcare

On certain markers, female-specific healthcare in Colombia is good relative to comparable countries: in 2015, 99% of births were attended by skilled health workers, and the maternal mortality rate is 64 deaths per 100,000 live births (higher than the median for high income countries, but lower than that for middle income countries).<sup>85</sup> The Government’s own statistics for 2016 report a fall to 49.2 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births.<sup>86</sup> In January 2017, however, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) requested that the Government take steps to curb the higher than average rate of malnutrition-related deaths amongst pregnant and breastfeeding indigenous women.<sup>87</sup>

In other areas, however, State healthcare is lacking in its attention to the specific needs of women and indigenous people, often perpetuating stereotypes and failing to tackle dangerous and damaging practices. Laws assigning absolute guardianship over people with disabilities to their families or to State institutions have seen women with disabilities (including deafness) forcibly sterilized.<sup>88</sup> HIV-positive women have been denied prenatal and post-partum care, and have been forcibly sterilized when giving birth.<sup>89</sup> High rates of teenage pregnancy and unsafe abortions either self-induced or performed by unqualified practitioners (and the refusal of medical professionals to treat complications resulting from such abortions) and the frequent use of sterilisation as a means of family planning have all been the subject of criticism from the CEDAW Committee.<sup>90</sup> The World Bank (2015) reported that 17.4% of teenage girls in Colombia had either had children or were currently pregnant<sup>91</sup> (OMCT state that as many as 30% of displaced girls have children or are pregnant<sup>92</sup>). This is unlikely to present the full scale of the teenage pregnancies, given that 36% of teenage pregnancies result in abortion. Human Rights Watch (2015) estimated that 450,000 illegal abortions take place each year.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Gender Data Portal, *World Bank*, 2018.

<sup>86</sup> “Ninth periodic report of Colombia under article 18 of the Convention, due in 2017.” CEDAW/C/COL/9, CEDAW Committee, *OHCHR*, 4 Dec. 2017, p.31, available at: [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1424860/1930\\_1519126837\\_n1741212.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1424860/1930_1519126837_n1741212.pdf).

<sup>87</sup> “World Report 2018: Rights Trends in Colombia.” *Human Rights Watch*, 18 Jan. 2018, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/colombia>.

<sup>88</sup> “From Forced Sterilization to Forced Psychiatry: Report on Violations of the Human Rights of Women with Disabilities and Transgender Persons in Colombia.” *Asdown Colombia et al.*, Oct. 2013, p.13-14, available at: <http://www.law.cuny.edu/academics/clinics/iwhr/publications/IWHR-Report-Colombia-2013.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>90</sup> CEDAW Committee, 2013, Paragraph 29.

<sup>91</sup> “Colombia: Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19).” *World Bank*, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/topic/gender?locations=CO>, accessed 27 July 2018.

<sup>92</sup> *OMCT*, 2004, p.170.

<sup>93</sup> Parkin Daniels, Joe. “Tackling Teenage Pregnancy in Colombia.” *The Lancet*, 18 Apr. 2015, available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)60738-3.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(15)60738-3.pdf).

High rates of domestic and sexual violence, lack of access to or influence over birth control, early marriage, poverty, lack of education and a macho culture where women lack influence all contribute to unplanned and early pregnancies, which in turn lead to unsafe abortion methods and/ or children born into insecure domestic environments. Conversely, according to Open Doors research, some women and girls (particularly from indigenous communities) are only given access to healthcare on the condition that they use contraception, and some teenage girls have been pressured into abortion as a means of birth control.<sup>94</sup>

Inadequate medical treatment for women who have been the victims of violence has been criticized internationally, with women forced to wait for forensic examinations following domestic violence and rape (by which time all physical evidence is gone and medication preventing STIs does not work) or denied any examination or treatment at all.<sup>95</sup> Many have been made to pay for such examinations, which they often cannot afford.<sup>96</sup> Women also report being asked insensitive and accusatory questions by medical staff<sup>97</sup> and having their confidentiality breached.<sup>98</sup> Once again, Afro-Colombian and indigenous women face even higher obstacles to receiving medical care following attacks, due to stereotyping about their sexual behavior and due to their location in rural and conflict-affected areas.<sup>99</sup> Acid attack survivors, many of whom are poor, report being unable to afford the numerous reconstructive surgeries which they need.<sup>100</sup>

