# Armed Conflict, Psychosocial Impact and Reparation in Colombia: Women's Voice*

## Conflicto armado, impacto psicosocial y reparación en Colombia: la voz de las mujeres

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## ABSTRACT

The armed conflict in Colombia has gone on for fifty years and produced numerous victims. Women make up a collective that has been especially affected and made invisible by the violence. Based on 935 interviews of Colombian women (17-83 years) belonging to different ethnic communities (who had identified themselves as mixed-race, Afro-Americans, indigenous, or white), the present study explores the Human Rights violations they experienced, the psychosocial impact of these violations, the strategies these women used to cope with the violence, and the measures they consider valuable to redress the damage inflicted. Using a feminist methodological perspective (Harding, 1987), data collection was carried out by women interviewing other women who wanted to bring back often invisibilized experiences of violence and thus contribute to their collective learning and empowerment process. They were to do this based on a shared redefinition of the facts. The instrument used included study methods used in other contexts of human rights violations (Arnoso, Beristain & González Hidalgo, 2014; Beristain, 2009) and the answers were coded for further quantitative and qualitative treatment. A relationship was found between the different types of violence and the regions the sample came from, with indigenous and Afro-American women affected more negatively by the conflict. The results indicate that the paramilitary groups were the agents identified most often as the perpetrators of the violence.

**Keywords**
Colombia; armed conflict; psychosocial consequences; coping strategies; reparation; women

## RESUMEN

El conflicto armado en Colombia ha durado cincuenta años y ha producido numerosas víctimas. Las mujeres constituyen un colectivo que ha sido especialmente afectado e invisibilizado por la violencia. A partir

de 935 entrevistas a mujeres colombianas (17-83 años) pertenecientes a diferentes comunidades étnicas (que se identificaron como mestizas, afroamericanas, indígenas o blancas), el presente estudio explora las violaciones a los derechos humanos que sufrieron, el impacto psicosocial de las mismas, las estrategias utilizadas por las mujeres para hacer frente a la violencia y las medidas que consideran relevantes para reparar los daños que les fueron ocasionados. Utilizando una perspectiva metodológica feminista (Harding, 1987), la recolección de datos fue realizada por mujeres entrevistando a otras mujeres que querían compartir experiencias de violencia a menudo invisibilizadas y, a través de ellas, poder generar un aprendizaje colectivo y proceso de empoderamiento mutuo a partir de una resignificación colectiva de los hechos acontecidos. El instrumento utilizado incluyó una metodología ya contrastada en otros contextos donde se han producidoe violaciones a los derechos humanos (Arnoso et al., 2014; Beristain, 2009). Las respuestas fueron codificadas para un tratamiento adicional cuantitativo y cualitativo. Se encontró una relación entre los diferentes tipos de violencia y las regiones de origen de las participantes, siendo las mujeres indígenas y afroamericanas quienes más negativamente afectadas se mostraron por el conflicto. Los resultados indican que los grupos paramilitares fueron los agentes con mayor frecuencia identificados como autores de la violencia.

**Palabras clave**
Colombia; Conflicto armado; consecuencias psicosociales; estrategias de afrontamiento; reparación; mujeres

## Introduction

The armed conflict in Colombia has lasted for more than 50 years, producing devastating effects on human rights among the civilian population. The Report "¡Basta Ya! (That's Enough!) Colombia: memories of war and dignity" (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica [CNMH], 2013) estimates that between 1958 and 2013 more than 220,000 people died, of whom 82 % corresponded to the civilian population. According to this report, between 1981 and 2012, paramilitary groups were responsible for 38.4 % of the cases of human rights violations. Another 27.7 % were attributed to "unidentified" armed groups. The guerrillas are identified as perpetrators in 16.8 % of the cases, and Law Enforcement in 10.1 %. The remaining percentage is attributed to "unknowns" (6.5 %) and the alliance between the far-right army and the State security corps 0.4 %.

