
Sexual Violence Against Women Victims of the Armed Conflict in South-Western Colombia

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Abstract: This article, a product of research, addresses the sexual violence committed against women in areas of armed conflict in south-western Colombia. It is based on testimonies about the attention given to women victims of the armed conflict by the Central Unit of Valle del Cauca (UCEVA).

Objectives: To analyse sexual violence against women victims of the armed conflict in the departments of Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño and Chocó, with a reflection on a phenomenon that has been silenced and made invisible, and which requires recognition and attention

Methods: The methodological design is oriented from a socio-critical paradigmatic perspective, with a mixed research approach, and the hermeneutic method is used for the interpretation of texts and narratives, based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews. The testimonies of women who have suffered different types of sexual violence and who are in the process of post-traumatic stress rehabilitation are analysed

Results: A total of 62 women were victims of crimes against their sexual integrity, of which 38 suffered rape, 11 unwanted pregnancies, 7 sexual assault and 6 sexual exploitations. Reflections are made on the problem, linking it to Sexual and Reproductive Rights. As conclusions and recommendations, the importance of implementing care and reparation plans for victims is highlighted, through psychosocial and legal guidance programmes, access to justice and guarantees of non-repetition.

Conclusions: This study evidences the gravity and extent of sexual violence exercised against women victims of the armed conflict in the departments of Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño and Chocó. The testimonies collected reveal that 62 women were affected by crimes against their sexual integrity, 38 of them victims of rape, 11 of unwanted pregnancies, 7 of sexual aggression and 6 of sexual exploitation. This phenomenon, often silenced and made invisible, requires urgent recognition and the implementation of concrete measures of care and reparation for the victims, with psychosocial and legal programmes that guarantee their access to justice and prevent the repetition of these acts. In addition, the need to link this problem with Sexual and Reproductive Rights is emphasised, in order to comprehensively address the situation of women affected by sexual violence in the context of the armed conflict.

Keywords: Sexual violence, women victims of the armed conflict, rehabilitation, access to justice, sexual and reproductive rights.

1. Introduction

Colombia has experienced decades of armed conflict that has left millions of victims, with women being the group most affected. The mandate of the Truth Commission has been to clarify and promote the recognition of the human and social impact of the conflict on society, including the differentiated ways in which the conflict exacerbated violence against women (Colombia, Truth Commission, 2022).

According to studies carried out by national (Minsalud, 2017) and international (O.M.S, 2017; O.P.S, 2022) entities, in countries such as Colombia, which has been in the midst of an internal armed conflict for decades, sexual violence - understood as any type of force or manipulation to access non-consensual sexual activity - mainly affects women, young women and girls, who are used as tools of war, violating their sexual and reproductive rights. According to these studies, throughout the decades

of violence in Colombia, the actors of the armed conflict have constantly resorted to sexual violence as a weapon to attack women's dignity and as an instrument of domination over communities (JEP, 2022).

In particular, the departments of south-western Colombia (Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño and Chocó) have for decades faced disputes between various armed groups for the control of territory, which has sown terror and attacked the human rights of the population. In this region, women living in areas of armed conflict have suffered various violations of their fundamental rights, such as aggression, sexual violence, threats, dispossession, forced displacement and the loss of loved ones, among other victimising events. These women demand comprehensive reparation and restitution of their rights from the state (Corredor, 2023).

Sexual violence is a social phenomenon present in situations of armed conflict, used as a strategy or spoils of war to weaken the enemy. At present, thanks to the denunciations and disclosures of international entities (UN, 2008), this type of violence has been recognised as a crime against humanity, which requires the adoption of preventive and punitive measures. It is therefore essential to contribute to unveiling this social phenomenon that has remained hidden, but which has manifested itself in all cultures (UNFPA, 2017). Sexual violence has permeated different social sectors, so it is necessary to identify the characteristic features and types of sexual violence present in conflict zones, as well as its causes and effects on communities, especially on women victims.

This contribution is derived from the research project entitled 'Contribution of the curricular processes of interest to the political subjectivities of women victims of the armed conflict in the south-west of Colombia', currently underway within the Law Programme of the Central Unit of Valle del Cauca (UCEVA, 2023). The project analyses the phenomenon of sexual violence against women in the context of the Colombian armed conflict in four departments in the south-west of the country, and presents the testimonies of some women who have been victims of this form of violence.

