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Received 1 Nov 2015 | Accepted 30 Mar 2016 | Published 10 May 2016

DOI: 10.1057/palcomms.2016.14

OPEN

Leaders against all odds: Women victims of conflict in Colombia

Elvira Maria Restrepo¹

ABSTRACT In the current high-profile conflict within Colombia, women account for the majority of civilian victims. It has been argued that the inclusion of women in peace-building processes may help increase the scope and sustainability of the subsequently achieved peace. However, most women victims of conflict (WVCs) achieve public visibility simply because of their suffering, not because of their potential as sources, initiators and agents of peace. In contrast, this article argues that WVCs represent a hitherto uncharted piece of the peace-building puzzle. In particular, this study explores the ways in which some WVCs are overcoming their own victimhood and emerging as leaders in peace-building, despite the significant personal risks associated with the on-going violence: who better to help heal and empower victims and reconcile society than those who have suffered trauma themselves—and risen above it? The article draws its primary evidence from extensive personal interviews, ethnographic work and data on women victims in Colombia. Against all odds, these unsung WVC leaders have proven to be powerful agents of change: capable of healing, empowering and even reconciling broader society. This article is published as part of a thematic collection on multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives on gender studies.

¹ Department of Geography, University of Miami, Miami, FL, USA Correspondence: (e-mail: e.restrepo@miami.edu)

Introduction

Women account for a significant portion of civilian victims in current conflicts, including Colombia where they form the majority (RUV, 2015). Much of the current scholarship on conflict depicts women victims as powerless, costly and needy. Focussing on Colombia, this paper challenges the unique image of women victims of conflict (WVC) as burdens and rescues their significance as potential peace-builders. Specifically, it examines the ways in which WVC who become peace-building leaders represent crucial parts of the peace puzzle in Colombia. The article's primary evidence has been drawn from extensive personal interviews, together with ethnographic work carried out by the author in Colombia in 2015, as the country began its final transition towards peace negotiations with the Farc. The Farc or *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* is the oldest left-wing armed guerrilla force in the western hemisphere. The author also uses secondary sources, such as existing data; laws that support victims' and women's rights; memory narratives from WVCs; and the Open Source Data (OSD) stories of 19 WVCs in Colombia. The concept of open data itself is not new; but a formalized definition is relatively new—Open Data is usually defined in the following way: “Open data and content can be freely used, modified, and shared by anyone for any purpose” (<http://opendefinition.org/>, accessed 20 January 2016). The main objective of this research is to improve understanding of the potential role that some WVCs who overcome their own victimhood can play as peace builders—even in the midst of an on-going, albeit declining, conflict.

This research also argues that some characteristics of the Colombian armed conflict—such as its length, the high number of women IDPs who have relocated to the main cities, the several peace processes that have taken place since the 1980s and the institutional responses to the conflict—have made WVC leaders more resilient and persistent, than women peace-builders in other parts of the world, in which women usually find themselves sidelined in post-conflict politics and pressurized to return to their traditional, subordinate roles (Nagel, 1998: 253; Alison, 2004 and Carlman, 2012: 73). WVC leaders did not emerge out of nowhere: Individual Colombian women have been involved in peace-building since the 1940s and women's organizations have been around since the 1990s. In fact, women in Colombia have achieved important concrete legal victories, which have shaped many current institutional opportunity structures. This unique scenario has few parallels globally.

This research was informed by two additional factors. First, many WVC leaders in Colombia suffered multiple and severe forms of conflict victimization before becoming leaders. This finding is puzzling and seemingly counterintuitive, particularly in view of the increased risk of re-victimization facing peace-building leaders in Colombia. Therefore, this article seeks to understand how some women victims of severe and multiple violations of their own and their loved ones' human rights have not only been able to overcome their own victimhood, but to rise above it and become leaders, in a country in which this type of activism often implies a *Chronicle of a Dead Foretold*. See Restrepo (2003) for a similar account of judges. There is still no official data on the numbers of women leaders killed in Colombia, Arson (1999) claims that, by the end of the 1990s, 17 per cent of the leaders and activists assassinated in Colombia were women. Some claim that figures may run into the hundreds (Lemaitre and Sandvik, 2015). During the past 6 years of Juan Manuel Santos's presidency (2010–2018), 24 women leaders have been assassinated and there have been many failed assassination attempts. The last attempt to murder a WVC leader occurred in October 2015 (see <http://lasillavacia.com/node/51886>, accessed October 2015) (Silla, 2015). According to the Agency for Memory and

Historical Reconstruction, the *Comisión Nacional para la Memoria Histórica* (CNMH), (see <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co> [accessed 1 May 2015]) women in leadership or emblematic roles in their communities are the most victimized group, representing 22 per cent of the total number of women who have been assassinated (CNMH, 2011: 52).

Second, this article represents an initial attempt to fill a gap in the existing literature, since, to the best of this author's knowledge, there has to date been no study of the role of WVC leaders in peace-building. WVCs almost always achieve visibility because of their suffering, not because of their potential as sources, initiators and agents of peace. This began to change following the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference and UNSCR 1325 in 2000, but the field is still under-empiricized, according to a comprehensive literature review conducted by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS) in 2015. This article will challenge this perspective by arguing that WVC leaders are an important piece of the peace-building puzzle. These women can help us to truly understand how to transition from victimhood to a position of relative power in the symbolic, informal and formal peace-building arenas. Furthermore, we have a moral imperative to try to understand how and why some women manage to overcome victimhood, since the number of registered WVCs in Colombia currently exceeds 3.5 million or approximately 7.6 per cent of the total population (RUV, 2015).