More recent reports (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica [CNMH], 2016a) reflect the nearly six and a half million people displaced during the conflict, of which a little over 50 % are women (3,301,848) (CNMH, 2016a). Likewise, 60,630 people have disappeared as a consequence of the armed conflict between 1970 and 2015. Of the 55,012 cases for which the date of occurrence is known, 60 % took place during the 1996-2005 period while 20 % occurred in the 2006-2015 period. Thus, 8 out of 10 of the forced disappearances took place in the last 20 years. About half of these were perpetrated by paramilitary groups acting with the acquiescence of the State (46.1 %, according to the CNMH, 2016a, 2016b). Thus, as González (2015) pointed out, the expansion of paramilitarism in Colombia has led to a kind of mafia state, which is based on the terror and intimidation that irrigates on the population.

The crimes committed were intended to control, cover up, and destroy the very existence of these communities, worsening the damage caused by the social exclusion, economic exploitation, and discrimination they have historically and systematically experienced (Grupo de Memoria Histórica [GMH], 2010). From a gender perspective, a variety of international organizations have repeatedly manifested and documented that women and children from different regions, ethnic groups, and economic conditions have been particularly affected in this conflict. The insecurity of women, who are already one of the most unprotected and vulnerable groups due to their conditions of discrimination, has been aggravated by the presence of the different armed groups operating in daily life and exercising social control over their lives in both public and private spaces (ABColombia, Sisma Mujer, & US Office, 2013; Amnistía Internacional, 2004; Unifem, 2005).

## The psychosocial impact of the collective violence

We know that human rights violations, such as those occurring in the framework

of the Colombian armed conflict, produce strong emotional damage, both individually and collectively. This impact has been extensively documented by social psychologists and mental health workers concerned with peace. In some cases, severe posttraumatic stress problems have been found (Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, 2005; Marshall, Schell, Elliott, Berthold, & Chun, 2005), and they are significant among displaced women (Vojvoda, Weine, McGlashan, Becker, & Southwick, 2008) and people who have been victims of torture. These profiles are usually combined with symptoms of anxiety and feelings of humiliation (Basoglu et al., 1997; Bojholm et al., 1992; Reis et al., 2004; Viñar, 2005). Moreover, there is frequently psychosocial damage, an impact on the life project, and the experience of a break with everyday life (Becker & Lira, 1989; Kordon, Edelman, Lagos, & Kersner, 1995). These effects are especially evident in those cases where the violence has caused the victims to leave their place of origin and face relocation and acculturation, stretching their capacity for long-term adaptation and worsening their quality of life (Bello, 2004; Boehnlein et al., 2004).

In the case of the women, they must also deal with the impact of the violence on their families and communities (Arnoso et al., 2014). Likewise, although sexual torture or the threat of using it also occurs in the case of men, there seems to be certain evidence of a differentiated impact in the case of the women, who can be blamed and made responsible for what happened. This stigmatization reinforces the invisibility in which sexual violence usually takes place, given that it is seldom denounced due to the victims' fear of being branded (Mackenzie, 2010).

Furthermore, as reported in other contexts (Blanco, Díaz, & García del Soto, 2006), in the Colombian case, during the past 15 years polarization has undermined feelings of solidarity with the victims, with many of them being questioned, especially the victims of paramilitary forces. Some authors have pointed out the establishment of discriminatory hierarchies according to the type of victim, which were correlated with institutional efficacy or apathy, mobilization or social passivity (CNMH, 2013). The stigmatization affects the way the victims face these violations, their social representations about human rights and the groups in conflict (Doise, Spini, & Clèmence, 1998), and their demands for reparation in the process of constructing a culture of peace (Beristain, 2009).

However, in spite of the obstacles to overcoming the damage caused by the violence, there are many documented experiences where the victims organize. Previous studies conducted in other contexts with displaced populations, such as the one carried out in the Western Sahara, show that many women who fled to the desert with their children and a few belongings collectively organized themselves to present demands for peace and collective rights (Arnoso et al., 2014). The battle against being forgotten and the testimonial commemoration, along with social organization and political demands, are mechanisms that make it possible to give a social significance to both individual memories and collective traumatic events (Becker & Lira, 1989; Punamaki-Gitai, 1990). In Colombia, studies on populations displaced due to political violence show that the main element of growth, in the midst of the horror, is the creation of a *collective identity* as victims and as displaced persons. Taking on this identity means accepting being part of a process and having some rights as a displaced population, and a capacity for agency by virtue of this role (Bello, 2004).