The objective is to analyse the main forms of sexual aggression and to disseminate the partial results of the research, based on existing reflections on sexual

violence against women in areas of armed conflict in Colombia, who are considered a vulnerable population sector. This work seeks to contribute to the knowledge of this social phenomenon. The results describe the main forms of sexual violence that have been identified and offer some reflections derived from the accounts of women victims of sexual aggression. Finally, it discusses the main limitations and difficulties in dealing with a problem that has remained invisible due to the stigma attached to the victims of this social scourge.

In the results of the research, it was identified that a total of 62 women were victims of crimes against their sexual integrity. Among them, 38 suffered rape, 11 experienced unwanted pregnancies, 7 were sexually assaulted and 6 faced situations of sexual exploitation. These figures reveal the seriousness of the problem and raise reflections on sexual violence, linking it to Sexual and Reproductive Rights. The conclusions and recommendations highlight the urgency of implementing comprehensive care and reparation plans for victims, including psychosocial and legal counselling programmes, as well as guaranteeing access to justice and establishing measures to ensure the non-repetition of these human rights violations. This is essential to contribute to the recovery and empowerment of affected women.

In conclusion, it can be said that this study shows the seriousness and extent of sexual violence against women victims of the armed conflict in the departments of Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño and Chocó. The testimonies collected reveal that 62 women were affected by crimes against their sexual integrity; of these, 38 were victims of rape, 11 faced unwanted pregnancies, 7 suffered sexual aggression and 6 were subjected to sexual exploitation. This phenomenon, often silenced and made invisible, requires urgent recognition, as well as the implementation of concrete measures of care and reparation for the victims. It is essential to establish psychosocial and legal programmes that guarantee access to justice and prevent the repetition of these acts. Furthermore, the need to link this problem with Sexual and Reproductive Rights is underlined, in order to comprehensively address the situation of women affected by sexual violence in the context of the armed conflict

2. Methods

This study is presented as a case study oriented from the socio-critical paradigm, using a mixed approach (qualitative-quantitative) and the hermeneutic method for the interpretation of the narratives. The reflections presented here derive from the findings obtained during the collection of information through semi-structured exploratory interviews with women victims of the armed conflict in the departments of south-western Colombia (Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Nariño and Chocó). In order to adequately manage the testimonies, the interviews were processed using Atlas Ti software, which allowed for a triangulation of the information according to its origin, as well as the systematisation of the testimonies and the documented cases (Rodríguez, 2003). This process aims to identify the constitutive features and the different ways in which the victimisation of women in areas of armed conflict manifests itself.

The mixed approach to social research. Since the second decade of this century, the mixed method has established itself as a third approach, in addition to qualitative and quantitative approaches, in all fields of research (Creswell, 1994). Its development and acceptance is due to the fact that various phenomena have historically been approached from a mixed perspective in a natural way. The adoption of this approach as a methodological strategy in the research process is justified by its ability to adapt to the needs, contexts, circumstances and available resources, but, above all, to the problem statement (Hernández et al., 2004).

Hermeneutic method. According to authors such as Baeza (2022) and Martínez et al. (2023), hermeneutics focuses on the interpretation of the uses and practices of language, both oral and written. For this reason, this method was used for the analysis of sources and the generation of knowledge. This approach holds that each understanding is unique, and its meaning is conditioned by the historical context of the interpreter and by the interests of the time in its attempt to understand itself within a tradition. In hermeneutics, actors are not considered mere objects of study, but are recognised as subjects who mean, reflect and communicate. This methodology seeks to capture social reality from the perspective of the women studied, that is, from their own vision of the events they

experienced, as well as from their interaction with their environment. It also includes a broader analysis of attitudes, values, opinions, perceptions, beliefs and preferences (Beuchot, 2008).

Instruments for data collection. Primary sources, including semi-structured interviews accompanied by oral histories and a validated life history form, were used as data collection instruments. Secondary sources were also used. The literature review revealed a deficit in the production of knowledge on this problem, especially in relation to studies and systematisation of data, which makes it difficult to quantify the phenomenon. To support the reflective analysis, institutional sources were consulted, such as reports from PAHO, WHO, UN-Codhes, Truth Commission, National Centre of Historical Memory and ENS-Profamilia, as well as secondary sources, including articles, publications and degree theses. The objective was to present a typology of this problem, the different modalities of sexual aggression and the rights violated.