All of these are issues which the Government, in its 2017 report to the CEDAW Committee, asserts that it has taken steps to tackle. However, no government can completely solve these problems alone without the engagement of civil society. Pregnancy and childbirth are part of the lives of the majority of women in the Church, and, given the high rates of violence against women, many will be affected by this too. In addition, within indigenous communities where healthcare is administered by tribal leaders, Christian converts have been denied care because they are no longer considered part of the community.<sup>101</sup> The ability to exercise one's faith and participate in the life of the Church is severely undermined by health issues and violence. If the Church is to have healthy, resilient, thriving individuals and families, supporting women and girls by helping them access adequate healthcare and tackling the reasons behind violence and unplanned and teenage pregnancies will have the added benefit of strengthening the whole Body. Tackling detrimental culture and attitudes at a church and societal level, and reducing the marginalisation of women's health needs at a state level, will lead to far healthier outcomes for women and their children.

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<sup>94</sup> Unpublished Open Doors research, 2017.

<sup>95</sup> CEDAW Committee, 2013, Paragraph 17 (b) and *Human Rights Watch*, 2012.

<sup>96</sup> *OMCT*, 2004, pp.177, 182.

<sup>97</sup> Friedman-Rudovsky, 2016.

<sup>98</sup> *Human Rights Watch*, 2012.

<sup>99</sup> *ABColumbia et al*, p.19.

<sup>100</sup> Tegel, 2016.

<sup>101</sup> Unpublished Open Doors research, 2017.

## 4.2 State education

At primary and secondary school level, girls have good parity with boys, and even do slightly better in both literacy rates and school completion rates.<sup>102</sup> At the tertiary level, however, while equal numbers enter tertiary education, girls strongly tend towards traditionally ‘female’ areas of study (ensuring that traditional attitudes towards women’s roles and employment remain), and 46.7% of girls do not complete their tertiary education, many dropping out due to pregnancy.<sup>103</sup> Both the physical and psychological impact of violence takes its toll on the ability to learn and focus, and it is likely that girls who face violence do not reach their full educational potential either.

### ATTACKED AS FAMILY PUNISHMENT

CHRISTIANS FACE VIOLENCE FROM GUERRILLAS, PARAMILITARIES AND STATE SECURITY FORCES. WHEN YOUNG INSURGENTS IN SOUTH-EAST COLOMBIA BECAME CHRISTIANS, LOCAL GUERRILLAS THREATENED DIEGO\*, A PASTOR, AND TOLD HIM TO LEAVE THE AREA. HE REFUSED, AND THE GUERRILLAS RETURNED TO DESTROY HIS HOUSE AND CROPS AND TO SEXUALLY ABUSE HIS WIFE, LEDY\*, AND THEIR TWO SMALL CHILDREN.

Educational and literacy rates vary across the population, with those in the poorer socio-economic groups, in rural areas and amongst indigenous populations having far lower levels of education. Girls who are less educated are often more vulnerable to sexual and economic exploitation<sup>104</sup> and less able to access help, either medical or judicial, if they are attacked or exploited. They are also more vulnerable to recruitment into armed groups and criminal gangs.

In indigenous areas, where a full indigenous education (including religious aspects) is the only education available, some Christian families have refused to send their children to school at all, meaning that indigenous Christians have a particularly high level of illiteracy.<sup>105</sup> For girls in this situation, this lack of education compounded by gender discrimination leaves them doubly disadvantaged. Those who are forced to leave the indigenous area due to persecution or displacement may find themselves entirely unable to earn an income by legal means.

Ensuring the full education of girls is a primary way that churches can protect their female members from exploitation, violence and poverty. For Christian girls, especially those whose families and communities may pressure them into abandoning their faith, and those who face isolation from other Christians, to be able to read and, thereby, directly and autonomously find comfort in the Bible is crucial.

<sup>102</sup> “Colombia: Gender.” *World Bank*, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/topic/gender?locations=CO>, accessed 27 July 2018.

<sup>103</sup> CEDAW Committee, 2013, Paragraphs 25-26.

<sup>104</sup> Amparo Sanchez et al, 2011, pp.17, 19.

<sup>105</sup> Unpublished Open Doors research, 2017.