This article's principal aim is to demonstrate that women, who are both disproportionately impacted by conflict and usually overlooked as mere “casualties of war” and post-conflict burdens, can prove crucial to peace-building, since they are in a unique position to understand how to heal and empower other victims, help reconstruct the social fabric and generally contribute to peace-building by promoting women's agency. At present, it is widely agreed that women's participation in peace-building has proved to be a decisive factor in the quality and sustainability of the resulting peace (Kray and Babcock, 2006; World Development Report, 2012; GIWPS, 2015 and Shepherd, 2015). Empirical studies from across the world have shown that peace agreements that include women's agendas are more sustainable (United Nations Women, 2015). “[E]ven gender differences in negotiation behaviour and outcomes that are small in magnitude add up to very large amounts over time because these differences accumulate” (Gizelis, 2011: 522).

Concepts and analytical methods

Most commentators agree that “There is no strong consensus on the definition of Peace Building, let alone the best practices for achieving it” (Schirch, 2004: 3). Since the establishment of peace is not a single event, but a process, characterized by progress and setbacks, peace-building is a very broad concept which encompasses, but is not limited to, preventing further violence; constructing peace symbolically and resisting violence (through marches, individual protests or peace communities), as San José de Apartado, whether informally (through reconstruction at a community level) or formally (in the political arena, through laws and peace negotiations); as well as assisting with reconstruction after the end of a conflict (healing for victims and societal reconciliation).

This article uses Porter's definition of peace-building as “... all processes that build positive relationships, heal wounds, reconcile antagonistic differences, restore esteem, respect rights, meet basic needs, enhance equality, feelings of security, empower moral agency and are democratic, inclusive and just” (Porter, 2007: 34).

WVCs are defined by the Colombian Victims' Law (Law 1444/2011). Article 3 defines victims as "aquellas personas que individual o colectivamente hayan sufrido un daño por hechos ocurridos a partir del 1o de enero de 1985, como consecuencia de infracciones al Derecho Internacional Humanitario o de violaciones graves y manifiestas a las normas internacionales de Derechos Humanos, ocurridas con ocasión del conflicto armado interno" (Article 3, Law 1448, 2011). Members of illegal armed groups are not considered victims unless they were minors at time of their demobilization. In broad terms, the term includes direct and indirect victims (family members including children, siblings and spouses or partners) who have, individually or collectively, suffered harm since 1 January 1985, as a result of violations of International Humanitarian Law or other grave violations of international human rights norms. Third parties, who were harmed when intervening to prevent victimization, are also considered victims. So are members of the Public Forces. Under the Victims' Law, victim status is not dependent on the identity of the respective perpetrators (guerrillas, paramilitaries or armed forces). It is possible to be defined as a victim even if the perpetrator is unknown. Consequently, leading peace-builders are defined as those WVCs who are full-time legal representatives or heads of formal or informal organizations dedicated to any of the peace-building activities listed above.

The first stage of the research was a pilot study carried out in spring, 2014. It was based on the life stories of 19 Colombian WVCs and drew on OSD. These stories were triangulated with CNMH narratives and information collected from different media outlets. There was selection bias in the pilot study, given the type of WVCs that one finds in OSD (14 leaders out of 19), but it provided a useful format for the interviews. The pilot study also demonstrated that the number of WVC leaders in Colombia is significant and revealed some of their major characteristics. Their stories, together with those of the women who were interviewed, were categorized according to 54 variables, divided into four main themes: demographics, life before conflict victimization, the conflict victimization event(s) and life after victimization (see Supplementary Information—Appendix).

In the summer of 2015, the author met a total of 16 WVCs: five of whom she contacted through the Unidad de Víctimas of the Bogotá Major's Office and 11 of whom she had initially contacted through two charity organizations (ABC Prodein <http://prodein.org> and *Fundación Hogares Integrales* <http://www.fundacionhogarintegral.org>, accessed 18 October 2015) not directly related to peace-building. This is important, since this research deliberately excludes "trained" victims. This was less easy to do in the case of the leaders. However, with the exception of Esther, who is relatively well known, the interviewees are all emerging or lower profile leaders. The author owes a debt of gratitude to Gina Castro and Betty Jiménez for facilitating contact with the WVC leaders. In Potrero Largo, a purpose-built neighbourhood for Afro-Colombian IDPs on the outskirts of Cali, the author carried out interviews and visits semi-covertly, posing as a social worker, at the request of the charity that facilitated those contacts, allegedly for security reasons. In Bogotá, the interviews were conducted openly, both in the slums of Ciudad Bolívar and Altos de Cazuca, and in the Victims' Unit of the Major's Office. In both cases, initial preparatory visits and ethnographic work allowed the author to gain the trust of the gatekeepers, such that, after a few visits, they facilitated contact with the WVCs the author had originally selected. At the beginning of each semi-structured interview (Berg and Lune, 2012: 116–120), the author always explained the goal of the research to the WVC. Since all the women shared common experiences as conflict

victims, there was no need to force them to assume any particular role. The 16 WVCs were good informants since they all wanted to talk about their victimhood and most were relatively easy to interview. In some cases, a few questions were omitted to spare the WVC unnecessary distress. It was extremely easy to talk to the peace-building leaders themselves and all interviews with them were conducted openly. All the leaders were interviewed twice. The fact that she herself is a Colombian woman helped the author to overcome cultural bias and gender obstacles. The author had also carried out previous work in Colombia with victims (Restrepo, 2005).

