

Voix de la gauche colombienne: femmes et lutte pour les changements sociaux

Terry Gibbs

Résumé

Cet article, fondé sur des entrevues avec des représentantes de divers mouvements sociaux en Colombie, se penche sur le rôle spécial des femmes dans l'articulation de la vision de ces mouvements, violents ou non-violents, et dans la détermination des stratégies adoptées pour atteindre cette vision. Peu des femmes interviewées pour cette recherche ont atteint leur présent point de vue politique à partir d'une perspective féministe ou préoccupée de la condition des femmes; la plupart se sont engagées par sens de l'injustice des conditions socioéconomiques plus larges affectant la majorité des colombiens. Dans cette optique, les perspectives des femmes activistes sont placées dans une analyse structurelle plus large de la Colombie, pour étudier les aspects sociaux, économiques et de défense des droits de la personne de leur travail politique. Il est clair qu'au sein de la gauche colombienne, certaines appellent à une politique de redistribution où la condition des femmes serait un élément intégral plutôt qu'incorporé ensuite par nécessité politique. En outre, les femmes considèrent les formes de leur participation quotidienne aux organismes communautaires ou paysans, aux mouvements sociaux, et aux groupes révolutionnaires comme intimement liées au type de société qu'elles cherchent à bâtir.

Voices from the Colombian Left: Women and the Struggle for Social Transformation

Terry Gibbs¹

Abstract

This article, based on interviews with representatives from various social movements in Colombia, focuses on the special role of women in articulating the vision of these movements—both violent and non-violent—and in determining the strategies to achieve that vision. Few of the women interviewed for this research came to their political positions from a gender or feminist perspective; most began their engagement due to a sense of the injustice of the broader socio-economic conditions in which a majority of Colombians live. With this in mind, the perspectives of activist women are placed in a broader structural analysis of Colombia examining the social, economic and human rights aspects of their political work. It is clear that across the political left in Colombia there are calls for a redistributive politics in which gender is an embedded element rather than incorporated after the fact as a political necessity. In addition, women see the forms of their daily participation in community and peasant organizations, social movements, and revolutionary groups as intimately connected to the kind of society they are seeking to build.

Introduction

In the context of the global war on terror, members of the Colombian left, whether armed or not, have been vilified by the U.S. and Colombian governments, which often portray them as either outright terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. Some Colombians have taken up arms against state repression, while others attempt, at great risk to their lives, to resist non-violently through social movements and in the electoral sphere. Colombian women are becoming increasingly prominent in these social struggles as they gain leadership roles in peasant and grassroots organizations, neighborhood associations, unions and political parties. While women are attaining positions of prominence in radical groups engaged in non-violent political struggle, the same shift is occurring within the country's largest guerrilla organization, the FARC-EP

(*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo* – the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People’s Army), known as the FARC for short.

In Colombia, the social justice movement spans a diverse set of experiences and visions which are difficult to articulate in a neat analytical package. This article does not pretend to capture this complexity and diversity in its entirety. Rather, it is hoped that by highlighting the voices of women from various social movements in Colombia we can get some glimpses into the meaning of social justice to these women and into the current state of social movements in the country from the perspective of gender. In order to achieve this, I explore the question of where women choose to place themselves in terms of their activism: within social movements, political parties, or guerrilla groups; and what influences affect their choice, particularly in light of the constant danger they face. I also examine the issues that women identify as central to the construction of a just society.

This article is based on interviews conducted by the author in June 2007 and June 2009 with women from five sectors: Colombia’s largest peasant federation, FENSUAGRO (*Federación Nacional Sindical Unitaria Agropecuaria* – National Unified Agricultural Trade Union Federation), the country’s largest indigenous organization, ONIC (*Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia* – National Indigenous Organization of Colombia); the centre-left political party, *Polo Democrático Alternativo* (Alternative Development Pole); a community-based social project in one of Bogotá’s largest and poorest neighbourhoods; and members of the FARC. While a majority of the interviews were conducted with individuals, others were conducted with groups. Information was also obtained from attending roundtable discussions with members of FENSUAGRO and meetings in the Mochuelo neighbourhood of Bogotá, as well as from interviews with female guerrillas during a three-day visit to a FARC camp. I have changed the names of some of those interviewed for reasons of security. However, I use the real names of those women who are spokespersons for, or are in leadership positions in organizations and political parties, and whose views are already publicly known. These women granted the author’s permission to use their actual names.