Unit of analysis and sample population. For the selection of the sample, reference was made to 62 women from the departments of Cauca, Nariño, Choco and Valle del Cauca (south-western Colombia). These are verbal reports resulting from the interaction between the researcher and the women under study (semi-structured interviews), which offer primary information about their lived experiences.

In this process, crimes against sexual integrity are presented as one of the most prevalent victimising events, with 62 victims specifically referenced in this event, with sexual dynamics associated with rape, sexual aggression, sexual exploitation and unwanted pregnancies, which constituted the categories of analysis. The testimonies are presented by displaced women, some of whom are Afro-descendants or ethnic minorities, ex-combatants and demobilised combatants. Out of respect for the women interviewed, anonymity and ethical considerations for this kind of study are preserved.

Categories of analysis. The most representative variables from the interviews were entered into Atlas ti. The study results showed as categories of analysis crimes against sexual integrity, emotional affectations derived from the armed conflict, management of emotions, feelings of loss, family ties, unresolved grief and fears, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Input variables to analysis software

Atlas-ti input variables	
Crimes against sexual integrity	Rape Sexual assault Unwanted pregnancies Sexual exploitation
Emotional effects of the armed conflict	
Managing emotions	
Feelings of loss	
Family ties	
Unresolved grief	
Fears	

Source: prepared by the authors

El estudio arrojó como subcategorías de análisis por modalidad de delitos contra la integridad sexual, en orden de prevalencia: Violación, agresión sexual, embarazos no deseados y explotación sexual, como se ilustra en la Figura 1.

Figure 1 Subcategories of analysis in the modality of crimes against sexual integrity.



Source: prepared by the authors

Techniques for data analysis

The interviews were processed using Atlas ti analysis software. Participants were recruited in four departments covering 24 municipalities as illustrated in Table 2. After attending to 150 people, the testimonies of women victims of sexual violence were selected, and a decided axis of 62 women was reached.

Table 2 Unit of analysis and sample population

Department	Municipalities	No. of women interviewed
Valle del Cauca	Buenaventura, Palmira, Tuluá, Buga, Jamundí, Cartago, Pradera, Florida, Trujillo.	45
Cauca	Toribio, Caloto, Corinto, Miranda, Caldono, Jámalo, Totoró	47
Chocó	Medio San Juan, Istmina y Nóvita	38
Nariño	Barbacoas, La Cruz, Roberto Payán, Guaitarilla .	20
Población Total		150
Women linked to Victimising Event	Sexual violence	62

Source: prepared by the authors

3. Results

Background

Colombia is a country particularly prone to systematic human rights violations due to the internal armed conflict, which has different nuances, is deepening in different regions and has a major impact on the peasant, indigenous and Afro-descendant populations (UNHCR, 2022). The south-western region of Colombia has historically been a source of dispute between paramilitary groups, guerrillas, the security forces and mafias (Corredor, 2023). Due to its geographical location, access to the sea and the geography of the area, it has become the scene of confrontation between FARC dissidents, the ELN, criminal gangs such as the Clan del Golfo, Los Rastrojos, Los Machos and the Águilas Negras, among others (Colombia, Truth Commission, 2022).

Strong economic interests, such as the development of mining or agro-industrial macro-projects, illegal income from drug trafficking and the use of illicit crops, extortion of traders, among others, cause a

strong dispute for the control of territories that triggers victimising events such as land dispossession, forced displacement, threats and murders (Truth Commission, 2022); in addition, there are restrictions on access to certain areas, imposition of codes of conduct, limitations on mobility and aggression against the most vulnerable population, such as women and children (Colombia, Truth Commission, 2022). (Rebolledo and Cajas, 2023).

Forced displacement is one of the factors that most affect different types of sexual violence (Minsalud, 2017). According to Profamilia, the average number of live births among displaced women is higher than the national average, but very similar to that of women living in rural areas. According to studies, adolescent fertility rates are higher the more intense the conflict in a Colombian territory, and most pregnancies are unwanted by the pregnant mothers (Profamilia and PLAN, 2018).