The victims in the sample were selected using a combination of purposeful sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 48) and a snowball approach (Berg and Lune, 2012: 52–53) via the charities and the initial contacts provided by the Mayor's Office. As the research progressed, the gatekeepers and those purposefully selected WVCs who had already been interviewed assisted in the selection of new WVC interviewees. This snowball approach helped create trust between the interviewees and the author, and also reduced the chances of interviewing fake victims, whose deception is often hard for outsiders to detect. It is difficult to know whether the interviews reached a point of saturation, but the sample was very diverse and, to the best of the author's knowledge, all the women were independent of each other. Their demographics also varied: the women come from diverse locations, such as Bolívar, Tolima, Valle del Cauca, Caquetá and Choco, but they all come from Colombia's most victimized provinces. Their ages range between 19 and 46; they have received different levels of education; some are mothers while others are childless; and they represent all ethnic groups. All the women are IDPs and all of them are poor, like the vast majority of WVCs in Colombia (CMH *et al.*, 2012; Rettberg, 2015). Six of the 16 women suffered additional forms of victimization. In addition, all the WVCs interviewed have relocated to two of the main Colombian cities, which have received the highest number of victims. The majority of the women (11/16) are not members of any organization, a finding which seems to be true for the vast majority of WVCs (Rettberg, 2015). With the exception of one of the leaders, the rest of the WVCs are relatively unknown as victims or leaders, so they genuinely represent their own voice (McEvoy and McConnachie, 2013).

In regard to the relatively small scale of the fieldwork, the author's experience from more casual acquaintances beyond the sample used in the fieldwork suggest that those interviewed provide a broadly representative subset of all registered WVCs: specifically, they were all typically displaced to the main cities and lower socio-economic status while at the same time show diverse ethnicity, age, education, marital status, motherhood or not, place of origin, affiliation or not to organizations, perpetrator, additional victimization, mentorship and so on. Although future fieldwork will be able to quantify this further, the author is confident that the sample discussed in this article is therefore representative of all Colombian WVCs.

Women victims: in peace-building and in conflict

Women's collective activism in Colombia first became visible in the 1990s (Domingo *et al.*, 2015), although, in individual cases, it had begun several decades earlier. Rojas (2005) argues that women's activism began in the 1940s during the *La Violencia* period (1945–1965), as attested by several accounts provided in personal interviews with the author's parents. Other accounts of individual leadership can be found in United States Institute of Peace (2004) and Villareal and Ríos (2006). As Sanchez and Bakewell's (1985) seminal work has demonstrated, since its independence, Colombia's history has been characterised by

continuous wars and violence. In fact, individual women have denounced violence against other women since the early twentieth century, although their efforts have not received much attention. In the twentieth century, the number of works by women depicting violence and conflict grew steadily and gave rise to more denunciatory literature, such as Soraya Jucal's 1967 *Jacinta y La Violencia*, in which the author specifically denounces armed bosses who destroy villages and rape women. Nevertheless the women's "testimonial literature" and life histories which have existed since the nineteenth century have gone largely unread, because they failed to reach the appropriate channels through which they could have been fully disclosed and become known (Navia, 2004: 18). By contrast present-day women activism is visible and takes place at local, regional and national levels and includes individuals from all socio-economic strata, religions and ethnicities (Rojas, 2005: 20). Many women victims and their family members have taken part in these movements, but the relevant literature only discusses women peace-builders, without discriminating between women victims and non-victims. In general terms, the women's movement appears to be very organized: it has five major networks, encompassing thousands of women's organizations across the country, with a variety of foci, ideologies (CNMH, 2011: 316–317), resistance strategies (Colombia UNDP, 2003; Rojas, 2004) and peace-building goals (<http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-1014230> accessed 28 October 2015 and also Rojas, 2005: 11). The *Ruta*, one of the biggest women's networks, defines itself as a feminist movement for peace and has already produced an unofficial women's truth document (see <http://www.rutapacifica.org.co/comision-de-la-verdad-y-memoria>, accessed 25 October 2015).

The existence of five separate women's networks (See Parra Fox, 2015, for more on the *Ruta* women's empowerment training and their presence in eight of Colombia's regions) and thousands of organizations suggests a high degree of collective organization. Paradoxically, a 2012 survey revealed that, although only 7 per cent of victims (out of a then total of 6 million) are organized, they belong to 3,000 different organizations (CMH, IOM, Universidad de los Andes, 2012). According to Rettberg: "This level of dispersion is a result both of heterogeneous experiences of victimization and, so far, of a severe incapability of producing collective action" (Rettberg, 2015: 4). This article finds additional reasons to explain this puzzle, such as the victims ignorance of these organizations existence, but it is a topic, which is beyond the scope of this article.

It is also hard to weigh up the end results of these activisms: some peace communities, such as Mogotes (Santander), have obtained national recognition and furthered women's rights (see also Colombia UNDP, 2003 and Rojas, 2004), while others have increased the visibility of the women involved, putting them at greater risk, as in the *Ciudad de Mujeres* in Turbaco (Bolívar), where criminal bands have threatened prominent women. See <http://www.eltiempo.com/politica/justicia/bandas-criminales-amenazan-a-mujeres-en-turbaco-bolivar/14145145>, accessed 17 October 2015.

With regard to WVCs and violence, the evidence suggests that violent conflict can trigger unexpectedly positive civic and political behaviours by women and other groups in the population who are largely excluded from participating in civic and political life during peacetime (Buvinic *et al.*, 2013). Experiences of war violence are often highly correlated with greater levels of social capital, community engagement and peaceful political engagement (Wood, 2003). Moreover, women's positions and roles tend to change and evolve during conflict, as shown by Viterna (2013) in El Salvador and by Sandvick and Lemaitre (2013) in Colombia. In some cases, conflict has been shown to offer a window of opportunity for the empowerment of

women (Bouta and Frerks, 2001; Batliwala *et al.*, 2002 and DIIS, 2008 and personal interviews, 2015). In Colombia, this has been well documented, through empirical studies of women's collective agency both nationally (Lemaitre and Sandvik, 2015) and locally, in the case of Trujillo, for example (Wills, 2009).