The Human Rights Context of Social Activism

Many women in the social justice movement struggle to

get their message out and to organize in the context of a dirty war, wherein they are threatened, harassed and sometimes killed for being “subversives.” Colombia’s conflict has raged for over 40 years and it is estimated that more than 200,000 Colombians have lost their lives to political violence. In addition, more than four million Colombians have been displaced by the conflict, giving the country the second highest internally-displaced population in the world, after the Sudan. Forcible displacement is regarded by many as one of the most—if not *the* most—critical human rights issues in Colombia, due to the sheer numbers of people affected. Displaced women face particular burdens, often finding themselves as heads of households and being fully responsible for child and elderly care as well as having to ensure some mode of income generation. In addition, rape and sexual abuse are common in the process of expulsion and in the communities of destination, given the vulnerability and insecurity within which these women live.

In this violent context, human rights violations perpetrated by all the armed actors, including the state, are a daily reality. It is estimated, however, that right-wing paramilitaries, often working hand-in-glove with the state’s security forces, have been responsible for the great majority of these rights violations (Hristov, 2009). While the state was only directly responsible for about five per cent of these violations during the 1990s, the UN estimates that this figure has increased since the paramilitary demobilization process began in 2003 (UNHCHR, 2006).

According to the Bogotá-based CINEP (*Centro de Investigación para la Educación Popular* – Centre for Research and Popular Education), the Colombian state’s direct role in overall human rights violations increased dramatically under President Alvaro Uribe. When President Uribe assumed office in 2002, the state was reportedly responsible for 17 per cent of all human rights violations. By 2006—at the end of Uribe’s first term—the state was reported to be responsible for 56 per cent of human rights abuses and was committing almost double the total number of violations perpetrated by government agents four years earlier. Meanwhile, the paramilitaries and the FARC accounted for 29 per cent and 10 per cent respectively (Isacson, 2008). These figures are important from two perspectives: firstly, in this context, individuals engaging in social justice activism, such as the women interviewed for this research, continue to be targets of violence. And secondly, if the

state is increasingly implicated in human rights violations, its ability to be a protagonist in the struggle for democracy and social justice is severely compromised. This last factor has led at least some women to step outside the boundaries of the law to promote their cause.

A key factor to be considered when analyzing social justice movements in Colombia is the criminalization of social dissent under President Alvaro Uribe's democratic security strategy, something that has continued under the current administration of President Juan Manuel Santos. President Uribe was known for his criticism of NGOs, accusing them of "politicking in the service of terrorism" and claiming, "[w]hen terrorists start feeling weak, they immediately send their spokesmen to talk about human rights" (Uribe, 2003). Uribe's attitude towards NGOs closely reflects that of the paramilitaries. In recent years, however, the parapolitics scandal has made it clear that the links between the government and the paramilitaries represent a deeper relationship than simply shared ideology.² The scandal confirms what independent observers have been arguing for years: corruption is deeply entrenched in the political system and goes to the highest levels of government.

Colombia provides unique insights into current social struggles for a number of reasons. It is the only country in the region where an armed revolutionary movement has significant power and it is the third-largest recipient of U.S. military aid after Israel and Egypt. The first point is important given that the peace processes in many countries, such as El Salvador and Nicaragua, have not led to the kinds of structural and redistributive changes that their revolutionary movements fought for and that the FARC, despite its political isolation, seeks to achieve. The second point is significant because the Colombian government has consistently shown itself to be aligned with the U.S. neoliberal vision for the region and within the U.S. narrative stands as a beacon of democracy and hope amidst the rising tide of supposedly authoritarian, socialist-leaning populists (Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador).

Meanwhile, the electoral left in Colombia has only recently begun to recover from the slaughter that occurred in the latter part of the 1980s when some 2,000 members of the UP (*Union Patriótica* – Patriotic Union) party, including two presidential candidates and four elected congressmen, were killed. This led many on the left who were promoting radical and redistributive changes to join

armed revolutionary movements. Despite the fact that Colombia can boast of a very progressive constitution and a relatively independent judiciary, the slaughter of the UP effectively marginalized the electoral left for well over a decade. In recent years, however, a new centre-left party, the *Polo Democrático*, has attempted, with mixed results, to unite the electoral left and to work for structural change from “within the system.” Former Bogotá Mayor Luis Eduardo “Lucho” Garzón, elected on a *Polo* ticket in 2003, built his reputation on policies of social inclusion as he attempted to tackle poverty in the capital with his development plan “*Bogotá Sin Indiferencia*.” A number of the women interviewed for this article either belong to the *Polo* or at least supported its efforts. Many former UP members and ex-guerrillas also belong to the party.

