

COLOMBIA

Women fight back in Colombia

TRADITIONALLY a patriarchal society, Colombia is a country in which extensive social discrimination against women continues to be a serious problem. Where rape and acts of violence against women are pervasive and are seldom prosecuted and where, in spite of legislation and constitutional guarantees, women are subjected to a worrying degree of discrimination in the labour market. This situation is aggravated by the country's escalating economic crisis, neo-liberal policies and IMF-imposed austerity measures which are having serious repercussions on society generally, but particularly on women, and most specifically on single mothers and impoverished rural women. Another major contributing factor is the on-going armed conflict in which women are increasingly victims of violence, with many thousands made destitute and left to fend for themselves, their children and elderly relatives. State-sponsored paramilitary death squads and the security forces murder fathers, husbands, brothers and sons in daily massacres. Disappearances, selective killings and orchestrated massive civilian displacements are commonplace.

The factors detailed below paint a bleak picture of the reality of being a woman in today's Colombia.

Inter-family violence, sexual assault and murder of women are increasing in Colombia. In the first half of 1999, there were around 20,000 reported cases of spousal abuse, 92% by the husbands against their wives. It is estimated that 95% of cases of abuse are never reported because of lack of confidence in the governmental institutions set up to address these issues and that there were probably around 15,000 unreported cases of rape throughout that year. While it is written into the Constitution that there should be no discrimination against women and local authorities are required to ensure "adequate and effective participation by women at decision-making levels of public administration", the daily reality is different.

A quota law was introduced in March 2000 requiring that a minimum of 30% of public positions should be allocated to women, yet women still do not hold more than 15% of the highest positions of authority. There is a huge discrepancy in hiring and in salary levels exacerbated by the country's economic crisis. Women's salaries rarely match their education and experience and they invariably have to demonstrate higher qualifications than their male counterparts.

Women earn 28% less than men in equivalent positions.

The unemployment figures for women greatly exceed those of men, with 16.9% of men and 24.5% of women unemployed in 1999. In addition, women represent a higher proportion of low-paid subsistence workers, especially in rural areas, with female rural workers the most severely affected by wage, labour rights and education discrimination and unemployment. 17.3% of women in rural areas are illiterate and 68% of the unemployed in rural areas are women. While dismissals for being pregnant or

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having a young child are prohibited by a ruling in September 1997 by the Constitutional Court, the reality is another matter and it is not clear whether the fear of losing a job through pregnancy contributes to the fact that the second greatest cause of maternal mortality in Colombia is abortion. Colombia is one of the world's few remaining countries where abortion is totally outlawed. Women, and in particular women in rural areas and single parents, suffer the hardest, from the extreme poverty that affects 55% of the population, rising to 80% in the countryside. As women resort to ever more desperate and dangerous means to resolve their financial situations, a consequence has been that Colombia is now the third most common country of origin of women and girls trafficked for prostitution.

Women who turn to prostitution in Colombia become

targets, along with street children, homosexuals, petty criminals, juvenile delinquents etc, of paramilitary “social cleansing operations”. Women are forgotten victims of the armed conflict that has been raging in Colombia for the last 40 years.

In 1999, around 60% of the internally displaced population, which is currently estimated to be in the region of 2 million people, were women and girls, 32% of displaced households were headed by women. Since 1999 the situation has become worse. Displacement is a strategy of paramilitary groups and the armed forces to destroy social cohesion and prevent social organisation. The circumstances of displacement involve dangerous, overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions, little or no access to health care, malnutrition, the prospect of only informal employment and further persecution by paramilitary groups.

On the positive side. There have been a growing number of female social movements in recent years that testify to the will of Colombian women, not simply to survive the social, economic and humanitarian crisis affecting their country, but to take an active part in finding solutions which have women in mind. Tired of the social and labour discrimination which is a legacy of Colombia’s centuries-old patriarchal society, and the hardships imposed on them by poverty and war, women are starting to organise and to take their future into their own hands. They realise that achieving sustainable peace and social justice for the entire population has to be an all-inclusive process. And while many women have been prepared to sacrifice their lives to the armed struggle fighting alongside the men in the country’s guerilla movements, networks of civilian women’s organisations have also taken some important initiatives to ensure that they too can actively participate in the struggle for a better Colombia.

Last year, different networks of women’s organisations including, the National Women’s Network, the Rural Women’s Network, Women and Politics, the Worker’s Union Umbrella Group (CUT), Women’s Network, Women for Colombia and the Women’s National Network for Initiatives for Peace and Against the War, presented their views about the negotiation process between Andres Pastrana’s government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC-EP).

The aim was to increase women’s participation in the talks and ensure they did not result in a series of male-dominated agreements that would perpetuate the discrimination, violence and social exclusion directed against women. They demanded women’s seats on the Thematic Commission, which is an integral part of the peace process with the FARC-EP and it was eventually agreed to appoint 2 women out of a total of 20 members. It was an important achievement, but one which leaves room for improvement given that women constitute 50% of Colombian Society and 35% of FARC combatants.

On June 25th 2000, these same women’s organisations requested a space on the agenda of public sessions on economy and employment which were to be held in El Vicente del Caguan, the centre for peace talks in the demilitarised zone



ACTION BY CHURCHES TOGETHER

In Calarca, Colombia, a woman works building her new home.

established for the purpose in 1998. Around 200 women from diverse sectors and regions of society attended the session. The aim of which was to introduce the perspective of women and gender into the framework of the peace negotiations, and to bring to the attention of both the government and the FARC-EP, the serious problems that affect women in Colombia.

However, while women’s increasing involvement in social movements, including, community organisations, political and peasant movements, and human rights groups, is a way of transcending their often tragic circumstances, and taking a proactive role in shaping their own future. The result is that they are increasingly victims of political killings, threats, intimidation, ill treatment and torture by para-military death squads. Members of the Popular Women’s Organisation (Organizacion Femenina Popular) who run a community centre for displaced women in Barrancabermeja have recently been the targets of widely reported paramilitary attacks.

And yet, in the face of adversity and terrifying violence, Colombia’s women are displaying courage, strength and resilience, perhaps born of confidence in the knowledge that one day the struggle for peace with social justice will be won and there will be a better Colombia for all Colombians, including women.