Moreover, while, in general, displaced women have very few economic opportunities and are often forced to cope with the loss of their homes, communities and identities, some scholarly findings have demonstrated that the reverse appears to be true in Colombia, where the conflict has narrowed the gender equity gap, because of the high rate of male school dropouts (Tuft, 2001). Moreover, displaced women have often become family breadwinners, especially as workers in the informal sector or as domestic workers in the cities (Ibáñez *et al.*, 2011 and personal interviews, 2015). Furthermore, in Colombia the absence of those men who have been killed in combat often leaves women bearing sole responsibility for their households (Ramírez, 2001), forcing them to move to the cities in search of new opportunities (Tuft, 2001 and personal interviews, 2015). The dissolution of patriarchal order often allows and emboldens women to become leaders (personal interviews, 2015).

Women's agency and opportunity structures

This article approaches WVC leadership from the perspectives of both agency (Carlsnaes, 1992 and Porter, 2013) and structuralism (O'Neill *et al.*, 2004). It argues that WVC leaders become agents of change, capable of acting independently to shape social reality, provided they are able to develop their capabilities to counter discrimination, vulnerability and inequalities (Porter, 2013). Briefly put, agency allows the WVC leaders to "shape their own lives and make choices that are important to defining their own interests, projects, and goals" (Nussbaum, 2011: 176). In turn, their choices can have important impacts on symbolic, informal and formal arenas. However, to become agents of change, WVCs need to use existing material capacities, normative structures and institutions (O'Neill *et al.*, 2004).

This section will adopt these two approaches to examine the ways in which the interviewed WVC leaders' voices and their agency in peace-building is linked to a serendipitous series of simultaneous events that developed in response to many domestic, and some international opportunity structures. A domestic opportunity structure is defined in terms of "how open or closed domestic political institutions are to domestic social movements or NGO influence" (Sikkink, 2005: 157). International political opportunity structures refer "mainly to the degree of openness of international institutions to the participation of transnational NGOs, networks and coalitions" (Sikkink, 2005: 156). These concurrent efforts reveal a less well-known side of WVC's involvement in the peace-building process.

The main domestic opportunity structures for victims can be divided into three categories: first, the *Registro Único de Víctimas* (RUV), a comprehensive data set listing all conflict victims; second, specific laws and judicial decisions enforcing victims' rights; and third, the narratives of the CNMH or Central Institute for Memory and Truth Reconstruction. The *Registro Único de Víctimas* (RUV) represents a governmental attempt to unite the demographic information on all registered victims, types of victimization and perpetrators involved in the conflict since 1985. It is a unique dataset, publically available online (<http://rni.unidadvictimas.gov.co/?q=node/107>, accessed 9 February 2016). The CNMH emerged as an institution in 2011, as the result of the joint efforts of the state, researchers, NGOs, victims' movements and the victims themselves. It has been in charge of reconstructing, via fact-finding and the collection of testimonies from all the actors involved, the most emblematic atrocities committed in the

conflict as well as a few narratives of victims' resistance. Victims, WVC leaders and other sectors of civil society supported and participated in the creation of all these domestic opportunity structures.

According to the RUV, at the time of writing (February, 2016), Colombia has an estimated 7.5 million recognized victims of armed conflict, a total that represents approximately 15 per cent of its total population. A total of 5.7 million of them are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), making up more than one sixth of all IDPs worldwide, and a full 91 per cent of IDPs in the entire western hemisphere (Albuja *et al.*, 2014). The number of IDPs has been growing annually and, since official records began in 1985, the majority of them have been women and girls (see Fig. 1). All the WVCs interviewed for this article are IDPs who moved to two of Colombia's major cities.

The RUV has also demonstrated that WVCs have often suffered multiple forms of victimization. Some of the most severe crimes, such as sexual violence, threats and displacements, have affected more women and girls than men (see Table 1). Women's disappearances and casualties have been extremely high, especially given that women combatants represent only a small minority of conflict actors. All the WVC leaders and three of the WVCs interviewed have suffered multiple and severe forms of victimization.

Most registered victims are young adults. Over 40 per cent are under 19. The average age of the entire victim population is 28 (RUV, 2015). Survey data show that the victims are not evenly spread across Colombia: the conflict has been more intense in the Caribbean, north and central regions, areas, which also have the greatest number of victims' organizations (for women and both sexes). Most of the WVCs interviewed come from those areas. Survey data shows that poverty is widespread among Colombian conflict victims, most of whom, including all the WVCs interviewed, belong to the lowest socio-economic *estratos*. Almost a fifth of victims have received no formal education and over half do not have a high school degree. Only a quarter have completed high school (CMH, *et al.*, 2012; Rettberg, 2015: 18), though this quarter includes all the WVC leaders interviewed.

The IDP crisis led to a ground-breaking law (Law 387/1997) enacted in 1997. This law is part of the second wave of domestic opportunity structures, established following an escalation in the number of IDPs. The law grants IDPs humanitarian assistance to help meet their immediate socioeconomic needs. Many IDPs, together with two of the WVCs interviewed, claimed their new legal rights through *tutelas*, another domestic opportunity structure. *Tutelas* are very efficient constitutional writs, giving citizens the legal standing to demand redress for state violations of fundamental rights. In 2004, a cutting-edge ruling of the Constitutional Court (T-025/2004) critiqued the government for failing the IDP population and decreed what rapidly became known as "an unconstitutional state of affairs", which needed to be resolved. T-025 was followed by a series of Constitutional Court decisions, one of which was directly designed to protect and empower IDP women.

Auto 092/2008 was the first follow-up decision in which the Court went beyond general recommendations to demand that the government adopt specific programs—this included thirteen national programs for displaced women. The programs were designed to respond to the court's list of women's specific vulnerabilities; for example, Auto 092 required the establishment of programs to prevent sexual violence in armed conflict, to promote political participation among displaced women, and to protect the leaders of displaced women's organizations (Lemaitre and Sandvik, 2015: 18–19).