*Helping on the path toward peace*

The purpose of Psychology for Peace is to collaborate in the search for solutions to conflicts that have involved serious human rights violations. From this perspective, it is necessary to develop studies that help to understand the victims' suffering, foster their empowerment and growth after the trauma, and make recommendations to facilitate peaceful co-existence between the groups in conflict (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004; Chirot & Seligman, 2001; Gibson, 2004; Kelman, 2005, Malley-

Morrison, Mercurio, & Twose, 2013; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Truth commissions have helped in this direction. However, few commissions have worked from the perspective of the women involved in the conflict.

The present study interviewed 935 women and was conceived as a first step in making visible their situation as victims of the violence in the armed conflict in Colombia. The study intends to describe the violations the women experienced, taking into account the region where they lived, those responsible for the events, or the ethnic community to which they belonged. Another objective was to discover the type of psychosocial impact these violations had, the coping strategies the women used, and their demands for reparation.

## Method

### Participants

Individual interviews were conducted with 935 female victims of different human rights violations from different regions in Colombia: Cauca (11.9 %), Bogotá (11 %), Risaralda (10.5 %), Putumayo (11.6 %), Bolívar (10.5 %), Valle (10.9 %), Chocó (11 %), Santander (10.9 %), and Antioquia (11.8 %). The majority of the women identified themselves as mixed-race (46.8 %; $n = 438$), followed by Afro-Americans (26.3 %; $n = 246$). A minority (5.7 %; $n = 53$) identified themselves as indigenous, while the remaining 21.2 % of the sample identified themselves as white. The age of the women interviewed ranged from 17 to 83 years ($M = 45.86$ and $SD = 12.96$). The inclusion of women in the sample was possible thanks to the collaboration of the *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres*, who informed and facilitated access to participants who testified within the framework of the Truth Commission on Women promoted by this organization. These women signed an informed consent previous to their participation in the research.

## Instrument

The instrument included measures used in other contexts of human rights violations (Arnoso et al., 2014; Beristain, 2009), the indicators of which were reviewed by women from the Ruta Pacífica adjusting its draft to the local context in order to ensure transcultural validity. The instrument consisted of a closed response questionnaire in which a series of questions were asked in various thematic blocks. 1. Regarding the types of violations experienced, the questionnaire made it possible to register diverse options. A cluster analysis allows us to summarize these options in five groups: a) *harassment and destruction of property* (including confiscations, forced entry and physical abuse, threats, persecution and vigilance, and the destruction of property; b) *torture* (physical, psychological, and/or sexual); c) *violations of personal freedom* (arbitrary detentions, forced recruitment, hostage-taking, and/or confinement); d) *forced displacement* (individual, family, or community); and e) *violations of the right to life* (executions, forced disappearances, and being injured in attacks). 2. Likewise, they were asked about the agents who had been responsible for the violations, differentiating between State agents, paramilitary groups, or guerrilla organizations (with the possibility that the person could mark more than one option about the agents who perpetrated the violence). 3. Regarding the consequences of the events, the questionnaire contemplates diverse consequences. A cluster analysis made it possible to summarize them in three subgroups: a) *socio-affective consequences and the life project*; b) *specific consequences in women* (include sexuality, gender identity, stigmatization, and loneliness and abandonment); and c) *effects on health and the body*. Moreover, an item was included that asked about the *persistence of a strong emotional impact in the present*, with a dichotomous response format (yes/no). 4. The actions undertaken by the women to deal with the events were regrouped, by means of a cluster analysis, into four sets of coping strategies: a) *seeking support in organizations for women*; b) *transformation of the*

