



WOMEN DEFENDERS OF AGRICULTURAL, TERRITORIAL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS IN COLOMBIA

Risking their lives for peace

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In Colombia, the women who defend their land, their culture, and the environment are being threatened, harassed, and sometimes even murdered. Since the Peace Agreement was signed, their territories have become highly desirable property. While defenders try to preserve these territories, armed groups are prepared to kill for them. These women are true peace builders, but the State provides them with barely any protection. If urgent measures are not taken, their lives are in grave danger.

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This report, with its analysis, recommendations and conclusions, is exclusively a reflection of Oxfam International's position and opinion on the topic examined. Oxfam collected testimonies from rural women defenders of agricultural, territorial and environmental rights who are farmers, indigenous and Afro-Colombian women from different Colombian regions. However, their names have not been provided in light of the profoundly delicate situation they live in with regards to their safety.

Cover photo: A Colombian women's rights defender. Credit: Pablo Tosco

This report is dedicated to all the women who have given and continue to give their lives defending their territory, their environment, their culture and their rights. Thanks to people like them, the world is moving toward being a better place.

We are losing our fear of speaking up. They had put the idea in our heads that we didn't have the right to speak, that we didn't have a voice, but we are discovering now that we do have a voice and that that voice is very valuable, and that that voice means we are building something very big for everyone, both men and women.

Indigenous woman defender, 2019

SUMMARY

After half a century of armed conflict that cost the lives of many people, peace finally came to Colombia. In August 2016, the Peace Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace was signed. But this long-awaited and very welcome agreement has turned out to be just a mirage, especially in certain parts of the country, which are still under the yoke of violence.

There are several reasons why today the Peace Agreement runs the risk of failing. The disarmament of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) has led to the emergence of a new wave of armed groups that have expanded in territories they seek to control in order to run illegal economies. Although the Agreement included plans to ensure the presence of civil institutions of the State in these areas to guarantee basic rights and justice, such civil institutions remain largely absent. On the contrary, the response that *has* been imposed is military in nature, seeking to exercise authority with force. The 5% increase in the national defence budget is an alarming sign that is a far cry from the type of policies demanded by the communities. Without government control, once the FARC-EP withdrew, the power vacuum was seized upon by legal and illegal extractive corporations and monoculture agribusinesses. They settled in the territories and extended their activities, encouraged by attractive fiscal and other incentives, often pushing aside local communities.

The five decades of war were deeply rooted in a profoundly unequal socioeconomic structure that perpetuates privileges and denies rights. This inequality is especially painful in rural areas and manifests itself very clearly in land ownership, where 1% of landowners possess 80% of the territory. These data make Colombia the most unequal country in terms of land distribution in Latin America, which is, in turn, the most unequal region in the world in this regard. The Peace Agreement was meant to reverse this situation, with a whole battery of measures that would affect land distribution and its use. To date, only 3% of those provisions in the Peace Agreement have been completed and almost half have not yet been initiated.

Women defenders face armed groups, extractive economies, illegal businesses, and military forces. These women defend their culture, their lands, the environment, and their rights. And in doing so, they challenge the interests of the different actors mentioned above. For example, they demand there be prior consent before the development of mining projects; they oppose the transfer of

their ancestral lands to extractive companies; and they resist the pollution and diversion of rivers, forest logging, and any indiscriminate and non-consulted exploitation of their natural resources. In their communities, they lead information and education initiatives about these processes. In performing this work, they question the status quo that prevails in the territories and become the target of all the aforementioned actors, who attack them with threats and harassment, sometimes committing political femicides.

From 2016 to the date of this report, 55 women defenders were killed. In the first half of this year, there was one women social leader murdered, on average, every two weeks. Those who persist in the struggle are in grave danger, and there is no indication that this escalation of violence is going to diminish. In the first quarter of 2019, attacks against women defenders increased by 97% over the previous period, breaking a new record, with 75 attacks. Unfortunately, Colombia is already the second most dangerous country in the world for people defending the land and the environment.

The risk for women defenders is multiplied because there is a whole series of factors that makes them more vulnerable. They are women in a country with a strong patriarchal structure. They are mostly small farmer, indigenous or Afro-Colombian women, and these identities carry a burden of stigmatization. They have diverse gender identities. And, finally, they live in poor rural areas that are historically marginalized. The result is that these women suffer disproportionate consequences of violence, not only physically, but also against their communities and territories. Many times, the authorities themselves do not allow awareness of this violence to be spread, just as they do not recognize the immense work of the defenders to bring justice to their territories.

The Colombian government's response to this serious situation has barely had any effective impact on women defenders, despite the numerous regulatory frameworks that should theoretically protect them. Iván Duque's government came to power in 2018, the year in which the country once again broke another tragic record as the most violent against human rights defenders. Reversing this trend and implementing the necessary measures was up to him. Although he took office saying he would work "tirelessly" to protect social leaders, his words have not translated into effective policies to prevent attacks. The measures he has taken, such as the Timely Action Plan (*Plan de Acción Oportuna*, PAO), are more cosmetic than real advances. They ignore the need to guarantee a conducive environment so that men and women defenders can engage in their communities. Moreover, the previous decrees that formed a notable legal framework to ensure protection and prevention have been omitted. And the government is turning its back on participation by civil society organizations.

Preventing and prosecuting murder, impunity and threats against women defenders is a critical priority. These crimes have a corrosive effect in the territories, eroding public confidence in the government. Each homicide increases uncertainty about the chances of consolidating peace and undermines the Peace Agreement.

The more than 260,000 lives cut short by the war in Colombia cannot be restored. But the efforts made to reach an end to the war and achieve peace should not be for naught. Violence against women defenders is the cruelest reflection and the most alarming warning that the commitments in the Peace Agreement must be

reinforced. The government must lead this process, and to do this it needs the determined support of the international community, the mobilization of Colombian society, and, above all, it needs to listen to the voices of the women leaders themselves.