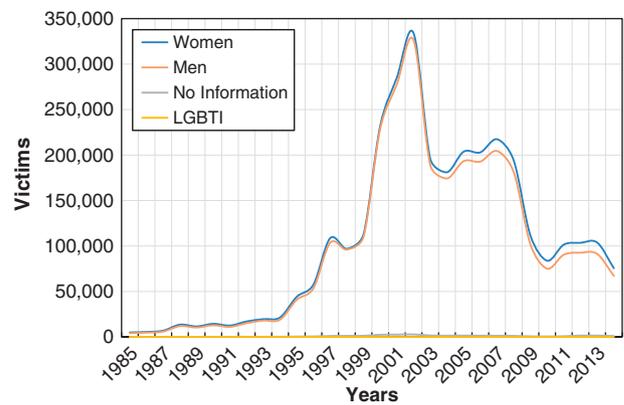


Figure 1 | On average women lead men in forced displacement.

Source: RUV (2015).

Esther (personal interview with WVC leader #1) and other victims participated in the process leading to this legal decision. The author changed all the names of the WVCs to protect their anonymity. Esther and other IDPs took over the International Red Cross headquarters in the heart of Bogotá's fancy "pink district", in a move designed to attract attention to the plight of IDPs. These judicial rulings, together with UN Resolution 1325/2000, provided the conditions under which many new women's organizations (both victims' and non-victims' organizations), and women leaders emerged and flourished in Colombia (see Rojas, 2005). Resolution 1325 acknowledges women's key role in peace-building and calls for women's participation in all stages of peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction. See the operational mandates of Resolution 1325 in <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/issues/women/wps.shtml> (accessed 25 October 2015).

Two further laws—the Law of Justice and Peace (Law 975/2005) and the Law of Victims and Land Restitution (Law 1448/2011)—together with several constitutional decisions gave victims' rights groups more clout, thereby supporting both existing and future WVC organizations. The Law of Justice and Peace was particularly important since it introduced a legal framework based on transitional justice, as a means of reintegrating demobilized combatants, while also providing conflict victims with rights and representation. It was enacted by Congress to regulate the demobilization of the paramilitary and provide justice, truth and reparations for the victims of the conflict. This Law was followed by several constitutional court decisions in 2006 and a second law, Law 1592, in 2012. These later rulings added increasingly stringent demands for truth, justice and reparations for the victims. The Victims' Law, enacted 6 years later, was to define victims in broad terms, as described in section two of this article. Bromelia's activist organization as well as Edith, one of the WVC interviewed, were involved in drafting the Victims' Law (personal interviews with WVC leader #2 and Edith). As stated earlier, under the Victims' Law, victim status is not dependent on the identity of the perpetrators or on whether or not the perpetrators can be identified. Therefore, an individual victim can meet multiple victimization criteria (as do all the WVC leaders interviewed)—for example, she could be both an IDP and a rape victim—and could also be the victim of more than one perpetrator, for example, the paramilitary, guerrillas or the state, like Ruth (WVC leader #3) and two of the other WVCs interviewed.

A third set of domestic opportunity structures originated in preliminary efforts towards truth seeking and memory

Table 1 | Types of victimization by gender

	Women (%)	Men (%)	No Information (%)	LGBTI (%)
Crimes against sexual freedom and integrity	90.87	6.88	1.94	0.31
Threats	51.43	47.63	0.85	0.09
Forced displacement	51.13	48.40	0.45	0.02
Homicide (Direct and Indirect)	47.16	51.60	1.23	0.01
Forced disappearance (Direct and Indirect)	46.87	51.81	1.31	0.01
Loss of real or personal property	40.85	42.90	16.23	0.02
Terrorist act/ Attacks/ Fighting /Harassment	39.69	56.48	3.80	0.04
Torture	36.06	62.42	1.39	0.12
Recruitment of minors (boys, girls and adolescents)	29.91	69.15	0.92	0.02
Forced abandonment or Land Dispossession	27.64	27.74	44.62	0.00
No Information	26.09	73.91	0.00	0.00
Kidnapping (Direct and Indirect)	21.13	77.49	1.35	0.03
Landmines/ Unexploded devise/ Explosive device	8.72	88.55	2.73	0.00

Source: RUV (2015).

reconstruction, efforts dating from 2005 and centralized in the CNMH since 2011. The following documentary provides a small sample of the many efforts and initiatives by the communities of victims and victims’ organizations which have been published online by CNMH (see <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/centro-audiovisual/videos/documental-rostros-de-las-memorias>, accessed 1 May 2015). As the conflict is still on-going, the CNMH is also constantly evolving and creating new initiatives. The CNMH has 15 new initiatives in progress, aiming to provide reports on various topics and emblematic cases that characterize the conflict (see <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/proyectos-en-curso>, accessed 1 May 2015). The CNMH narratives, which take the form of reports on specific emblematic cases and conflict topics, can be accessed free of charge, both online and in print form.