### 4.3 Gender-based violence in armed conflict

The use of gender-based and sexual violence during Colombia's armed conflict has been extensive and strategic. Sources including the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and the IACHR agree with the Colombian Constitutional Court's assessment that the use of sexual violence, particularly against women and girls, is an "habitual, extended, systematic and invisible practice in the Colombian armed conflict."<sup>106</sup> The tactical use of gender-based violence, and the fact that it is increasingly the subject of international humanitarian law, marks it as different from non-conflict-related sexual violence (although there are overlaps in its tactical use by criminal gangs), and it therefore deserves its own section. While it is used against men and boys as well, it disproportionately affects girls, displaced women and Afro-Colombian and indigenous women and girls<sup>107</sup> and, as the subject of this report, the research focuses on them.

In the context of armed conflict, gender-based violence becomes a means by which to terrorize, humiliate, persecute, subdue, control and possibly displace communities considered the enemy. It is used as torture, punishment, rule-enforcement and revenge. Attacking women and girls is not simply about the individuals themselves but is also an indirect attack on their families and communities, with attacks frequently taking place in front of husbands, fathers, sons and other family or community members. Women may be attacked for being associated with the enemy or with a resistant community, or for trying to protect their children from recruitment. All parties to the Colombian conflict - guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and State security forces - have used women and girls in this way, not as isolated crimes committed by 'rogue' soldiers, but in order to achieve their military aims, often with the consent or direct order of commanding officers, and yet there have been virtually no prosecutions.

Given the effectiveness of sexual violence in undermining whole communities, where Christian congregations, families or individuals resist armed group activity and recruitment, or, prompted by faith, support vulnerable people, sexual violence is an effective, and often hidden, tool of direct or indirect religious persecution as well (see box<sup>108</sup>).

UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008) on women, peace and security states that:

Civilians account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict; ... women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instil fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group; and that sexual violence perpetrated in this manner may in some instances persist after the cessation of hostilities.<sup>109</sup>

Their 2015 report defines conflict-related sexual violence as:

<sup>106</sup> *Oxfam*, p.11.

<sup>107</sup> Ban, Ki-moon. "Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Report of the Secretary-General." S/2012/33, *United Nations: Security Council*, 13 Jan. 2012, p.6, Paragraph 19, available at: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/33](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/33).

<sup>108</sup> *World Watch Monitor*, 2018.

<sup>109</sup> "Resolution 1820". S/RES/1820 (2008), *United Nations: Security Council*, 19 June 2008, p.1-2, available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7b65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7d/CAC%20S%20RES%201820.pdf>.

rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization and other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is linked, directly or indirectly (temporally, geographically or causally) to a conflict. This link to conflict may be evident in the profile of the perpetrator, the profile of the victim, the climate of impunity or State collapse, any cross-border dimensions or violations of the terms of a ceasefire agreement.<sup>110</sup>

Rape and other forms of sexual violence during armed conflict are prohibited under international humanitarian law (e.g. Fourth Geneva Convention and Additional Protocols I and II) and listed as a war crime by the International Criminal Court. States have a legal duty to prosecute sexual violence, whether committed by state or non-state actors and in international or non-international conflicts. Such is its seriousness and devastating impact that in other countries sexual violence used in this way has been successfully (but rarely) prosecuted as torture (and thus a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions),<sup>111, 112</sup> genocide<sup>113, 114</sup> and a crime against humanity.<sup>115, 116</sup>

Regarding the Colombian conflict, Oxfam (2009) reports the collective observations of several sources on gender-based violence:

In 2001, the UN Special Rapporteur identified during a visit to the country the existence of sexual slavery, domestic slavery, rape, sexual mutilation, sexual abuse and violation of reproductive rights of women combatants, such as forced contraception and sterilization. The Rapporteur also noted that armed groups place territorial limitations on women's freedom of movement and establish curfews for them, impose rigorous codes of social conduct that include restrictions on women's clothing and establish punishments for failure to comply or for "bad conduct."