*roles within the family* (includes having become the main source of economic and affective support); c) *avoidance strategies* (not talking about the events and finding support in religion); and d) *active communal coping* (organizations to demand their rights, legal accusations, and/or the search for psychosocial support). 5. To explore the level of agreement with the reparation measures, the set of measures cited underwent a cluster analysis that summarized the information in five subgroups: a) *memory and forgiveness measures*; b) *legal measures and reforms in the State*; c) *right to the truth, justice, and protection of victims*; d) *distributive measures* (economic reparations, job, educational, and health support); and e) demilitarization and returning land and property. 6. The last block of the questionnaire included some items designed to collect socio-demographic characteristics of the women interviewed, such as age, region of residence, and ethnic identification.

## Procedure

The study was carried out following a feminist methodological perspective (Harding, 1987) with special concern in terms of rescuing often invisibilized experiences of violence and contributing, through research and action, to the process of learning and collective empowerment of victims starting from a shared redefinition of the facts. The study was carried out through a network of women's organizations with a strong regional base and access to the victims (Afonso & Beristain, 2013) (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, 2013). It should be kept in mind that, at the time, the study was carried out in a context of war, with strong territorial control by different armed participants. The interviews lasted about three hours, and they were carried out by women specially trained by the project for the case documentation work, which included practical sessions of collecting testimonies and supervision. This experience of women telling their stories to another woman who accepts and accompanies them makes sense because it allows a previously unrevealed truth to emerge from the women (many of the women interviewed had never talked about their experience of violence because the female experience in the war had not been investigated to this extent). Participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality of the responses was guaranteed.

## Results

*Report on human rights violations and the responsible agents*

When globally analyzing the report on human rights violations, we find that on average each woman reported having experienced 4.13 events ($SD= 2.47$). This means that the experience of these women is marked by what we could call a systematic exposure to violence. In fact, 25 % of the women suffered more than six different types of violence, with some women mentioning as many as thirteen of the violations included in the instrument. An analysis of the violent events reported by the women indicates that the large majority of them (73.8 %) were victims of forced displacement, mostly family displacements (61.7 %). Collective displacements (8.7 %) and individual displacements (5.8 %) are reported in a much lower proportion. A statistically significant association is detected between this type of violence and the regions the women come from ($X^2_{(8)}=88.42$; $p<0.001$, $\phi=0.31$), as it is reported more in the regions of Bogotá, Bolívar, and Risaralda, although there was no association with the ethnic identity of the women ($X^2_{(3)}=4.21$; $p=0.24$, $\phi=0.07$). Table 1 shows the percentages broken down for the different regions of origin and the ethnic identity of the women.

**TABLE 1**
*Human Right Violation: region and ethnic identity.*

| | Harassment | Torture | Detention | Forced displacement | Violations of the right to life |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Antioquía | 63.6 % | 51.8 % | 6.4 % | 58.2 % | 90.9 % |
| Bogotá | 72.8 % | 71.8 % | 7.8 % | 89.3 % | 63.1 % |
| Bolívar | 52.0 % | 53.1 % | 9.2 % | 93.9 % | 65.3 % |
| Cauca | 46.8 % | 49.5 % | 0 % | 70.3 % | 63.6 % |
| Chocó | 78.6 % | 61.2 % | 29.1 % | 71.8 % | 90.3 % |
| Putumayo | 64.8 % | 50 % | 9.3 % | 56.5 % | 88 % |
| Risaralda | 60.8 % | 53.1 % | 7.2 % | 90.7 % | 51.5 % |
| Santander | 66.7 % | 66.7 % | 13.7 % | 76.5 % | 64.7 % |
| Valle | 71.6 % | 77.5 % | 8.8 % | 60.8 % | 73.3 % |
| Afro | 71.4 % | 64.6 % | 17.1 % | 75.9 % | 79.9 % |
| Indigenous | 64.2 % | 64.2 % | 5.7 % | 81.1 % | 75.5 % |
| Mixed | 67.6 % | 61.9 % | 10.5 % | 73.7 % | 71.9 % |
| White | 47.5 % | 45.5 % | 1.5 % | 69.2 % | 64.5 % |

Source: own work.