Of the 31 reports compiled to date, two are specifically devoted to WVCs. The first report on women, published in 2010, is entitled *La masacre de Bahía Portete. Mujeres Wayuu en la mira* (CNMH, 2010). It narrates the atrocities of the paramilitary massacre of the Wayuu indigenous people, especially that of four women whose bodies were tortured and desecrated, an atrocity that represented a direct attack against an ethnic group in which women are powerful figures. A second report on women appeared the following year. *Mujeres que hacen historia* (CNMH, 2014b) recreates the stories of four women who resisted the conflict. A third report, which is not entirely devoted to women, *El placer: mujeres, coca y guerra en el Bajo Putumayo* (CNMH, 2014a), narrates two decades of Farc and paramilitary violence and resistance to that violence on the part of courageous women. These two reports demonstrate that women in Colombia have suffered enormously from the violence of the armed conflict and from certain forms of victimisation, disproportionately so, when you take the ratio of female to male combatants into account. These narratives are supported by RUV data which shows that 95 per cent of the victims of sexual violence have been women. (Consistent with this high percentage, is the fact that among those interviewed, 5/16 were victims of sexual violence). Also women represent the majority of those receiving threats and undergoing forced displacements as compared to men. It is important to stress that domestic violence was already widely prevalent before the conflict. Some of the women in *El placer* (Putumayo) cite this as one of the reasons why they often preferred to partner with paramilitary men who at least “spoiled” them with gifts, despite being violent (CNMH, 2014a). A second disturbing finding, provided by the data and confirmed by the narratives, is that the victimization of women has often been carried out by more than one of the three main actors in the conflict and, often, the same woman has been subjected to multiple forms of victimization. This finding was also corroborated by 6/16 WVCs interviewed by the author and by 7/19 pilot stories. In addition, the memory narratives show that women have played an enormously important role in the resistance to the conflict, a finding corroborated by the interviews with the three leaders and by many of the pilot stories.

The RUV has provided victims with public recognition and, with it, the legal standing to demand their rights. The laws have given them concrete and enforceable rights. The memory narratives reinforce the validity of the data and act as sources of truth for the victims, allowing them to make their stories known and increasing the likelihood of healing (Hayner, 2001 and Dimitrijević, 2006). All these domestic opportunity structures have given WVC leaders concrete possibilities for their agency. Together with the international opportunity structures arising from Colombia’s monist tradition, in which treaties signed by Colombia have constitutional status, these opportunity structures have opened enhanced leadership possibilities for WVCs. Many

of the WVCs leaders interviewed, together with most of the women in the pilot group, would not have been able to achieve what they have without the benefit of these opportunity structures. Many of them also participated in their creation. In this respect, a structural approach and the characteristics of the leaders (see Table 2) explain the development of the WVC leaders' agency.

Findings

This article represents a first attempt to address a gap in the literature where the relevance of WVC peace-building capacity has been ignored. The interviews and ethnographic work conducted by the author revealed a wealth of information, much of it beyond the scope of this article. This study both corroborates findings drawn from secondary sources and reveals new evidence about WVCs and their leadership.

Colombian WVC leaders have to overcome at least two kinds of victimization: conflict victimization and victimization as leaders (mainly in the form of death threats). Some leaders are under constant and others under sporadic threat, but none of the leaders have been able to live free from danger. Overcoming complex conflict trauma requires heroism in itself, but living under constant threat takes superhuman fortitude. These are the kinds of leaders the author interviewed.

Puzzlingly, of all the WVCs studied here, it is precisely those who suffered more than one form of victimization and who were subject to the most severe forms of victimisation (sexual violence and disappearances) who have assumed leadership roles. These findings challenge previous studies suggesting that sexual trauma inevitably leads to shame, fear, distrust and ostracism (Levi, 1988; Human Rights Watch, 2003; Denov, 2006) and that reconciliation is difficult in conflict regions where sexual violence is prevalent (Ni Aolain *et al.*, 2012: 122, 140).

WVC leaders have found diverse ways to overcome their victimizations and traumas, but they all have one thing in common. Joining or creating victims' organizations and helping others are themselves part of their own complex healing processes. The informality of some of these organizations makes it hard to know exactly how many WVCs are current members, but it is worrying that until 2012 the vast majority of WVCs were not organized (CMH, IOM, Universidad de los Andes, 2012). There are a number of reasons for this. Many WVCs are afraid of being targeted, threatened or killed (Comisión de Seguimiento, 2008; Petesch and Gray, 2009, cited by Lemaitre and Sandvik, 2015). As described above, hundreds of WVCs have been killed or disappeared and threats to prominent women are common. The personal interviews also revealed that some WVCs do not join organizations because they are unaware of their existence. Clearly, WVCs' fears for their personal safety, the dispersed nature of the organizations themselves and the lack of education common among WVCs (RUV, 2015) all affect their ability to join associations. This in turn may impede the political impact of women's collective agency.

It is a humbling experience to meet a WVC. Most of the WVCs interviewed are single mothers and sole or main breadwinners. They often have to support their entire surviving extended families. All are IDPs and most of them live in very basic conditions, in violence-prone urban neighbourhoods where prospects for proper reintegration are poor. Bogotá's slums are riddled with invisible boundaries (Sandvick and Lemaitre, 2013 and personal interviews, 2015) and no-go zones where random violence is commonplace (two of the WVCs had family members who were killed for unknown reasons) and where daily existence is precarious, because of hazardous roads, poor infrastructure, hilly surroundings and/or little or no state presence. Potrero

Table 2 | Leaders' main traits and motivations

Life before victimization	Present demographics	Life after victimization
Presence of an inspirational figure in their life Experienced a family-related former victimization Rebelled versus former victimization Poor but not missing anything essential *Finished High School education	Older than 40 Separated from 1st partner No emotional or economic support from 1st partner No mention of current partner support *More training or further education Poorer than before conflict victimization Lives in a city Motherhood: all have at least two children	Adult Victimization > 25 years Severe and multiple victimizations Reintegration thanks to NGO or church *Join or create NGO or community organization *Received State reparations (economic & psychological) Participates in non-partisan politics and social activism *Have obtained or achieved concrete legal rights Has been re-victimized as leader

NB: Those preceded by * are linked to existing opportunity structures
 Source: 16 Personal interviews (Bogota and Cali, Summer 2015).