In 2004, Amnesty International broadened that list to include genital mutilation, sexual exploitation, kidnappings aimed at forcing women to provide sexual services to members of armed groups and enforced abortion or use of contraceptives. Other sources have shed light on other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by armed actors, such as forced prostitution or human trafficking.<sup>117</sup>

Various parties to the conflict use sexual violence in differing ways. The use of forced prostitution, connected to illegal economic activities of paramilitary groups, has been detailed above. Such groups are also known to have used sexual violence as a means of control over

<sup>110</sup> Ban, Ki-moon. "Conflict-related sexual violence: report of the Secretary-General." S/2014/181, *United Nations: Security Council*, 13 Mar. 2014, p.1, available at: [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7b65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7d/s\\_2014\\_181.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7b65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7d/s_2014_181.pdf).

<sup>111</sup> *Mucic et al*, International Criminal Tribunal of Yugoslavia, 1998, available at: [http://www.icty.org/x/cases/mucic/tjug/en/981116\\_judg\\_en.pdf](http://www.icty.org/x/cases/mucic/tjug/en/981116_judg_en.pdf).

<sup>112</sup> Torture is the intentional infliction of pain (physical or mental) upon a person for the purposes of punishment, coercion or intimidation. Whether or not actions committed by non-state actors constitute torture is a contentious issue in international law.

<sup>113</sup> Genocide means acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.

<sup>114</sup> *Prosecutor v Akayesu*, International Criminal Tribunal of Rwanda, 1998, available at: <https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/ictr-prosecutor-v-jean-paul-akayesu>.

<sup>115</sup> Crime against humanity means a widespread, systematic attack against a civilian population.

<sup>116</sup> *Prosecutor v Akayesu*, 1998.

<sup>117</sup> *Oxfam*, 2009, p.12.

women's everyday activities<sup>118</sup> such as the collection of food (accusing them of collecting food for guerrillas, even when the food was for their own families or for displaced groups<sup>119</sup>).

Guerrilla groups such as FARC are known to have recruited girls into their ranks, often from poor or abusive backgrounds, promising them good pay, only to use them for sexual slavery,<sup>120</sup> and to use sexual violence in order to forcibly recruit girls as combatants. In addition, FARC – 40% of whose combatants were female<sup>121</sup> – are known to have forced women and girls to use harmful forms of contraception and to have had abortions as late as eight months into pregnancy. In addition to the trauma and potential physical injury connected to this, for Christian women opposed to contraception and/or abortion this may also engender guilt or shame, regardless of their lack of culpability. The US State Department 2017 report on Colombia reports that:

Through July 31, the Attorney General's Office reported it opened 400 investigations related to cases of forced abortion, 13 of which had occurred during the year. A two-year Attorney General's Office investigation that concluded in 2016 documented 214 cases of girls who were subjected to rape, forced sterilization, forced abortion, and other forms of sexual violence by the FARC. January, Spain extradited a Colombian man - Hector Albeidis Arboleda, known as "the Nurse"- who was accused of performing up to 500 forced abortions for the FARC between 1998 and 2003.<sup>122</sup>

The recruitment of children under fifteen is a war crime. Both guerrilla and paramilitary groups are known to have recruited children, both as combatants and for sexual purposes. Girls may agree to recruitment – particularly from poor or abusive backgrounds – as a means of securing food or some measure of protection (for themselves or their families). Many enter into relationships with older male combatants, where a clear power imbalance exists, but does provide the girls with some form of security and possibly safer assignments, depending on the military seniority of the man.<sup>123</sup> Despite demobilisation of some groups, their metamorphosis into criminal groups means that sexual violence against women and, in particular, against girls continues, with the UN Secretary-General's 2017 report on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence documenting several cases of ongoing exploitation against girls as young as twelve.<sup>124</sup>

The impact of gender-based violence by State security forces is particularly devastating, as it leaves the civilian population with no protection and nowhere to turn for justice. The rule of law is obliterated when the authorities responsible for ensuring security and justice are those violating it. Colombia's Human Rights Ombudsman said that in Cartagena:

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<sup>118</sup> ABColombia et al, p.1.

<sup>119</sup> OMCT, 2004, p.168.

<sup>120</sup> OMCT, 2004, p.167.

<sup>121</sup> Bigio, Jamille; Connell, Anne; and Vogelstein, Rachel. "Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Colombia." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 Dec. 2017, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/women-s-participation-peace-processes-colombia>.

<sup>122</sup> "Country reports on human rights practices for 2017: Colombia." Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *US State Department*, 20 Apr. 2018, available at: <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?dliid=277319&year=2017#wrapper>.

<sup>123</sup> OMCT, 2004, p.169-170.