Moreover, 72.6 % referred to having been the victim of attacks against the right to life, which includes executions and forced disappearances among their family members, as well as serious injury during attacks. These reports are significantly associated with the region of origin ($X^2_{(8)}=84.19$; $p<0.001$, $\phi=0.30$), occurring mainly in Antioquia, Chocó, and Putumayo, and with the ethnic background of women of Afro-American descent ($X^2_{(3)}=13.45$; $p<0.001$, $\phi=0.12$).

In addition, 64.1 % of the women reported human rights violations linked to *harassment and destruction of property*, such as confiscation, forced entry, destruction of objects belonging to them, abuse, threats, and being followed. These events are significantly associated with the ethnic identity ($X^2_{(3)}=31.81$; $p<0.001$, $\phi=0.18$) and region of origin ($X^2_{(8)}=36.68$; $p<0.001$, $\phi=0.20$). That is, they were reported significantly more in women identified as indigenous, mixed-race, and Afro-descendants than in those who defined themselves as "white". The regions where this violence was reported the most were Bogotá and Chocó.

Furthermore, 59.3 % reported having experienced some form of *torture* (54.4 % reported cases of psychological torture, 15 %

physical torture, and 13.2 % sexual torture). These events are significantly associated with the ethnic identity ($X^2_{(3)}=31.81$; $p<.001$, $\phi=.18$) and region of origin ($X^2_{(8)}=37.02$; $p<0.001$, $\phi=0.20$). In other words, there are more reports of torture in the groups identified as indigenous, mixed-race, and Afro-descendants. The regions with the most torture reported were Bogotá, Chocó, Santander, and Valle.

Finally, 10.1 % referred to having been victims of violations of personal freedom, such as arbitrary detentions, kidnapping, and forced recruitment. These events are significantly associated with the region of origin ($X^2_{(8)}=59.75$; $p<0.001$, $\phi=0.25$) and the ethnic identity ($X^2_{(3)}=30.78$; $p<0.001$, $\phi=0.18$). Thus, the reports of violations of individual freedoms are associated with the population that identifies itself as Afro-American, especially in the region of Chocó.

Only half of the women interviewed (48 %) identified the groups that had perpetrated the human rights violations. In fact, 52 % did not mention anyone as being specifically responsible. However, 10.4 % identified State agents, 18.2 % guerilla organizations, and 32.6 % paramilitary groups. Moreover, 35.9 % referred to having been punished by only one type of responsible group, 11 % by two different groups, and 1.1 % mentioned the three groups in conflict. Broken down, in the case of *harassment* and *destruction of property*, the paramilitary are identified as perpetrators in 38.2 % of the cases (compared to 19.9 % for the guerrilla and 11.7 % for State agents). The pattern is similar for *torture* (33.9 % paramilitary, 17.3 % guerrilla, and 10.5 % State agents), *violations of the right to life* (45.1 % paramilitary, 25.1 % guerrilla, and 14.3 % State agents), *forced displacement* (31.1 % paramilitary, 18.7 % guerrilla, and 9.3 % State agents) and *violations of personal freedom* (29.8 % paramilitary and 13.8 % for both the guerrilla and the State agents).

*Impact of the violence on the women*

When asked about the effects on *socio-affective* aspects and the *life project* of the women included in the study, 91.6 % of them referred to an important worsening of their quality of life, whether on an economic level and/or an affective one, as well as an impact on their life project. Moreover, 79.3 % expressed having felt consequences on their *health and body*, whether of a sensorial physical type, serious injuries, fractures, pain and chronic diseases of various types, addiction, or different types of handicaps for which medical treatment and hospitalization were required. Likewise, 74% of the women expressed having had consequences that were *specific to women*, that is, they recognize an impact on their sexuality and gender identity, which has contributed to stigmatizing them socially and led them to feel lonely or abandoned.