In this context, women constitute a very vulnerable sector of the population, given that they make up the majority of the displaced population and that in rural areas, they are in charge of the care of the farm and the home. In fact, peasant and Afro-Colombian women, as well as ethnic authorities, become targets of violence by Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) through threats, selective assassinations, attacks and massacres - which in turn increase the numbers of forcibly displaced - rape, recruitment of minors and disappearances, which have become daily occurrences (Codhes, 2022).

Sexual and Reproductive Rights SRHR

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual and reproductive health as a state of general physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, involving the possibility of exercising sexual and reproductive rights (WHO, 2017). It further notes that sexual health refers to the enjoyment of a satisfying sexual life and the autonomy of each individual to make free and informed decisions about their sexual life, free from violence, coercion, intimidation or discrimination.

Although it is difficult to quantify the forms and cases in which acts of sexual violence are committed, due to the lack of records, the known testimonies give an account of violent actions against women because of their condition, so that it has become evident '[...] the close relationship between local armed conflicts and the violation of

SRR that could well be named as the rights that each woman has over her bodies and over her desires [...] ' (Peralta and Urrego). (Peralta and Urrego, 2023).

The right to sexual and reproductive health, regroups a series of rights, such as: knowing, respecting and loving one's body; not being a victim of any type of violence or discrimination; deciding whether or not to live with someone; choosing and living maternity; timely, comprehensive, secular, gradual, scientific and gender-focused sexual education; construction of sexual identity; having or not having sexual relations, as well as their conditions and circumstances; being informed, communicated and educated in a responsible and timely manner on these issues, and accessing timely quality services, (Cristancho and Rodríguez, 2010).

Apart from rape or violent carnal access, in the context of the Colombian armed conflict, there are other types of violations of SRR, such as forced pregnancy, use of contraception or forced abortion, forced sterilisation, and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (HIV-AIDS, Herpes, among others). In this context, it can be affirmed that the sexual and reproductive rights of girls, adolescents and adult women in Colombia, as victims of the conflict, have been violated due to the impact of displacement and the different forms of sexual violence of which they have been victims. Existing data on the proportion of forcibly displaced women in the country indicate that it ranges between 49 and 58% of the total displaced population (ENDS, 2015). 'Displacement often brings with it implications such as sexual abuse and its consequent impact on the psychological and emotional life of women [...]' (Pinzón, 2015).

Indeed, apart from sexual and reproductive health, the mental health of the woman victim of sexual violence may be affected by one or more victimising events: displacement, loss of loved ones and/or sexual violence, in which case it is important to consider, within the rehabilitation processes, post-traumatic stress as a condition that most victims suffer from according to their violated rights. (Vaca et al., 2004).

Contexts of sexual violence in zones of armed conflict in Colombia

The Report: My body is the Truth: experiences of women and LGTBIQ+ persons in the armed conflict in the year 2022, by the Commission for the clarification of the truth, coexistence and non-repetition, points out that the persistence of the

armed conflict in Colombia is currently expressed, among other factors, in a new cycle of violence directed at social processes, leaders, women leaders and defenders of human rights, of the territory and of the Final Peace Agreement. In this way, 'the discriminatory phenomenon of men towards women is accentuated, as women are more exposed to being victims of different forms of physical, sexual and psychological violence, due to the disadvantage of women compared to men. Due to their state of defenselessness, women in these territories are used and exploited by the actors of the armed conflict' (Mi cuerpo es la verdad., 2022).

It is pertinent to point out that gender-based violence and sexual violence experienced in the context of the conflict is due to socio-cultural factors, and is a result of generic forms of violence present in society, which leads to the deduction that '[...] women are victimised before, during and after the direct acts of victimisation, an aspect that must be taken into consideration when designing social inclusion policies for the post-agreement period [...]' (Suárez-Pinzón, 2015, p. 173).

According to PAHO, sexual violence refers to any sexual act, attempted sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances made by the recipient, and actions associated with the commercialisation of a person's sexuality, regardless of the relationship with the victim (S.P.O., 2020). Thus, sexual violence does not refer exclusively to rape, assumed as violent carnal access, but includes different forms of sexual aggression, from forced pregnancy or abortion, slavery and sexual exploitation, forced prostitution with the aggravating factor that in situations of war, these acts can be perpetrated together on a single woman (Wilches, 2010).

