

# Stop violence against women

## Colombia - women's bodies a battleground

Terror and exploitation have made women's bodies a battleground in Colombia. All sides in the 40-year internal armed conflict - the security forces, army-backed paramilitaries and armed opposition groups - have sexually abused and oppressed women, both civilians and their own combatants.

Women are targeted for a number of reasons - to sow terror within communities, to force people to flee their homes, to wreak revenge on adversaries and to accumulate "trophy of war". Sexual violence has indelibly marked Colombian women's lives.

Rape and sexual mutilation are frequently used by the security forces and their paramilitary allies as part of their terror tactics.

[Quote]

*" As we were leaving Neiva, the army made us get out [of the bus]... I was raped by eight or nine soldiers. They left me on the road... When I got to Dabeiba, the paramilitaries were there. They said I was a guerrilla. The commander of the paramilitaries raped me... When the army comes, I start thinking that it's going to happen to me all over again. Like a nightmare that never ends. "*

[End quote]

Women and girls have also been persecuted and subjected to attacks, including rape and sexual abuse, by armed opposition groups which accuse them of fraternizing with members of the security forces or alleged paramilitaries.

[Quote]

*" He raped me and told me that it was a little reminder... that they would keep their word. That they were fed up with the girls from the town ignoring their orders not to get mixed up with soldiers... They said they were from the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia]. "*

[End quote]

It is the civilian population that bears the brunt of the violence. The wall of silence around crimes against women has made them the hidden victims in the Colombian conflict.

Armed opposition groups and paramilitaries compete to be the guardians of traditional sexual morality. They impose intrusive rules of conduct and rid the streets of "undesirables" to demonstrate their power. Clothing considered provocative and sex outside marriage have been punished with rape and sexual abuse, floggings and mutilation. Women from the poorest communities, Afro-descendant and indigenous women, peasants and shanty town dwellers, are particularly at risk.

[Quote]

*" The girls spend their lives being intimidated and threatened by guerrillas and paramilitaries. They are accused of having*

*relationships with men from the other side. Between February and March [2004] the bodies of three girls who had been raped were found in the area. [Both sides] mark their territory by leaving scars on the bodies of the women. "*

[End quote]

As part of "social cleansing" operations, women considered "undesirable" have been persecuted, "disappeared" and killed. "Social cleansing" attacks have included the abuse of individuals because of their sexual or gender identity, or because their behaviour was seen as challenging sexual norms.

[Quote]

*" When the paramilitaries arrived, they put lists of people on the posts. They accused them of vice. For being lesbians or homosexuals or because the women had been unfaithful... They told girls they mustn't wear cropped tops (ombliqueras) and low-slung jeans. In San Francisco, Bolívar department, a young woman had acid put in her belly button, in November 2002. "*

[End quote]

Violence against women in Colombia is widespread. Despite the gravity of the crimes carried out against women, those who commit them enjoy almost complete impunity which the government is failing to tackle.

The Colombian state must comply with its obligation, under international human rights law, to protect women's right to a life free from violence and discrimination.

[Photo captions]

Cover photo: A woman of the Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres (a feminist-pacifist movement) holds a yellow handkerchief which says: "We women want to live free of violence". © Paul Smith/Panos Pictures

Left: The (first) demonstration against violence by women and girls in Mutatá, in the Urabá region of Antioquia department in 1996. The banner reads: "We women give life... we don't want more violence". © Jesús Abad Colorado

[End captions]

[Box]

## **Support our campaign: together we can make a difference**

- **Take an interest:**  
Find out and monitor how your community, government, police, security forces and courts respond to violence against women and girls.
- **Take a stand:**  
Speak out about violence against women. Challenge prejudiced or dismissive attitudes.
- **Take action:**  
Join our global campaign for women's right to freedom from violence and discrimination.

[End box]

[Box]

In the home and in the community, in times of war and peace, millions of women and girls are beaten, raped, mutilated and killed with impunity. Join Amnesty International's campaign to demand action by governments, communities and individuals to stop violence against women throughout the world.

[End box]

## **Together we can make our voices heard**

Join us in pressing the Colombian government and armed groups to abide by their international obligations: the security forces and armed opposition groups in Colombia must abide by their responsibilities under international law, including by protecting the civilian population from the conflict and ending abuses against women by the forces under their control.

### **Urge the Colombian government to:**

- acknowledge that violence against women is an integral part of the serious human rights crisis facing Colombia and publicly express strong condemnation of this violence
- guarantee the protection of women and respect for women's rights by implementing recommendations by human rights monitoring bodies of the UN and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and international human rights standards
- investigate all reports of sexual violence committed by members of the security forces, paramilitary groups and armed opposition groups, and bring to justice those responsible in accordance with international standards of fair trial
- ensure truth, justice and reparation for the victims and survivors of sexual violence

Send your appeals to the President of Colombia: Señor Presidente Álvaro Uribe Vélez, Presidente de la República, Palacio de Nariño, Carrera 8 No. 7-26, Bogotá, Colombia

Amnesty International calls on armed opposition groups to abide by international humanitarian law. They must publicly denounce gender-based violence, and issue clear instructions to all combatants under their control not to commit rape and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls.

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### **What you can do**

- Join Amnesty International and become part of a worldwide movement campaigning for an end to human rights violations. Help us to make a difference.
- Take action on Amnesty International's website at [web.amnesty.org/actforwomen/actnow-index-eng](http://web.amnesty.org/actforwomen/actnow-index-eng)

- Make a donation to support Amnesty International's work.

Want to know more?

Contact the Amnesty International office in your country at the address in the box (right), if there is one.

Or contact

Amnesty International's International Secretariat in London:

Peter Benenson House, 1 Easton Street, London WC1X 0DW, United Kingdom

Or visit Amnesty International's website at [www.amnesty.org/actforwomen](http://www.amnesty.org/actforwomen)

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