<sup>124</sup> Guterres, António. "Report of the Secretary-General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence." S/2017/249, *United Nations Security Council*, 15 Apr. 2017, Paragraph 29, available at: <http://www.un.org/en/events/elimination-of-sexual-violence-in-conflict/pdf/1494280398.pdf>.

even if cases of sexual violence against women perpetrated by the Security Forces do not correspond to a war strategy (...), they constitute a generalized practice that takes advantage of the conditions of subordination of women, their precarious economic conditions resulting from lack of protection by the State, and the acceptance of existing ideas in the local culture, such as a woman's body is an object that belongs to men.<sup>125</sup>

It is impossible to know how many women and girls have been affected by violence specific to them as women, especially given that the majority of attacks go unreported and many may end in the unrecorded death of the victim, or the exclusion of sexual violence from autopsy reports. The campaign 'Rape and Other Violence: Leave my Body out of the War' is regarded as having conducted one of the most comprehensive surveys. Their 2001-2009 study found that estimated that during these nine years, 12,809 women were victims of rape by armed groups and 1,970 by members of State armed forces; 1,575 women had been forced into prostitution by armed groups and 986 by State armed forces; 4,415 had forced pregnancies perpetrated by armed groups and 987 by State forces; 1,810 had abortions forced on them by armed groups and 987 by members of the State armed forces and 987 women were forcibly sterilized by State armed forces.<sup>126</sup> The impact on victims and their families is immeasurable.

UN Women asserts that

sexual violence challenges conventional notions of what constitutes a security threat. It is often invisible: the world does not witness rape in the same way as landmine injuries. Cheaper than bullets, it requires no weapons system other than physical intimidation, making it low cost, yet high impact. This may also render sexual violence resistant to disarmament processes and ceasefire monitoring, aimed to rid communities of conventional weapons and ensure the cessation of shooting and other openly hostile acts.<sup>127</sup>

## RETALIATION FOR CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

LUZ\*, A FORMER GUERRILLA COMBATANT, WAS SEXUALLY ABUSED BY HER COMRADES WHEN SHE LEFT THE GROUP AFTER SHE CONVERTED TO CHRISTIANITY.

ANOTHER FORMER COMBATANT, SARA\*, SAID, "THEY ROB YOU OF YOUR FAMILY. THEY MAKE YOU LIVE A LIFE THAT YOU DO NOT CHOOSE. THEY EXCHANGE A DOLL FOR A RIFLE, A PLAYGROUND FOR A BATTLEFIELD AND THEY SEXUALLY VIOLATE YOU. THESE VIOLATIONS DAMAGE YOUR SOUL. NOT A SINGLE DAY GOES BY THAT YOU DO NOT REMEMBER THOSE MOMENTS."

<sup>125</sup> United Nations: Security Council, 2012, Paragraph 19.

<sup>126</sup> Amparo Sanchez et al, 2011.

<sup>127</sup> "Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: An Analytical Inventory of Peacekeeping Practice." UNIFEM, United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict, UN Women, June 2010, p.12, available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2010/1/addressing-conflict-related-sexual-violence-an-analytical-inventory-of-peacekeeping-practice>.

Given that whole groups or communities may be impacted in this way, churches may find large proportions of their congregations affected by sexual violence, possibly due to their actions in resisting armed groups or for other Christian activity such as evangelism. Female combatants who become Christians have been known to face rape as punishment (see box<sup>128</sup>) and severe restrictions on their movement, preventing them from Christian fellowship. This is likely also to be the case for already-Christian women who are forcibly recruited or coerced into armed groups. They need vital support from the Christian community, as do those who have potentially been forced to have abortions and faced other forms of violence. All of this may be covered by a layer of shame, silence and fear, detracting from strong family and church relationships and the ability to freely worship. An Open Doors spokesperson supporting survivors explains, “Sexual abuse doesn’t only have sexual implications. It is a violent means of nullifying the will of a person, of crushing the individual and robbing them of their identity.”<sup>129</sup>

The full-circle nature of violence against women is illustrated by its use in armed conflict: pre-existing violence against women allows for the context in which it occurs in conflict, and conflict-related violence against women exacerbates its use outside the conflict.