Regarding the persistence of the emotional impact, 63.6 % of the women mentioned feeling quite affected now about events that occurred in the past, which shows the lasting emotional impact of the stressful and traumatic events. Table 2 shows the correlations detected among the types of Human Rights violations suffered by the women and their consequences, and the coping styles used to respond to this violence. The results indicate that almost all the types of rights violations are associated with some type of impact. The closest relationships were established between *harassment and destruction of property and socio-affective consequences*, the *life project* (r=0.21, p<0.001), and *specific consequences for women* (r=0.20, p<0.001), which refer to problems with their sexuality and gender identity and social stigmatization, family separation, or social isolation. *Torture* is related to *specific consequences for women* (r=0.16, p<0.001), and *violations of the right to life* are associated with *effects on health and the body* (r=0.16, p<0.001). In another vein, there was a negative correlation between the *effects on health and the body* and *displacement* (r=-0.07, p<0.05), which seems to suggest that the displaced women present fewer consequences in this regard. This

result indicates that, in spite of experiencing a strong impact due to leaving their communities of origin, for a large percentage of the women this option protected them from possible damage to their physical health.

**TABLE 2**
*Human Rights Violations, consequences and coping: Correlations*

| | CONSEQUENCES | | | | | COPING | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Socio-affective aspects | Specific consequences for women | Health and body | Persistence of the emotional impact | Active communal coping | Transformation of the roles | Avoidance | Search for support in |
| Harassment | 0.214** | 0.203** | 0.128** | 0.126** | 0.206** | 0.256** | 0.140** | 0.193 |
| Torture | 0.041 | 0.160** | 0.091** | 0.116** | 0.091** | 0.172** | 0.111** | 0.091 |
| Detention | 0.032 | 0.036 | 0.034 | 0.046 | 0.037 | 0.052 | 0.073* | 0.029 |
| Forced displacement | 0.065* | -0.021 | -0.067* | -0.092** | 0.014 | 0.044 | -0.091** | 0.058 |
| Violations of the right to life | 0.098** | 0.107* | 0.155** | 0.186** | 0.137** | 0.179** | 0.117** | 0.037 |

*Note.* * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.001
Source: own work.

Having suffered the consequences of violence activated various forms of individual and communal coping. The female victims used various strategies to defend their lives and manage the consequences in a way that would allow them to rebuild their lives. Thus, it can be observed that the *coping strategy of avoidance* was reported by 78.2 % of the women, *active communal coping* was reported in 70.6 % of the cases, the *transformation of the roles* within their families in 67.1 %, and the *search for support in women's organizations* in 40.5 % of the cases. As we can see, the women used various coping strategies depending on the opportunities they had and the requirements of the context in which they found themselves.

These coping strategies are significantly related to certain types of human rights violations. Thus, the *search for support in women's organizations* is associated with *harassment and destruction of property* (r=0.21, p<0.001) and with *violations of the right to life* (r=0.14, p<0.001). The *transformation of roles within the family is related to harassment and destruction of property* (r=0.26, p<0.001), *violations of the right to life* (r=0.18, p<0.001), and *torture* (r=0.17, p<0.001). The *avoidance strategies* are associated

with *violations of the right to life* ($r=0.12$, $p<0.001$) and *harassment and destruction of property* ($r=0.14$, $p<0.001$). The strategies of *active communal coping* are related to *harassment and destruction of property* ($r=0.19$, $p<0.001$); the greater the number of human rights violations reported, the more coping strategies were used.

*Reparation measures and victims' perceptions*

In the interviews carried out, some aspects related to reparation were addressed in order to find out what demands the women were making to the State or against their perpetrators. Most of the women expressed the feeling that it was impossible to repair the damage caused. This feeling of irreparability reveals the profound impact of the violations and the impossibility of recovering the situation prior to the violence. The past violence continues to represent a rupture in their life trajectories. When asked what measures would contribute to improving their situation or restoring their rights, 86.2 % of the women mentioned *distributive-type measures* (such as economic payments or social aids and demilitarization), 68.5 % referred to the *measures of truth, justice, and protection of the victims*, 51.6 % demanded *legal changes and reforms in the State*, 32.3 % mentioned *demilitarization and a policy of returning land*, and 30.3 % pointed out *measures of memory and forgiveness*.