In the Colombian case, sexual and gender-based violence against women in the context of the internal armed conflict takes on different typologies. There is a wide range of modalities that go from crimes typified in the Penal Code such as violent carnal access, forced prostitution and sexual slavery, to other forms of violence that are not considered crimes, but which also constitute forms of aggression, such as the imposition of rules of coexistence as a strategy of control exercised by armed actors in the territories, over daily life and over women's bodies that limit or restrict the self-determination of female sexuality (Fisco, 2005).

More specifically, the Truth Commission's 'Guide for addressing sexual violence' describes other forms of sexual violence: rape, the threat of rape,

sexual harassment, unwanted sexual advances, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, sexual slavery, the obligation to witness, perform or allow sexual acts, forced nudity and mutilation of sexual organs (Truth Commission, 2022). There is also reproductive violence: forced contraception and sterilisation, forced pregnancy and abortion, torture during pregnancy, as well as forced childbearing and child rearing (TRC, 2020).

Rape in the context of war has been institutionalized through forced prostitution and sexual slavery of women by military forces. Most adolescent girls are forced to provide sexual services to combatants or are blackmailed into sexual demands under the promise of protection and security for both themselves and their families (Fisco, 2005).

Amnesty International (2019) points out that attacks against the female body are perpetrated as a gender attack, in many cases with the purpose of imposing masculinity and patriarchal dominance. These attacks, carried out by armed men, often target parts of the body linked to motherhood and reproduction, such as the womb and breasts (Amnesty International, 2011). In addition to physical harm, sexual abuse generates psychological trauma that can lead to suicide, unwanted pregnancies with economic implications, social stigmatization and transmission of infectious diseases, among other consequences. The effects cover physical, psychological, economic and social dimensions. In the Colombian case, sexual violence in the armed conflict has taken on a collective and systematic character, being used massively as a tool of warning, intimidation or punishment of the enemy, and as a means of consolidating territorial control. This violence also reinforces the dominance over the "symbolic territory" of the female body (Fisco, 2005).

According to the Historical Memory Group of the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation, rape is used as a weapon of war, since on many occasions it is intended to humiliate the enemy, or it is used as a strategy of social control, to prevent any collaboration or relationship with the enemy, but if there is already some kind of relationship, rape occurs to warn others of the consequences or to punish for "disobedience" (CNMH, 2021).

They are also violent forms that are naturalized in areas occupied by armed actors, in order to gain position and territorial dominance (CNMH, 2021). Sometimes, women are seduced by armed men who

try to gain their trust to integrate them into the armed organization, or they are simply threatened along with their relatives if they do not agree to their demands (ENS, 2019).

Indeed, within armed groups, there is a certainty that sexual violence is a necessary instrument of war, since it is a way of insulting the enemy and demoralizing it. "Rape often occurs before the eyes of the family and the community. In this sense, it is an attack against everyone, although it is women who suffer physically and bear the weight of shame and social ostracism [...]" (Fisco, 2005, p. 127). Similarly, rape is used as a weapon against a community that does not want to submit to the domination of illegal armed groups, and its identity is undermined, attacking its ethnic purity or religious customs through sexual abuse.

The Registry of victims of sexual violence

There is a consensus among experts that sexual violence of any kind is a social phenomenon that is difficult to quantify and understand in depth, being the most invisible victimizing fact in the armed conflict, since it is normally accompanied by secrecy, fear of reporting, with a social tendency to hide the facts. It is a topic that is rarely discussed in Colombia, but which is a priority in international settings (Contreras, Both, Guedes, & Dartnall, 2016). It is a social phenomenon that is generally accompanied by the silence of the victims, due to feelings of guilt and shame, cultural prejudices and patriarchal attitudes, which cause silence and lack of reporting. "In the armed conflict, sexual violence is used as an effective weapon of war, with systematic and widespread use, but silenced and not admitted by either the victims or the aggressors" (Wilches, 2010).

These limitations prevent the systematic recording of cases and the quantification of the number of victims. In Colombia, it is only since the 1980s that some figures on the armed conflict that discriminate by gender begin to appear; in the face of the phenomenon of sexual violence, there are no records, nor are there consolidated statistics that show the dimension of the problem (ICBF, 2021).

