

## Embracing Truth: Gender-based violence

Sexual violence has been used strategically in Colombia's armed conflict to breakdown community ties, to punish, humiliate and subordinate, and to silence those who denounce atrocities. But the magnitude of conflict-related sexual violence against women and LGBTI people in Colombia is yet to be fully understood. It is a crime that remains massively underreported, silenced and denied.

Nonetheless, the gender agenda in the Colombian Peace Accord in 2016 set a worldwide precedent. Colombia now has an opportunity to uncover the truth about gender-based violence in the context of the armed conflict, to empower women and LGBTI people, advance gender equality and promote structural change.

## Mi Cuerpo Dice la Verdad – Victims of sexual violence speak their truth

Colombia's Truth Commission includes a gender perspective which seeks to uncover the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on the lives of women, girls and LGBTI people as a consequence of the violence exercised against them because of their gender, sexual orientation and gender identity.

On Wednesday 26 June, in Cartagena, 30 women and LGBTI people presented their stories of sexual violence, in the first 'encuentro por la verdad' - a series of events organised by the Truth Commission to officially recognise victims' experiences and bring past wrongs into the public domain.

The survivors of sexual violence told their stories of torture, rape, forced abortions and sexual slavery, among others, to an audience of over 500, made up of leaders from across the country, members of the international community, victims' organisations, the media, and, crucially, perpetrators of violence, whose role was to be silent and listen.

Some participants gave their own testimonies while others provided a written statement that was read aloud by public figures chosen by the Truth Commission – including John Petter Opdahl, Norwegian Ambassador, and Gonzalo Sánchez, former director of Colombia's National Centre for Historical Memory.



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Each emotive testimony conveyed the pain and suffering of these experiences and the heavy weight of shame and stigma that surrounds sexual violence.

“It was shocking, very difficult to cope. The impact of testimonies is being felt in the body, the feelings stay with you, consciously and unconsciously.” Andrei Gómez Suárez, speaking about the event

## Art and resistance

This event also builds on the important work of organisations which have supported women and LGBTI people over the years and acknowledges their efforts to shed light on sexual violence during the conflict.

The afternoon brought music and performance to Cartagena, from traditional drumming to Aterciopelados, a popular Colombian band, in a public event designed to reach more people and awaken Colombian society to importance of truth. These activities demonstrate that human beings have the capacity to overcome extreme pain and transform it into something positive.

These artistic activities also encourage inclusivity and tolerance, which are essential for coexistence and non-repetition of violence, as women and LGBTI people from marginal regions of Colombia participated and demonstrated that they have much to contribute to and enrich Colombian culture.

## What contribution is the Truth Commission making to this debate?

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Addressing the participants, the commissioner, Alejandra Miller, said, "Today, the Truth Commission wants to tell you that we hear you, we believe you, we embrace you, and we care about you." This is why, she explained, the Truth Commission decided to begin these discussions with "a crime that has been normalised, silenced and denied in this war and all wars".

Relationships and truth are gradually being rebuilt. Closing the event, the commissioner Angela Salazar and the president of the Truth Commission Francisco de Roux – said that the Commission had heard the victims' stories, listened to their needs, and promised that the commission would do all they could to fulfil these needs.

While some question whether it was appropriate to focus on sexual violence from the beginning, raising concerns that this will define gender and the armed conflict, it is hoped that this encuentro will help to create greater awareness about sexual violence in the armed conflict and will encourage more people to give testimonies.



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