

# Historical memory in Colombia

## Towards a public policy from a gender perspective

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**A memory policy for a society that wishes to move from violence to peace and democracy** must review, make visible and recognize the errors of the past in order to advance toward a more liveable future based on just and equitable relations. Gender relations must be part of this effort. This policy paper looks at the way femininities and masculinities and gender relations are being represented in the documents of the Historical Memory Group in Colombia. Its aim is to show the importance of incorporating a gender perspective into this effort. Based on this analysis, a series of recommendations are made that may be useful for research groups, administrators of memory projects and public policy decision makers in Colombia.

### Context

A peace settlement in Colombia seems closer every day. Although major challenges remain, the steps being taken are generating a climate that suggests that an accord between the government and the two most important guerilla groups, the FARC-EP and the ELN, is in reach. However, though the parties in this conflict are talking, they have not laid down their weapons, and clashes and violence continue to be part of daily reality in different regions of the country.

In the midst of this conflict the country is also going through a post-conflict scenario or what some academics have referred to as "transitional justice without transition", that began in 2005 after the signing of a demobilization agreement between the previous government and paramilitary forces.

In this complex context, a legal framework is being established that is opening the door to what could be a public policy of historical memory in Colombia. The Justice and Peace Law (Ley de Justicia y Paz; Law 975 of 2005) has, for the first time in Colombia, placed the rights to truth, justice, reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence on the public agenda.

The law, however, has been heavily criticized for the impunity it could offer due to its weakness in guaranteeing a real dismantling of paramilitary structures and in preventing the subsequent regrouping of the demobilized - fears that unfortunately have to some extent been realized.

The Justice and Peace Law established the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation that, although not the same as a truth commission, does have as one of its objectives the elaboration and dissemination of an account of the armed conflict in Colombia that identifies the reasons for the emergence and evolution of illegal armed groups. To achieve this objective the Historical Memory Group (GMH) was formed, which since the end of 2008 has produced 24 public reports on historical memory and recently finished its principal task: delivering a report on the evolution and development of armed groups that have operated in the country outside of the law. The effort of the GMH received strong backing with the Victims and Land Restitution Law (Ley de Víctimas y Restitución de Tierras; Law 1448 of 2011) that created the Historical Memory Center, which has taken on and strengthened the work of the GMH.

## Analysis

### Historical memory

As the reports of the GMH reveal, an internal armed conflict, sixty years in duration, has penetrated deeply into the psyche and way of thinking and acting of the population. As a result, in order to build a different future it is fundamental to understand what has happened, why, where and how. Those who have lost family need to know what happened to them so that they can grieve, and society needs to examine the past and rewrite its history, in order to begin to overcome it. Historical memory is essential for the process of mourning; it is a therapeutic instrument that contributes to the gradual recovery of a society that has been severely battered over several generations.

However, historical memory cannot be limited to recounting past errors; rather, to make the expression "never again" a reality, it must also seize its potential to ensure that the violent acts of the past will not be repeated. It is not enough to raise awareness about the atrocities that have been committed; it is also necessary to recognise the mistakes that were made. The narrative that emerges can contribute to establishing a collective agreement on the punishment for violence and to its delegitimation, while also generating the opportunity to stress the benefits of peace and democracy.

### Incorporating a gender perspective

A historical memory policy for the 21st century cannot allow the errors of the past to be repeated, as this is exactly what it seeks to prevent. Thus, it cannot hide or ignore the structures of discrimination or exclusion that were at the origin of the violent conflict and that were exacerbated and perpetuated during it. Recognizing and understanding the patriarchal system and the impact of violence on women is a necessary strategy for the cultural and political transformations required to build peace. Doing so can help to define a new value system that delegitimises all forms of violence and therefore, all forms of violence against women. In addition, greater knowledge regarding the reality of gender is also key to government action in the design of policies and strategies that will not allow the recurrence of discrimination.

A memory policy, therefore, is not satisfied with a return to the situation that existed prior to the outbreak of war, but its intention is to collectively define a scenario of more equitable and just relationships between different social groups, fostering coexistence and the democratic administration of diversity.

Women, like other subaltern groups, have been excluded from the construction of the nation and from discourse on its *official* history. Too often their voices have been silenced in narratives on conflicts. The historian Joan W. Scott argues for the importance of a gender perspective on war, as the power relationships between nations and the status of colonial subjects have been understood (and in this way, legitimated) in terms of the relations between men and women. War and peace imply relations of power, as does memory, and in this sense, they cannot be understood without recognising the logic, interests and different needs of the sexes.

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If the discourse of memory does not take into account gender analysis, not only will this be a lost opportunity, but it will also mean that this process can only aspire to an incomplete peace in which the perpetuation of discrimination against women will impede the consolidation of a just democracy with full enjoyment of rights for all citizens.