If we analyze the relationship between the reparation measures indicated by the women and the forms of violence described (Table 3), we observe that *harassment and destruction of property* correlated significantly with all the reparation measures, although mainly with those related to demanding *legal changes and reforms of the State* ($r=0.24$, $p<0.001$). The victims of *torture* support the measures of *demilitarization and returning land and property* ($r=0.12$, $p<0.001$), the *measures of truth, justice, and protection* ($r=0.11$, $p<0.001$), and the *legal changes and reforms of the State* ($r=0.13$, $p<0.001$). The women who have suffered *forced displacements* of their communities support, as would seem reasonable, the *measures of*

*demilitarization and returning land and property* ($r=0.18$, $p<0.001$), but also the *distributive measures* ($r=0.09$, $p<0.001$). Those who have suffered *violations of the right to life* agree more with *measures of truth, justice, and protection* ($r=0.27$, $p<0.001$), *legal changes and reforms of the State* ($r=0.28$, $p<0.001$), and *measures of memory and forgiveness* ($r=0.27$, $p<0.001$). The correlations between the *violation of personal freedom* and the reparation measures proposed were not significant.

Analyzing the consequences of the violence and the need for reparation, the data show a positive correlation with the set of impacts dealt with in this study. The stronger the impact, the more demands there are for reparations of all types.

**TABLE 3**
*Human rights violation, consequences and reparation measures: Correlations*

| | | REPARATION MEASURES | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Memory and forgiveness | Legal changes and reforms in the State | Truth, justice and protection | Demilitarization & returning land and property | Distributive measures |
| **VIOLATIONS** | Harassment | 0.187** | 0.236** | 0.219** | 0.154** | 0.216** |
| | Torture | 0.053 | 0.131** | 0.110** | 0.066* | 0.116** |
| | Detention | 0.058 | 0.060 | -0.011 | -0.010 | 0.050 |
| | Forced displacement | -0.025 | -0.051 | -0.058 | 0.093** | 0.178** |
| | Violations of the right to life | 0.189** | 0.192** | 0.267** | 0.130** | 0.096** |
| **CONSEQUENCES** | Socio-affective aspects | | | | | |
| | Specific consequences for women | 0.248** | 0.212** | 0.234** | 0.237** | 0.113** |
| | Health and body | 0.199** | 0.193** | 0.185** | 0.190** | 0.124** |
| | Persistence of the emotional impact | 0.170** | 0.247** | 0.220** | 0.142** | 0.081* |

*Note.* * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.001
Source: own work

## Discussion

The present study confirms the lasting effect of violence on the Colombian women who were victims of human rights violations, as found in other contexts (Arnoso et al, 2014). Although only a minority identified the perpetrators (partly out of fear and partly due to their *modus operandi* of hiding their identity), the results showed that the paramilitary groups are more often identified as being responsible for the violence, confirming what was found in previous studies (CNMH, 2013, 2016b; González, 2015). This finding indicates that these groups viewed

the civil population as a target, carrying out forms of violence indiscriminately. Especially in the territories under dispute, women were frequent victims of different armed actors due to the extension and indiscriminate nature of the violence, as well as permanent accusations of supporting the guerrilla or collaborating with "the other side" (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados (Acnur), 2005; Amnistía Internacional, 2004).

Forced displacements and violations of the right to life were reported by the majority of the women interviewed, showing the predominant pattern of victimization among them. While the former are mainly reported by women from Bogotá, Bolívar, and Risaralda, as territories of displacement, in some cases, or places of refuge, the executions and disappearances are pointed out significantly by the women who live in the regions of Antioquia, Chocó, and Putumayo (zones where the armed conflict occurs more openly), as well as by the population identified as Afro-American, especially prevalent in these territories.