The Construction of Inequality

Colombia is a highly unequal society and the political-military establishment has historically defended this status quo. Colombia largely bypassed the “lost decade” phenomena of the 1980s due to the continuing power of nationally-focused elites and its relatively low level of foreign debt. However, by the end of the 1990s, the country endured its worst economic recession in more than half a century. While the government and Washington blamed the economic crisis on the civil conflict, Colombia analyst Garry Leech (2006) links the recession directly to the neoliberal reforms that had been implemented over the previous decade. U.S. aid for the war on drugs increased during the peak of violence by drug cartels at the end of the 1980s, as did the requirements for structural reform of the economy. The usual prescriptions of economic deregulation and privatization were applied throughout the 1990s (Leech, 2006: 128). Colombia’s economic collapse in 1999 opened the door for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as Bogotá received its first ever loan from the international financial institution and the corresponding conditions resulted in the further implementation of neoliberal reforms. Indeed, as Leech notes:

Under Uribe, Colombia became a neo-liberal poster child, increasing foreign investment and achieving respectable economic growth. But as had occurred throughout the country’s history, the majority of Colombians did not benefit from the new-found prosperity. Furthermore, Uribe’s macroeconomic successes were partly a result

of state repression, including the waging of a dirty war against those sectors of civil society opposed to neoliberalism (Leech, 2006: 165).

As is common across the region, those sectors working for social justice in Colombia are, by definition, opposed to top-down, elite-driven neoliberal policies. Women in all sectors have been disproportionately affected by these policies, bearing the brunt of cuts to social programs. While the language of neoliberal reform is accompanied by talk of democratization and an enhanced role for civil society, the international financial institutions use the language of financial management, obfuscating the power dynamics at the root of structural adjustment policies. As one analyst notes, “[i]n fact many hegemonic globalization discourses no longer employ such concepts as power and domination, but rather use more instrumental and apparently neutral terms like management dynamics, marketing, and knowledge” (Stromquist, 2007: 225). So, not only has there been a de-politicization of social movements in the context of neoliberal reforms, there has also been a decreasing focus on feminist and gender concerns in light of survival politics. Meanwhile, as authors such as William Robinson (2008) have noted, women make up ever greater numbers of the working class in Latin America and represent 70 per cent of new employment in the informal sector. This is in addition to their dominant role in the reproduction of the household (Robinson, 2008).

The Struggle for Land: Women in the Rural Sector

Perhaps in no other segment of Colombian society are the inequities and concentration of wealth as blatant as in the agrarian sector. By the end of the 1990s, just three per cent of landowners had amassed ownership of more than 70 per cent of the country’s arable land (Norwegian Refugee Council, 1999). At least some of this land was taken over in what has been described as a form of violent land speculation wherein paramilitaries forcibly displaced entire communities from their lands through campaigns of violence and terror (Gibbs and Leech, 2009: 72). Neoliberal policies have exacerbated the violence in many resource-rich regions by aggressively promoting the agro-export, mining and oil industries, and by providing favourable conditions for multinational investment (Chomsky et al, 2007).

Women such as those from FENSUAGRO, the peasant federation, are part of a rich historical tradition of women struggling for the right to organize and to achieve democratic access to the land for the peasantry. FENSUAGRO is made up of associations of small and landless farmers, agro-industry workers, rural women, tenant farmers, day labourers, indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations, and other groups representing the rural sector. The union, with a membership of some 80,000, works through sixty affiliated rural organizations in 22 of Colombia's 32 departments (FENSUAGRO, 2006). Since 1976, FENSUAGRO has promoted the notion of land redistribution oriented towards "democratic agrarian reform." Their campaigns have focused on food sovereignty, organic production and the protection of native seeds (FENSUAGRO, 2006). Because of the strong positions that the union takes against the U.S.-sponsored war on drugs and the government's security and neoliberal economic policies, FENSUAGRO members have faced persecution from both paramilitaries and the state.