On the occasion of the National Day for the Dignity of Women Victims of Sexual Violence in the Context of the Armed Conflict in Colombia, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2023) points out that since 1985 and until April 30, 2023, the Single Registry of Victims (RUV) has recorded 37,820 victims of sexual violence: 91% are women

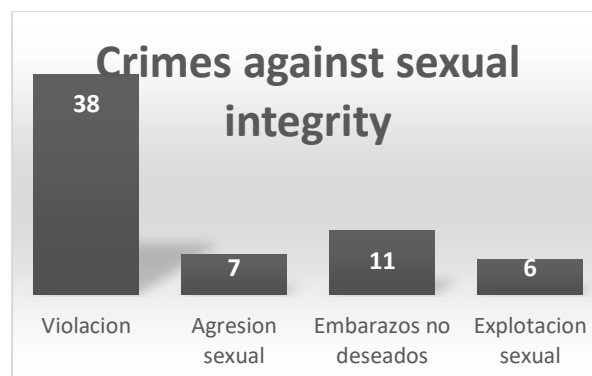
and 2% are LGBTIQ population. Of the total, 34,291 are women victims of sexual violence in the context of the armed conflict, 21.5% (7,384) are black, Afro-descendant, Raizal and Palenquera women, and 6.4% (2,178) are women of indigenous ethnicity (UNFPA, 2017).

On the other hand, according to the Single Registry of Victims (RUV), women and girls represent 92.5% 177 of the victims registered by this entity. Meanwhile, of the 1,294 events reported to the Commission corresponding to 1,154 people who were victims of sexual violence, 89.51% of them were women and 10.49% men (RUV, 2023). This type of violence was the fourth most reported by them and, on average, women suffered 1.3 victimizations in a single event of sexual violence, with rape being the most frequent subtype (Report 086-CI-01277., 2021).

According to studies carried out, victimizing acts of sexual assault occur mostly in rural areas and girls and young women (between 12 and 28 years old) are the most affected (CNMH, 2021). Within the social group, there are other subgroups that are even more vulnerable and more likely to suffer sexual violence, due to the discrimination they suffer and which is aggravated by it, such as women members of ethnic and racial groups and internally displaced women (Codhes, 2022) then suffering double discrimination: on the one hand, due to their race or ethnicity and on the other hand due to their status as women (UARIV, 2023).

The women who committed crimes against their sexual integrity were, in total, 62, of which 38 were victims of rape, 11 of unwanted pregnancies, 7 of sexual assault and 6 of sexual exploitation as illustrated in Figure No. 2.

Figure 2 Crimes against the sexual integrity of the population under study.

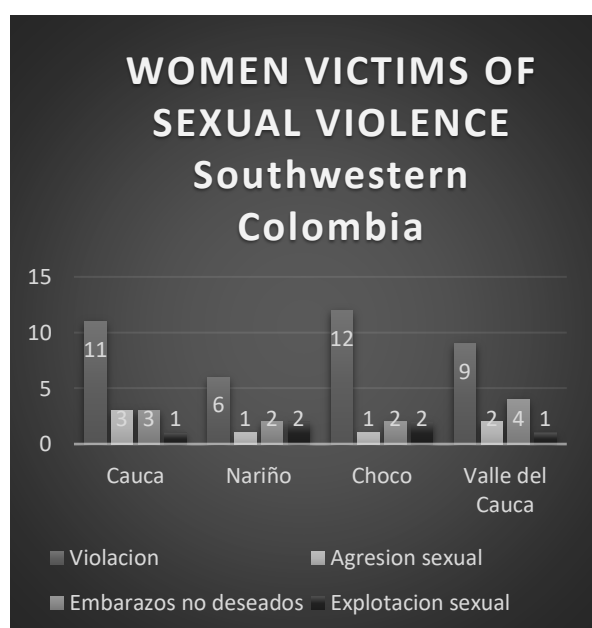


Source: prepared by the authors

Some women were victims of more than one crime against sexual integrity. By type, the highest number of victims were rape, unwanted pregnancies, sexual assault and sexual exploitation.