In general, the women identified as indigenous, mixed-race, and Afro-descendants indicated higher levels of harassment and torture than those who defined themselves as "white", probably due to the greater use of torture and harassment in rural areas. Likewise, the Afro-Americans, especially in the region of Chocó, mentioned significantly more violations linked to detentions, taking hostages, or confinement. This region has a strong guerrilla presence, and it is a territory actively disputed by the groups in conflict.

Torture was a type of violation significantly reported by the women from Bogotá, Chocó, Santander, and Valle, regions where there has been displacement from other areas and numerous massacres and reports of cruelty.

Overall, the paramilitary groups are most frequently mentioned by the women as being responsible for the events (coinciding with other studies on human rights violations in Colombia), and indigenous women and those of African descent reported a higher level of violence because the territories they live in have become

the center of conflict in the war. In addition, they find themselves in conditions of marginalization and invisibility, which increases the violence and its impact on their communities. It is also possible that the ethnic category itself is relevant in explaining these greater reports of violence, as other publications have already pointed out (GMH, 2010).

Regarding the impact produced by the violence, the study shows that the female victims of violence in Colombia experienced serious consequences in their lives, given the massive and systematic nature of the violence. Each of them has suffered various human rights violations, often at different points in their lives. This cumulative and systematic nature can explain the relevance acquired by forms of violence that, at first glance, might seem less serious, such as harassment and destruction of property. In the same way, there is a frequent under-reporting of sexual violence, which tends to remain invisible due to the implications for the women in a social context that tends to stigmatize the victims, and where research exposes their private lives (Mackenzie, 2010).

Almost all of the interviewees mentioned consequences in the socio-affective area and in their life project, health and body, or specific to women. Moreover, more than half reported being affected to some degree in the present. The displaced women would be less affected in this sense, which seems to indicate a better emotional situation than the rest of the women, who continued to be surrounded by the violence. These results, although apparently contradicting the literature in this area showing a more acute significant impact on the displaced population (Vojvoda et al., 2008; Boehnlein et al., 2004), could indicate that these collectives can manage to rebuild their lives in safer contexts and reduce the current impact, while women who have continued to live in the midst of the violence are more affected by the continuing war. The displaced communities have, in some way, constructed support networks that allow them to rebuild their lives.

This study reinforces the idea that the population affected by the violence acted to

defend their lives and used strategies to recover after the violence. The more violations reported or the greater the consequences described, the more strategies were employed by the women interviewed. The ways the women coped with the violence involved a combination of preservation mechanisms (silence, religion) and protecting the family and loved ones (focus on the family, trying to make sense of it, rebuilding their lives), in addition to denouncing the events or looking for mutual support in organizations (direct coping, filing a complaint, organization). This combination shows an adaptive profile to changing contexts of violence.

Although the majority of the women talked about the impossibility of repairing the damage, a large number demanded distributive-type measures to improve their lives and demilitarization to make possible a change in their situation. These were followed by measures of truth, justice, and protection of the victims, especially compared to measures of memory and forgiveness, which were mentioned less. This is consistent with the needs expressed in the accounts collected in the recent report by the National Centre of Historical Memory (CNMH, 2016a) which, however, warns that in practice, a legal system capable of responding to the demands of justice for victims still does not exist from the perspective of victims, even in those cases in which punitive sentences were pronounced or in which there were legal consequences regarding the facts that had taken place.

In any case, what the study proves is that women have a broader view of reparation than what is usually referred to, in contexts of transitional justice, and that reparation is associated with overcoming the war in their territories and transforming their life conditions and opportunities through the exercise of so-called economic and social rights. For them, the priority would be to modify the context of danger and threat to life.

The importance of this study is that it collects, for the first time, a broad sample of female victims in the country and offers a preliminary analysis of the impact of the violence, the main coping strategies, and the relevant reparation measures in the Colombian context, all of this from the perspective of the women, who are frequently invisible in armed conflicts and political transition processes (Nesiah, 2006). The study can also make some recommendations for a future truth commission in Colombia to follow, in the midst of the scenario of the peace process initiated two years ago with the guerillas and negotiations with paramilitary groups.

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## Notes

\*     Research article.