#### 4.4 Impunity

On paper, Colombia has some of the most proactive laws in the world to protect women against violence. But strong laws have not yet changed the attitudes or practices of authorities, and implementation of these laws is in stark contrast. The 2013 response of the CEDAW Committee noted the “persistent impunity with respect to the investigation, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators of acts of violence against women.”<sup>130</sup> Both the US State Department and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office have highlighted that impunity for all crimes is one of the biggest challenges facing Colombia.<sup>131</sup> Combined with discrimination against women and the failure to protect Christians from attacks and threats, this leaves Christian women with very little recourse to justice if they are attacked due to their faith or activities.

It is estimated that only 18% of sexual crime, both domestic and conflict-related, is reported in Colombia. ABColombia et al (2013, 15) state that:

Sexual-related crimes in Colombia have an impunity rate of more than 98 per cent. If only one in five sexual violence cases are reported, and of those cases only two in 100 are likely to result in a sentence, the chances of being sanctioned after committing an act of sexual violence are almost nil. As a result, a high percentage of women victims of sexual violence harbour a sense of fear, powerlessness, frustration and insecurity.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> World Watch Monitor, 2018.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> CEDAW Committee, 2013, Paragraph C/15.

<sup>131</sup> ABColombia et al, 2013, p.15.

<sup>132</sup> ABColombia et al, 2013, p.15.

In the past decade, the Government has strengthened laws and penalties against domestic violence and, in particular, femicide (see above), now punishable by a sentence of up to 41 years.<sup>133</sup> Despite this, domestic violence also goes unreported more often than not.

The problems are manifold: female victims may not report violence because it is seen as normal or, in the case of domestic violence, a private matter; due to shame and fear of stigmatisation; because they fear retaliation; from a belief in family cohesion over individual rights or safety; because they do not trust authorities and fear mistreatment or not being taken seriously; because they do not know how to complain; they lack financial resources; they rely upon their abuser for money, food or shelter; or because they may never see justice even if they do report crime. For indigenous women, the lack of a translator and the fact that forced sexual relations are, for many, considered taboo may further impede reporting. In addition, however, widespread discrimination against women; stereotyping of female victims of violence (particularly sexual violence, and particularly Afro-Colombian and indigenous women); victim-blaming; devaluing of the impact and importance of gender-based violence; rampant public-sector corruption (including links to organized crime); intimidation of judges, lawyers and witnesses; lack of State presence in areas ruled by guerrilla and paramilitary groups (or their successors) and the chaos caused by five decades of armed conflict all play their part.

Both underreporting and judicial failings are intertwined: the devaluing of gender-specific crime can be seen in the failure of police to properly investigate, such as registering only a murder, and not the rape which happened prior to it. When a crime happens to men and to women (murder) it is registered: when it is gender-specific (rape) it is not. This indifference to violence against women partly explains its underreporting. Regardless of these factors, the State is under international obligation to investigate and prosecute violence against women.

Conversely, prior to demobilisation, OMCT reported that “if women want to see results from their complaints, they will often report to the paramilitaries or the guerrillas before going to the police because the armed combatants will ensure quick action.”<sup>134</sup> Given that some areas are still under the control of armed groups and drug trafficking groups rather than State authorities, this may still be the case.

For Christian women, the lack of official recognition that violence against them can also have a faith-related persecutory dimension further undermines the likelihood that crimes against them will be adequately prosecuted for both aspects of the crime (gender-based violence *and* religious persecution), particularly where, as Open Doors research has found, authorities refuse to acknowledge that a majority religion such as Christianity may also be subject to pressure and persecution from numerous sources.<sup>135</sup>

During much of the peace process between the Government and FARC, concern was expressed about the potential amnesty for sexual violence committed by rebels – not only due to the lack of justice for victims and the fact that this is in breach of international humanitarian laws, but

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<sup>133</sup> Global Database on Violence Against Women, 2015.

<sup>134</sup> OMCT, 2004, p.174.

<sup>135</sup> Open Doors Analytical, 2018, p.3

also due to the impact it would have on non-conflict related violence against women. In 2013, ABColombia et al stated that:

the same attitudes and cultural beliefs driving sexual violence against women in conflict are present in domestic life. This is one of the major reasons why these crimes cannot be amnestied in a peace process. If this occurs, it would give a message of acceptance of these crimes, and of the social, economic and cultural systems that sustain violence against women and girls....