The main objective of this report is to give visibility to the hard work that the defenders of agricultural, territorial, and environmental rights do every day. Their voices are present throughout the content of these pages and bring us closer to their real situation. Their stories reveal our urgency in making their work visible, to provide them with the protection they so desperately need. Without them, Colombia will be one step farther from peace.

Why is the defence of rural women so important for us? Because together with the land we bring forth life. And it's not only that we give birth to children, we also give birth to hope, we have given birth to peace, we have aborted the war, we say, 'We don't want war!' Although war has been written on women's bodies, that ink is not ours. This is why for us it is so important to focus on the small farmers, to defend the life of those women who are never heard, who are there, who defend their lives, the life of the communities.

Rural woman defender, 2019

RECOMMENDATIONS

The murders and harassment of women defenders must cease immediately. To accomplish this, it is essential to make their work known and obtain recognition for their valuable contribution to peace. Prevention, protection, and guaranteeing justice are key elements to enable them to do their work safely. But none of this will help if there is not a determined government push to put an end to the structural causes that are the backbone of inequality in the country and that put obstacles in the way of these women exercising social leadership. The international community is and must continue to be a major ally to promote these changes and make the crucial role played by these women visible. This is why we make the following call to action:

To the Colombian State

- **Consolidate the comprehensive and effective presence of the State in rural areas**, especially in those most affected by the armed conflict, promoting the rule of law and sustained and inclusive development in these areas.
- **Effectively implement all the points of the Peace Agreement** with the FARC-EP in general, especially the points related to the control of paramilitaries.
- **Restart the negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN)**, as its ongoing activity puts women defenders in a situation of high vulnerability.
- **Make the security of women defenders a policy of the State**, thereby drastically reduce the rising numbers of political femicides and attacks, achieving "zero weeks"—that is, weeks without any victims or attacks.
- **Substantially reduce the level of impunity**. To achieve this, the Public Prosecutor's Office must advance more rapidly in investigations against those who attack defenders, including those attacks that took place before the

signing of the Peace Agreement, as well as against the intellectual authors of the attacks.

- **Facilitate the process to report crimes**, improving institutional coordination so that there is a single window created to which women defenders can go.
- **Promote the preventive approach** that has been relegated to the background until now. To do this, it is essential for the Ministry of the Interior to take more leadership in addressing the recommendations and alerts issued by the Early Warning System.
- **Launch prevention and protection mechanisms** to avoid the violence to which women defenders are subjected.
- **Publicly recognize the work of the women defenders of agricultural, territorial and environmental rights** through awareness campaigns on a national level.
- The highest levels of government should **promote respectful treatment of women defenders** by all officials, including local authorities.
- **Avoid the use of mechanisms that instigate the criminalization** of women defenders, their organizations and the lawyers who defend them.
- The following recommendations are presented with regard to the legal measures and the specific government institutions discussed in the report:
 - **Strengthen the participation** of women defenders of agricultural, territorial, and environmental rights **in the National Roundtable on Guarantees, ensuring the necessary resources and conditions for the operability of the Gender Commission**. Likewise, the participation of rural, indigenous and Afro-Colombian women in the Territorial Roundtables on Guarantees must be strengthened.
 - **The Office of the Attorney General must carry out investigations and establish the respective disciplinary sanctions for officials of territorial entities** that act ineffectively or do not fulfil their duties regarding public policies, budget allocation and establishment of measures for the prevention of violence against and protection of women defenders of agricultural, territorial and environmental rights, especially with regard to adoption of gender approaches.
 - **The Office of the Attorney General must expedite the processes investigating public officials who, by their actions or failure to act, commit offenses related to the violation of the rights to life and integrity of women defenders of agricultural, territorial, and environmental rights**. This includes public servants of the entities that fail to comply with the recommendations of the Ombudsman's Office reports on risk and early warnings.
 - **The National Protection Unit should promote protection mechanisms with an ethnic, territorial, differentiated and collective approach** and ensure that they are adapted to the needs of women defenders through the defenders' active participation in the design and implementation processes.
 - **Guarantee the participation** of women defenders of agricultural, territorial, and environmental rights in the construction of protocols for the **integration of the gender approach in all the entities and frameworks analysed**.
 - **Strengthen and support Afro-Colombian community councils and indigenous authorities as well as self-protection instruments** such as

indigenous and *cimarrona* guards, recognizing and supporting *guardias campesinas*, and promoting the recognition of small farmers as having rights, as the Office of the Attorney General has just done.

- **Expand the space for dialogue** between representatives of rural women's groups and organizations and the **Ombudsman's Office Early Warning System**.
- **Take the political leadership necessary** to revitalize the important issues that must be addressed by the **National Security Guarantees Commission**.
- **Make the Peace Agreement an institutional priority**, safeguarding the spirit in which it was drawn up and implementing key chapters, such as the disarmament of paramilitary groups, **the National Security Guarantees Commission, the Agrarian Reform, and the provisions to protect men and women defenders**.
- **Allocate resources** that allow the adequate development and implementation of the **Comprehensive Security and Protection Program for Communities and Organizations in the Territories and of the Comprehensive Guarantee Program for Women Leaders and Human Rights Defenders**. The resources allocated must be differentiated to have a larger amount to guarantee the participation of women defenders of agricultural, territorial, and environmental rights throughout the cycle of the implementation and monitoring of these measures.
- **Formalize an annual public accountability forum** for ministries and institutions to present the progress in the defender protection policy, specifying inter-institutional alliances, budgets, the participant population, and coverage.