Regarding the geographic location where the events occurred, according to the category, the segregation by department is presented, according to the prevalence of the type that occurs most among the population under study, with rape being the most victimizing act. The departments with the highest rate of presence of the phenomenon are Cauca and Chocó, followed by Valle del Cauca and finally, Nariño, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Types of sexual violence against women victims of the armed conflict in the four departments of southwestern Colombia



Source: prepared by the authors

Armed actors committed rapes with varying frequency, in contexts of defenselessness such as captures or detentions; in scenarios of territorial control in communities; and in the context of territorial disputes, operations and massacres. It should be noted that, although this review focuses on the civilian population of women victims of the armed conflict, it should be noted that the sexual and reproductive health of women combatants, demobilized women and women in the post-conflict stage has also been affected (Cristancho & Rodríguez, 2010). In addition, it provides a general overview, but studies are lacking on the differential effects that have occurred among ethnic minorities, since indigenous and Afro-descendant women are

the ones who have been most affected by the internal war in the country (Céspedes-Báez, 2010).

Description of narratives

- The most important reflections that emerged from the analysis of the stories of women victims of sexual violence in southwestern Colombia were, among others, the loss of the meaning of existence, from an early age due to rape, being one of the many wounds that the conflict leaves in the lives of women.

- Some testimonies narrated by women who belonged to armed groups, through forced recruitment, or because they were persuaded to belong to them through deception with the conviction that their rights and privacy would be respected, demonstrate various forms of sexual harassment by superiors in rank, some of which ended in rape and even sexual slavery.

- There are testimonies of women who had to lose their family, be stripped of everything they had and leave the territory, emigrate to the jungle to live another imposed life, having to serve men who abused them and become slaves and sexual objects, are some of the most significant stories that were found.

- Many cases of rape result in induced or involuntary abortions, other mothers prefer to raise their children, even though they know that their fathers are the same perpetrators, who not only committed the act of violent sexual intercourse, but had also been the same murderers of parents, siblings or children.

- Children of rape have no future, without a father and seeking refuge in drugs. Thus, it can be deduced that the armed conflict not only affects people of one generation, but also close relatives and new generations like Melania's son. She tells the sad story of having had an abortion due to which she lost her womb:

- These events, according to the narrative of the victims, changed their lives significantly and despite the psychological help they have received from public and private entities, they are not able to easily overcome them to start a new life.

4. Discussion and conclusions

A large part of the stories captured in the research narrate acts of rape and other forms of sexual violence against women, thus forming, from a subjective perspective (Tovar-Aldana, 2020), a

symbolic gender language that crudely expresses the experiences lived and the traumas received. In this sense, it becomes important to underline the symbolic gender constructions that are expressed when women are victims of violence. "Women were not simply victims in addition, but their violent death - and frequently their rape, torture and mutilation when they were pregnant - played a strong symbolic role" (Fisco, 2005).

All of these are forms of aggression against women, they constitute an attack on the privacy and integrity of those who have suffered them, leaving traces that are not easily erased. Thus, the Colombian woman who is a victim of the conflict feels how her reproductive capacity is violated, attempts are made to control or destroy her, taking advantage of her defenseless state and bending her will through force, coercion and deception (Truth Commission, 2022). These are crimes against humanity, in which violent people attack women's bodies, and which not only affect them physically (sometimes with unwanted pregnancies), but also psychologically, emotionally and in their relationships with other people, leaving great traumas that are difficult to overcome.

The stories presented alone show the impact that violence generates among women in the departments analyzed, an impact that, obviously, has also been present in other regions of the country. They are raw testimonies, voices that express from the depths of their being, the pain and suffering caused by intolerance and barbarism. These are intolerable acts whose denunciation is legitimized by the attention provided in the rehabilitation and psychosocial and emotional care processes (Céspedes-Báez, 2010).

On the other hand, it is pertinent to point out that the stories show the victims' fear of narrating the events due to the social stigma that exists against sexual violence, which prevents the problem from being addressed in all its dimensions. Other factors that limit or restrict a close and objective knowledge of the phenomenon of sexual violence is that, in many cases, the victims hide their tragedy for different reasons, including cultural reasons, such as the feeling of guilt and shame associated with the social stigma that this crime brings with it, the fear of rejection by family members, as well as the fear of reprisals that armed groups may exercise. In addition, there is distrust towards state entities, police authorities and the judicial system due to the negligence present in many cases to investigate,

judge and punish the guilty parties (Truth Commission, 2022).