### Positive effects and future challenges

The GMH, recognising the importance of a gender perspective in discourses of memory, carried out an internal analysis and made a political commitment resulting in the document, *Historical Memory from a Gender Perspective* [La memoria històrica con perspectiva de gènere].

Analysis of the discourse in some of the published reports<sup>1</sup> provides a glimpse into the interesting effects of the incorporation of a gender perspective in the stories recounted. At the same time, it also reveals certain challenges.

In general, the discourses of the GMH reveal a concern for gender dynamics and avoiding the perpetuation of stereotypical roles that favour inequality. It is worth noting that the inclusion of a gender perspective is not limited to, nor focused on, issues of sexual violence, as has occurred at times in

past truth commissions. Gender relations are understood to be complex and to have an impact on any situation or circumstance being analysed.

However, depending on the report being analysed, the treatment of gender varies. There are reports focused on women, and other reports which attempt to integrate gender, while in others, analysis of the different impact of the war on men and women is concentrated in specific sub-sections or sub-chapters. In *Mujeres que hacen historia. Tierra, cuerpo y política en el Caribe colombiano* [Women that Make History. Land, body and politics in the Colombian Caribbean] and *El Placer - Mujeres, coca y guerra en el Bajo Putumayo* [Pleasure - Women, Cocaine and War in Lower Putumayo], both focused on the experience of women, the GMH was able with its political positioning to place the experience of women at the centre of the historical narrative of the war. In addition, both reports present data disaggregated by sex, though the language of gender was not sufficiently integrated by the authors.

In general, the different reports do not ignore the fact that women play multiple roles in a society at war (just as in a society at peace), and most importantly they generally attempt to emphasise women's power. Although the majority of the women that appear in the reports are victims - this is logical given the objective of the report and the reality of the impact of the conflict on women - they are not presented in a stereotypical way: as weak, dependent and fragile victims. Instead, they are normally presented as women demanding their dignity.

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However, this vision of women has not been completely integrated, as we can also find places in the reports that reproduce traditional stereotypical gender roles, equating women with being confused and weak, or defining women based on their relationship with others (generally men), for example, as wives and daughters.

Although not falling into an easily made stereotype equating women with pacifism (very common even in feminist theory up until recently), the GHM reports have not dealt in depth with the role of women in

violent groups. Their presence in such groups is mentioned, but is not explored. However, the little information offered reveals that these "violent" women reproduce masculine stereotypes and on occasion even encourage discrimination and the abuse of power against women.

Men are also not represented in a singular manner; they appear generally as "guerrillas" or "paramilitary", but there are also examples of men who are direct and indirect victims, as well as community leaders and leaders of social change. The reports also reveal a sense of unease among some men (especially the young and elderly) in reproducing the standards of behaviour corresponding to the hegemonic vision of masculinity.

A further aspect examined in the reports is the role of the participants in the war in gender arrangements. Paramilitarism is presented as an institution that promotes machismo and control, based on traditional patriarchal conceptions, even in men and women's intimate relationships. Victims have a different perception of the guerrillas because they oversee and mediate in cases of abuse, including even the rape of women by their husbands. However, this is done by imposing behaviour that reproduces the patriarchal order. The reports also recognise and expose institutional *machismo*; for example, the report *El Salado. Esa guerra no era nuestra* [Salado. That War was Not Ours] exposes the treatment of victims by state institutions such as the public prosecutor.

With its work, the GMH also highlights women's organizing efforts and the political transformations of victims to leaders that have contributed to understanding the role that the conflict has played in the emancipation and empowerment of women. To the extent that any transformation in the life of women has repercussions on the life of men, the GMH reports also recount the unease felt by men regarding any shift toward greater autonomy for women.

The explanation of what happened, why, who did what, where and when, filtered through the lens of an analysis of gender makes it possible to propose more just, effective and coherent strategies and policies in order to guarantee non-recurrence.

In its own discursive production, the GMH has recognised that memory is a mechanism that contributes to collective healing by recounting individual experience and that it has the capacity to influence structural change toward a better future.

## Recommendations

It is essential that a policy of historical memory recognise and incorporate a gender perspective throughout the process, in both the design and use of tools and in the production of the discourse to rewrite the past. To do this, the following recommendations should be considered:

### ***1) The gender perspective must be comprehensive***

The design of an exercise in historical memory should be filtered through the lens of gender from the very start: in defining the mission, vision, objectives, strategies and tools, as well as the composition of teams, with parity between men and women and with training and awareness of gender issues.

### ***2) Analyse the causes of gender discrimination***

The analysis should explore the existing power relations between the sexes. The data presented should be broken down by sex. In addition, the analysis should not be reduced to the period in which the conflict began, but should penetrate into the structural causes of gender discrimination. If this explanation does not emerge from the persons who offer testimony, even that of women, teams of historical memory workers should ask appropriate and sensitive questions in order to facilitate awareness of situations of inequality and victimisation. The exercise of self-recognition and verbalization of individual experience on the part of women can represent the beginning of a process of empowerment and increase in their capacity of agency.