Largo's urban landscape may seem safer, but overcrowding and domestic and street violence are very common there. The structures of community life are absent from both areas, with the exception of schools, *comedores comunitarios*, and a dispersed web of charities and NGOs working independently of each other. Schools and comedores comunitarios feed hundreds of children and old people daily at their communal dining facilities.

Of the 16 WVCs interviewed, only five are affiliated with organizations (two of whom, WVC leaders #1 and #2, created their own organizations). The author also discovered that the three leaders happened to have been the respective victims of the three main actors in the conflict: Esther was a victim of the paramilitary, Ruth of the military and Bromelia of the guerrillas. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics and motivations of the three WVC leaders, comparing them with other WVCs, using the classifications employed in the Supplementary Information—Appendix.

The first column of Table 2 demonstrates that, before they were victimised, all the WVC leaders experienced and rebelled against extreme forms of family-related victimization or hardship. Maria Eugenia's parents died of natural causes when she was 9 years old, leaving her an orphan. She and her two younger siblings were sent away from her birthplace, Cali, to live with extended family in a rural community in Caloto (Choco). In Caloto, Afro-Colombian women often wear very few clothes and expose their breasts. Victims believed that their own nudity could have provoked paramilitaries to rape them when they arrived in the region. Rape was a well-established military strategy among the paramilitaries. The victimized women actually felt responsible for their own rapes. Esther generously initiated "kitchen talks" with a group of rape victims, telling them not to blame themselves for the abuse. She became a local inspiration before being victimized herself. Ruth was a victim of her paramilitary partner's continual violence until he was eventually killed. She claims to have lost seven children as the result of his attacks. She fled to Bogotá with her remaining five children to escape her abusive partner and the killing of her two brothers by the Armed Forces. Bromelia ran away from home and went to live with an aunt when she was 8 years old, to escape her father's violence against her mother.

All three leaders had their own inspirational role models, predating their conflict victimisation. Esther describes her paternal grandmother, whom she never met, as her main source of inspiration. Her grandmother rebelled after being raped by the liberals during the *La Violencia* period (1945–1965), and inspired other women to dissent and resist oppression. Ruth is extremely religious and views God as her protector. Her extreme piety has strengthened her in the most difficult moments of her life. Bromelia both rebelled against and emulated her own mother who inspired her to lead the women's organization that initially saved her and then, ironically, was the main cause of her disappearance. Many people expect women leaders to be rebellious and to have had inspirational role models. What is more surprising is that they all had early experiences of victimisation and extreme hardship.

In demographic terms, it is worth noting that all three women are mothers, with more than one child each. All the women acknowledged that at some point their children had given them the strength to carry on, a fact which contradicts the common perception that having children limits agency (Carlman, 2012: 82–83). See also Aroussi (2009), for a critique of feminist representations of women as mythical peace-builders and postmodern feminists who have insisted on "the futility of any attempt to define an essential female nature" (Spegele, 2002: 392, cited by Aroussi, 2009). All the women who had partners before their conflict victimization (partners who had often fathered all or most of their children) had separated

from them after being victimized by the conflict (Esther's partner left her when she was raped, feeling that he was the main victim), and none of them cites a partner as a source of emotional or economic support. While all three now have new partners, these partners were never explicitly mentioned as relevant to their lives as leaders. All leaders are older than the average victim (40 versus 28 years old). Importantly, recent empirical research, has linked Colombian women's victim's age to resiliency. Amar *et al.* (2014) in a study of 113 IDP women in Colombia show that victims older than 40 are more resilient than the younger ones. Finally, all the women completed high school, something we would expect leaders to have in common.

The third column of Table 2 describes the women's traits after conflict victimization. All three leaders (and all fourteen pilot leaders) suffered severe and multiple forms of victimization: all three are IDPs; Esther was threatened and raped twice by the paramilitary; Ruth's two brothers were killed by the military; Bromelia's mother was disappeared by the Farc and, during her initial search for the truth, they first threatened to kill her and then forced her to live. We might expect such severe victimizations to have left these leaders mere ghosts of their former selves (Shultz *et al.*, 2014). However, all the leaders (including those from the pilot study), together with some of the WVCs, saw their displacements as opportunities. This finding has been confirmed by a 2011 study conducted by Ibañez *et al.* and by Shultzs *et al.* (2014). To them, while their victimizations and forced displacements remained traumatic, their meaning was transformed over time. Most of the women felt that their experiences had given them the chance to overcome patriarchy and other cultural forms of oppression. And, for some, they had even opened up hitherto unimagined opportunities in the cities. Gladys, one of the WVCs interviewed, is a prime example. Raped by the paramilitaries at a very young age because she refused to become their informant, Gladys fled to Bogotá. After overcoming almost indescribable difficulties, she trained as a jeweller at a state school, saving up her earnings as a domestic worker for more than 5 years to help get her life back on track. She felt that her training, together with the support of the women with whom she had associated, had helped her overcome her trauma and become a "uni-personal enterprise".

The state has played a fundamental role in supporting the three WVC leaders, together with some of the potential leaders, such as Gladys. All the registered WVCs received humanitarian aid and counselling when they arrived at the cities, but the leaders also received economic assistance and home subsidies and some were even granted personal protection. This shows that domestic opportunity structures are critically important for leaders.

As we might expect, all the leaders have been involved in forms of political interaction while fighting for their rights. But none of them have joined existing political parties, which they perceive as clientelistic and alien to their cause. "I was forced to enter politics, since rights are politics and without them there are no opportunities", Ruth explains. Esther's first political act was to take part in leading the takeover of the Bogotá Red Cross building, to demand concrete action on behalf of IDPs. She claims that this act led to Constitutional Court Ruling T-025/2004. The takeover empowered her and enabled her to meet major public officials including then president Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002). Bromelia's organization was very active in the creation of the Victims' Law and has recently spearheaded a process of collective reparations for 2,000 of their members.