The last negotiation process between the Government and the paramilitaries gave the message to women that perpetrators would not be held to account for sexual violence. Of the 39,546 confessions received only 0.24 per cent relate to sexual violence. Since investigation of cases relies on confessions, the full extent of this crime has not been revealed, nor is it being investigated or the truth made known. Internationally, a gender perspective is recognized as essential to peace negotiations and reconstruction processes.<sup>136</sup>

Encouragingly, however, after the inclusion of more women in the peace negotiations (by 2015, 20% of Government negotiators and 43% of FARC negotiators were women<sup>137</sup>), the UN Secretary-General's report of 2017 stated that:

"During a joint visit to the Havana talks in July by my Special Representative and the Executive Director of UN-Women, the Government and FARC-EP publicly committed to delivering justice and support to sexual violence survivors. In terms of transitional justice, the final peace accord provides for the establishment of a truth commission and a special jurisdiction for peace, which identifies sexual violence as a grave violation that cannot be amnestied."<sup>138</sup>

It remains to be seen whether or not conflict-related sexual violence will actually be properly prosecuted and punished, and whether female combatants will receive gender-specific disarmament and reintegration processes. Likewise, the Government still has a long way to go in the full implementation of laws which protect women from other forms of violence such as acid attacks or access to health services for victims. Women's groups have been instrumental in bringing about change to laws and the approach of the judicial system at the highest levels. Until significant change happens, however, lack of faith in the judicial system, undermines the rule of law and will be an impediment to the peace and reconstruction process.

Christian women who have no hope of protection from authorities or of recourse to justice will continue to be easy targets for those wishing to undermine all Christian activity: despite threats to her life and that of her unborn child, Angela Hernandez received virtually no State protection. If a State Deputy has so little assistance, what can the average Christian woman expect? The constant fear, trauma and adaptive behavior this leads to not only curbs freedom to practice faith, but also decreases the resilience of the broader Church and deprives it of some of the giftings women bring. If perpetrators know they can expect impunity when targeting women, they will continue to use Christian women as a means of undermining the whole Church.

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<sup>136</sup> ABColombia et al, 2013, p.1-2.

<sup>137</sup> Bigio et al, 2017.

<sup>138</sup> Guterres, 2017, p.14, paragraph 26.

## 5. Conclusion

At the April 2018 Global Christian Forum's Global Gathering, held in Bogota, Colombian Deputy Minister of Political Relations Héctor Olimpo Espinosa Oliver praised churches and faith-based organisations for their role in reconciliation and peace-building in Colombia.<sup>139</sup> Women, too, have been integral to peace work across the country, at a community level, at a governmental level and in negotiations between armed groups and the Government.

The importance of women's involvement in peace and reconstruction is recognized in UN Resolution 1325, which "reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security."<sup>140</sup> In Colombia, women negotiate with fighters for local ceasefires and hostage and child soldier releases, secure community engagement with peace agreements (thus ensuring that peace is sustainable), and gender-based violence survivors from all groups involved in peace negotiations demanded the inclusion of this issue in negotiations, ensuring that it was not subject to amnesties. 27 of the 51 seats in the war crimes tribunal court will be held by female judges, in particular Afro-Colombian and indigenous women.<sup>141</sup> The hope is that this will bring a more holistic perspective to the proceedings and ensure that the crimes suffered by women will be properly recognized.

However, threats to both women and to churches still remain from a variety of sources and, as seen in Figure 3 below, these vulnerabilities intersect, are affected (or even caused) by and go on to affect other vulnerabilities, making individual issues far more complex to overcome. Violence against women is an ongoing context, rather than a series of isolated incidents, and the normalisation of this violence increases the likelihood of its repetition and of impunity for perpetrators. Worldwide, women often report that they face more violence following conflict than during it, as combatants return to civilian and domestic life, and UNHCR (2017) reported in Colombia that, "since the signing of the peace agreement, increased violence by new armed groups has resulted in killings, forced recruitment — including of children — gender-based violence and limited access to education, water and sanitation, as well as movement restrictions and forced displacement of the civilian population."<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> "Role of Churches in Colombia's Peace Process Raised at Global Christian Forum Gathering." *World Council of Churches*, 30 Apr. 2018, available at: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/role-of-churches-in-colombias-peace-process-raised-at-global-christian-forum-gathering>.