### ***3) Address gender relations in their complexity***

Gender relations must be analysed in all their complexity; the focus should not only be the problem of sexual violence, though this is not to underestimate the severe gravity of this issue. Focusing on only one issue reduces the scope of the problematic of gender relations. In addition, it can also encourage the promotion of a new stereotype in which women are linked to the conflict through their body and their sexuality. This could result, paradoxically and contradictorily, in reinforcing perspectives on the feminine that justify discrimination and violence against women, as the GMH specifically warned in their document on gender and memory.

### ***4) Include gender sensitive language***

Discourse must be sensitive to the language of gender. While dictionaries still accept the use of masculine forms as the generic form, and therefore their use is not grammatically incorrect, from a political

standpoint doing so is an error for authors who are rewriting the past in order to rewrite the future. If the discourse of memory does not give voice to those who have been silenced for centuries, then it will not be providing them with importance in the new post-conflict society being formed.

### ***5) Give the victims a leading role***

Victims must be at the centre of the production of discourse. As the majority of the surviving victims of the conflict in Colombia are women, then they must play a fundamental role in the construction of a new, inclusive narrative.

Addressing the discourse of memory without a gender analysis will lead to an incomplete peace and a democracy without full rights for all

### ***6) Consider the intersectionality of female identity***

Women should not be considered as a homogeneous group, as there is not one single experience of womanhood. Female identity intersects with multiple categories such as class, ethnicity, urban/rural origin, age, religion, political affiliation, etc. Moreover, women's identities can change over the course of their lives. With this understanding, it does not make sense to analyse the oppression of women as universal and isolated beings. The femininities through which women pass may assume different forms of exclusion and discrimination that overlap and therefore, the analysis of oppression and the mechanisms to overcome it cannot and must not be separated.

### ***7) Avoid the reproduction of feminine stereotypes***

The representation of femininity must not fall into the reproduction of stereotypes. Myths that reproduce the traditional vision of woman in violent conflicts identify the female sex with victim hood and impose attributes on women such as weakness, dependency and fragility. Likewise, it is false to label women as pacific by nature. As Caroline Moser has pointed out, it does not make sense to assume that when women gain power and agency they will always support peace and be against violence. Sometimes they will and sometimes they will not, just like men. In fact, to suggest that women cannot be violent is practically an anti-feminist perspective. In short, the presentation of

women as pacific because they are women is essentialist, depoliticising and ends up perpetuating relations of domination that seem indisputable as they are considered to be natural.

## **8) Emphasise femininities that subvert traditional roles**

It is necessary to prioritise the presentation of the life stories of women victims and emphasize transgressive attitudes regarding traditional roles. This contributes to, on the one hand, making processes empowering women visible and on the other, to reducing misgivings related to possible new, more equal gender relations. The war forced women to assume traditionally masculine roles, such as in production and politics. The struggle for the rights of those who died in the war and for the rights of those who survived is found in political paths that have never been explored. Far from weakening or negating agency, proclaiming themselves to be victims and/or survivors can contribute to women being perceived as subjects with rights and can strengthen their political demands.

## **9) Move away from the myths of the hegemonic masculine identity**

The representation of masculinities must also not lapse into myths associated with the hegemonic masculine identity, which David Gilmore defines as based on the “three p’s”: Protection, provision and power. Men account for the majority of deaths in war and see their brothers and fathers fall as well, making them both direct and indirect victims of violence. It is essential they claim the role of victim and their right to suffer. Not recognising nor considering men as victims is to silence an important aspect of the reality of gender in violent conflicts. Recognising this reality contributes to weakening a myth that is an obstacle to equality and the search for peace: the myth of masculine invulnerability.

## **10) Emphasise masculinities that subvert traditional roles**

As in the case of femininities, it is necessary to emphasise masculinities that subvert traditional roles and contribute to a new value system. It is unjust that men have to present themselves as strong and able to face war and its consequences. They must also have the opportunity to recognise and publicly express their suffering in the line of fire. If society allows them to abandon cultural imperatives such as the obligation to always be strong and to be the exclusive providers and protectors of their families, it will help to mitigate the difficulty they have in dealing with the pain and legacy of violence. Men need a path for healing beyond silence, frustration and impotence that will lead them

toward positive transformation. A future with new, more just gender relations involves the creation of spaces of self-recognition and the expression of new, non-hegemonic masculinities.

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i 2008– *Trujillo. Una tragedia que no cesa*; 2009– *El Salado. Esa guerra no era nuestra.*; 2010– *La Rochela. Memorias de un crimen contra la justicia*; 2011– *Mujeres que hacen historia. Tierra, cuerpo y política en el Caribe colombiano*; 2012– *El Placer. Mujeres, coca y guerra en el Bajo Putumayo.*

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