It is interesting to note that all the leaders and potential leaders (including three of the WVCs interviewed) have continued to educate and train themselves and all of them have expressed the wish to be better equipped. Bromelia "had to go from 0 to 100 in a matter of weeks", as she puts it, when she retrained herself in basic skills ranging from accounting to public relations.

In a country where conflict is still on-going, most leaders receive death threats and many have been brutally re-victimized. Esther, for example, was raped for leading an organization which, ironically, helps women overcome sexual victimization. Others, as statistics and press stories have demonstrated, have been murdered because of their leadership activities, including five of the pilot leaders. Nevertheless, when asked, none of the three leaders saw these threats as deterrents. They regarded the dangers as “part of the job”. Esther, like other very visible leaders, has two bodyguards and an armoured car, provided by the state. Bromelia has no state protection, but is always accompanied by other women who act as her “shield”. Ruth has addressed safety issues “personally”. It is unclear how she did this, but she does have one son in the military and one in the guerrilla rank and file. While she regrets that her son is in the military, since they victimized her, she also claims that this is her way of repaying her “taxes” to the state. Esther also refers to her son’s military service as her “taxes”. In a way, this is their symbolic tribute to a state that abandoned them for so long and is now attempting to make amends.

After their relocation to the cities, all the WVCs interviewed found that their economic situations became more precarious. They all struggle to make ends meet, but leaders view this, too, “as part of the job”. As we might expect, leaders have very little time for any additional salaried work.

Table 3 lists non-relevant variables among leaders. It is worth emphasizing that they did not benefit from previous leadership or mentorship, nor were they members of civil society organizations or involved in partisan politics before becoming leaders. This suggests that these leaders were self-made. All three of the country’s main ethnic groups are represented, demonstrating that ethnicity and religion are not relevant factors in leadership.

Similarly, leaders have been able to overcome their traumas without necessarily receiving retributive justice. This finding coincides with those of representative victim surveys throughout the world, which have shown that victims prefer truth and reparations over justice and revenge (Kiza *et al.*, 2006). This reflects attitudes in Colombia, where, on average, the population appears to be less vengeful and more prone to reconciliation (Rettberg, 2015). These findings have been indirectly corroborated by Rettberg and Prieto (2010), who also argue that Colombian victims have a high social proximity with demobilized combatants. Studying former conflict communities, Prieto (2012) found victims and former combatants peacefully sharing workspaces and schools. Explanations for this are diverse, but range from the superior status that demobilized combatants still have, to war fatigue, apathy, or a general willingness to leave the past behind.

In fact, most WVCs argue that helping others helps them to forgive. Some scholarly work on reconciliation and forgiveness in other countries has produced similar findings (Skaar, 2013). In addition, the constant threats that all leaders receive and the number of leaders who have been assassinated attest to the fact that these leaders are willing to sacrifice their own personal safety in the interests of the greater good.

Overall most of the main characteristics of WVC leaders show that they are self-made. However, without the structures of opportunity their empowerment and leadership wouldn’t have been possible. The combination of the two merits a further discussion on governments’ approach to WVC when designing peace-building agendas.

Preliminary conclusions

The findings of the WVC interviews corroborate the claims of other scholarly studies, which argue that women’s inclusion can both expand the scope of peace processes and increase the likelihood of a sustainable peace. In the case of Colombia,

Table 3 | Non-relevant variables for leaders

Life before Victimization	Demographics	Life after Victimization
Had a leadership position	Belongs to a particular religion	Perpetrator type
Had a mentor	Has a particular ethnicity	Retributive justice
Was part of civil society membership	Comes from rural or urban location	Joined a political party
Was involved in partisan politics		Economic security
Was employed		Personal safety

Source: 16 personal interviews (Bogota and Cali, Summer 2015).

women's movements and individual gender advocates have succeeded in furthering an agenda that has enabled women to move from being perceived and perceiving themselves as passive victims to becoming agents of change who empower and heal other victims, demand legal rights and state accountability and press for wider social change.

The Colombian women's 25 years of activism, the more than 3,000 recognized women leaders and the resiliency of the WVC leaders against all odds are all clear signs that women and women victims' agency are there to stay. The conflict has empowered some women and the existing opportunity structures have strengthened WVC leaders and led to the creation and enforcement of concrete victims' rights.

Present day Colombia is undertaking a peace experiment, supported by a comprehensive legal framework of transitional justice, with victims' rights at its centre (Restrepo, 2013). The state's official recognition of 7.5 million victims has given victims irrevocable formal status.

To reach a sustainable peace, the state needs peace-building leaders to help it heal, empower victims and achieve reconciliation. The WVCs' dual role as both victims and leaders is truly unique. Who could possibly be in a better position to heal and empower victims and help reconcile society than those who have suffered similar traumas and risen above them? These leaders and their associates need the state to guarantee their safety and future political opportunities. As Bertolt Brecht once claimed, "Unhappy is the land that needs a hero". These WVCs cannot continue to lead against all odds.

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Data availability

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available in the repository of the Registro Único de Víctimas de la Unidad de Víctimas de la Presidencia de la República de Colombia (<http://cifras.unidadvictimas.gov.co/Home/General>).

Acknowledgements

The author wants to thank Alejandro Carvajal-Pardo, University of Miami PhD candidate, who helped me design and run the pilot study in 2014. He also thank Nicolas Velasquez, University of Miami PhD candidate, who helped me create Graph 1 and Table 1.

Additional information

Supplementary Information: accompanies this paper at <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/palcomms>

Competing interests: The authors declare no competing financial interests.

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How to cite this article: Restrepo E-M (2016) Leaders against all odds: Colombian women as victims of conflict. *Palgrave Communications*. 2:1614 doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2016.14.



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