The lack of social recognition of women as subjects equal in dignity and rights, gender stereotypes that accentuate discrimination against women, and the constant social emphasis on the superiority of values such as aggression, dominance and strength, culturally attributed to the masculine, increases the vulnerability of women, young women and girls to sexual violence. In addition, it has become evident that there are few cases recorded, and there is a scarcity of diagnoses and studies "that take into account the differentiated effects of sociopolitical violence on the female sex" (Wilches, 2010), which translates into impediments to the implementation of public policies, actions and specific programs aimed at the female population in conflict zones.

In conclusion, it can be said that it has been shown that women in armed conflict zones in the departments analyzed are victims, both direct and indirect, of various forms of abuse. It is necessary to address these situations from a rights-based perspective, oriented towards their restitution and comprehensive rehabilitation processes that allow overcoming post-traumatic stress. Likewise, a critical analysis of the violation of rights in relation to crimes against humanity, the guarantees of comprehensive reparation by the State and public policies that seek to prevent phenomena such as those presented in this study are crucial.

As has been explained throughout this article, sexual violence is a tragic reality that can no longer be hidden. It is a phenomenon on which little research has been done, and which remains taboo in many sectors of society. However, its impact is devastating in the lives of women victims of the armed conflict in Colombia, as has been demonstrated in the cases of southwestern Colombia. Although this study represents only a sample of a broader problem, the testimonies reveal the magnitude of a social phenomenon that affects not only women, but also their families and communities.

Despite the existence of institutional programs and non-governmental organizations that try to make this reality visible and address it from the health field, progress so far has been limited (CNMH, 2021). There are still significant challenges in terms of health education and access to sexual and reproductive health services for women victims of armed conflict (CDR, 2020). In addition, there are still deficiencies in care provided by health

personnel, due to the lack of training to respond to the needs of this population and ensure compliance with their sexual and reproductive rights (ICBF, 2021).

The recognition of this problem challenges institutions, academia and the private sector regarding their commitment to Colombian women, especially those who live in the peripheries, areas of armed conflict, and in indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. Beyond formal commitments, concrete actions and social policies that involve various sectors are needed to prevent sexual violence and provide comprehensive care for survivors.

More studies are needed on sexual violence that affects women based on their gender, in order to repoliticize research on violence and armed conflict. Furthermore, it is crucial to give public visibility to those cases that have remained hidden by fear and silence, and to offer a space for the experiences of women, victims of rape, sexual slavery and other forms of aggression, to be recognized and understood.

Recommendations

The Presidential Council for Women's Equity and UNHCR (2022) have highlighted the need for the government to take responsibility for addressing the problem, given its magnitude. To this end, the implementation of policies that protect displaced women who are victims of sexual violence, guaranteeing their access to justice, is recommended. It is essential to adopt effective measures to prevent abuses and crimes, investigate them when they occur, and ensure justice through impartial procedures, guaranteeing adequate reparation for affected women.

In addition, the adoption of comprehensive policies to care for women victims of armed conflict and sexual violence is proposed, considering their vulnerable situation, whether due to forced displacement or ethnic and racial discrimination. This demands a differential approach to the prevention, investigation, and punishment of these forms of violence.

It is crucial to improve care in Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) in conflict zones, establishing health centers with trained personnel to guarantee the sexual and reproductive rights of women victims. Specifically, it is necessary to ensure that women have timely access to basic

health services, and to train health personnel in topics such as care for victims of the conflict, contraception, abortion, sexual and gender violence, family planning, prevention and diagnosis of sexually transmitted diseases, and management of unwanted pregnancies.

It is also recommended that observatories be created in conflict and post-conflict zones to provide adequate protection and assistance to women victims. These observatories must have mechanisms that demand respect for the norms of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) by armed groups, to guarantee the protection of the rights that IHL confers on women.

Finally, it is important to include women victims in the spaces for discussion on this issue and facilitate their participation in the processes of reconciliation, community reconstruction and defense of their rights. This will ensure their access to justice, the imposition of sanctions and guarantees of non-repetition, creating spaces where their experiences and demands are made visible.

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