<sup>140</sup> "Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (Security Council Resolution 1325)." *S/Res/1325, United Nations*, 2000, available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>.

<sup>141</sup> Bigio et al, 2017.

<sup>142</sup> Spindler, William. "Forced displacement growing in Colombia despite peace agreement." *UNHCR*, 10 Mar. 2017, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2017/3/58c26e114/forced-displacement-growing-colombia-despite-peace-agreement.html>.

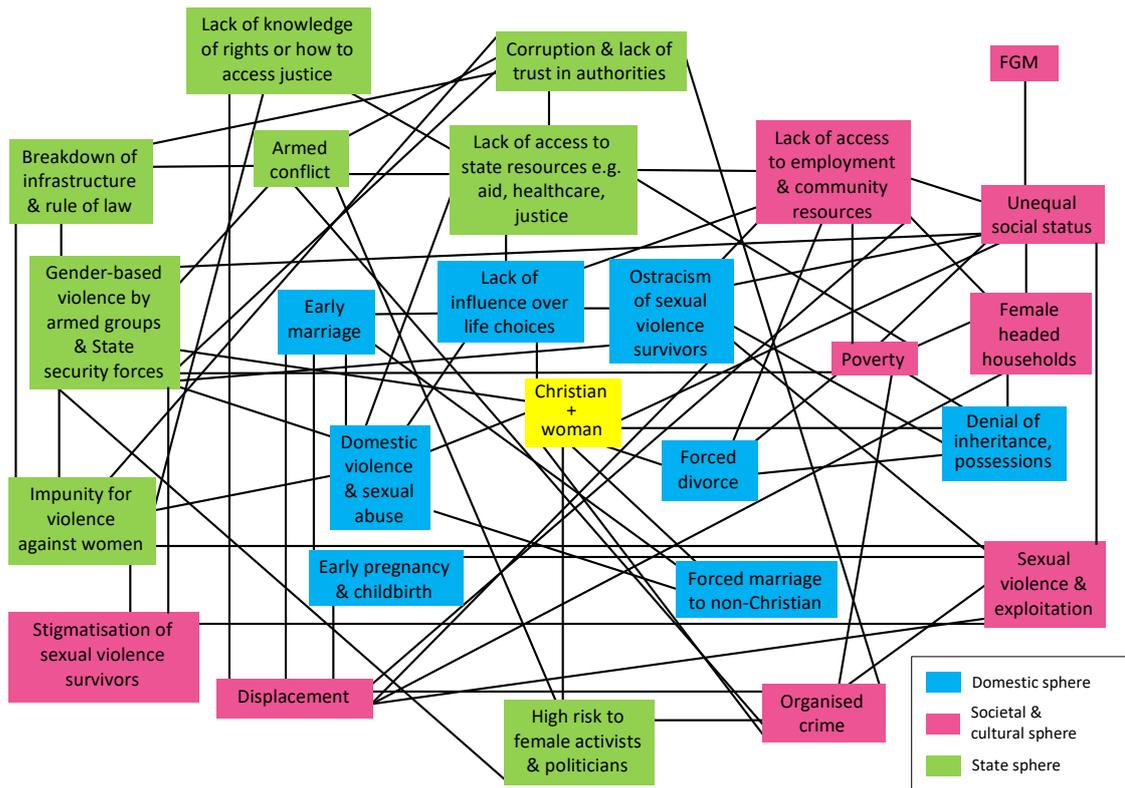


Figure 3: Intersecting vulnerabilities of women, and especially Christian women, in Colombia.

A Colombian female church leader stated that, “The end of the FARC is not the beginning of peace; it is only one actor in this war. The persecution against the Church has grown through criminal gangs, indigenous leaders and other guerrilla groups.”<sup>143</sup> For as long as such groups remain outside the rule of law, as long as wider societal attitudes continue to devalue both women and the socio-political perspective of Christians, and as long as the Government does not prioritize stopping violence against either women or Christians, women will continue to face disproportionate and female-specific vulnerabilities at the intersection between their gender and their faith.

<sup>143</sup> Ruiz, Camilo and Poveda, Liz. “Colombian Church Sceptical over FARC deal.” *World Watch Monitor*, 4 July 2016, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/07/colombian-church-sceptical-over-farc-deal/>.