One woman member of FENSUAGRO, participating in a roundtable meeting on June 25, 2007, noted how the early struggles of the peasant movement were focused on rights to land titles, the *cedula* (national identity card) and the right to vote, which women obtained in 1954. FENSUAGRO has built on this history and over the years the union has articulated a comprehensive strategy for democratic land reform while promoting a negotiated solution to the country's civil conflict. When the women spoke of their activism, they emphasized the importance of participating in social organizations as a channel to becoming politically conscious and to building skills in social organizing. Many spoke of the historical "slavery" of the household, noting that while many women are still dominated by their husbands, the forms of control are more insidious. They identified the attitudes of men as a barrier that makes it particularly difficult for women to organize. As another woman at the roundtable meeting noted, "[d]espite the improvements in the rights of women both socially and in the home, there are still many men who think that a woman's place is in the home and many who do not want their wives to become active politically. Like the meeting today, many women that we invited didn't come because their husbands wouldn't let them." Another woman added, "[m]any men don't take seriously the work we do as women. If they form an organization, it takes on an importance. If we get together, they say it's because

we want to gossip.” This refrain was repeated by women from base communities in the barrios of Bogotá.

Some women spoke of their involvement in the Communist Party as an important catalyst for their political transformation. The Communist Party has long supported the peasantry in Colombia and in recent years has put increasing focus on the role of women in social change. The focus of this particular meeting was, however, both the economic hardships faced by rural communities and the particular difficulties faced in organizing rural women. One woman noted: “[o]ne of the major challenges we face is that, despite our efforts at capacity building, women lack a unified notion of the struggle and we don’t have the place or time to (discuss this) or organize ourselves. We have to work hard just to feed and educate our children. It’s not like the old days when men worked and women could dedicate themselves to family life and the animals, now we barely have time for these things.”

In other words, while they ultimately work for a radical redistribution of wealth in the country, FENSUAGRO women, in the meantime, find most of their time dominated by survival economics such as building small, cooperative businesses. The women have engaged in capacity building workshops on topics ranging from health and business to commercialization. There is, however, little state support for their plans to build their businesses and many women do not have title to their land so they cannot participate in state programs.

The women have organized into a collective involving 22 families and have received financial support from ten countries for their community *finca* (farm), known as *El Progreso*. One woman related that they began with work in baking, milk products, yogurt, sausages and salami, but when they started to sell the products in their own municipality they were told they needed a patent. The women explained that this kind of red tape is just one of the ways the state obstructs their efforts.

However, unlike other women organizing cooperatives, these women face the additional stigma of belonging to FENSUAGRO, which makes them a target of state and paramilitary repression. As one of them noted:

We were only seven or eight women and we were really demoralized because if we wanted to export we had to have a licence, we couldn’t compete with Alpina which

is a big company. Ultimately, we can't continue with this work despite the high quality of our products. Instead of recognizing that we are doing a great job of maintaining our families in difficult circumstances...they give us repression. That's what they give us. They try to stop us from working. Given that our husbands are persecuted by the state, we also have to remain vigilant.

One woman recounted the experience of the community of Viota in March 2003 when paramilitaries terrorized locals because of the historical links of the community with FENSUAGRO and the Communist Party:

They came to assassinate entire families. They preferred this to displacement. From that moment there were death threats, detentions of many farmers, and many women were left alone because their husbands were detained; children were suffering from hunger... When the paramilitaries came, there were 80 of them. They arrived with pamphlets naming organizations such as the Communist Party and threatening that any known communists would die... They arrived with a list of names and when they found the person, they'd kill them. It was clear that there was complicity by the army.

Variations of this story were recounted for the author in the barrios of Bogotá and in displaced communities in Bogotá and Calí, where women discussed the barriers and often direct repression they faced as soon as their efforts moved beyond individual survival to holding meetings or community organizing. Incidents such as that which occurred at Viota are not isolated incidents of repression, but rather are part of a broader systematic attempt to rid the country of any elements of an organized left (Hristov, 2009).

The head of the International Commission of FENSUAGRO, Lilianny Obando, explained in June 2007 that the union's members have been the targets of ongoing attacks by paramilitaries and the state. More than 400 affiliates have been assassinated, many have been forced into exile, hundreds live in conditions of forced displacement, and more than 45 are imprisoned in various regions of the country. Obando claimed, and other FENSUAGRO members corroborated, that the tracking, harassment, threats and surveillance

of FENSUAGRO's headquarters, its leaders and members from the base communities have been constant, day to day realities. Obando herself was imprisoned in August 2008 and charged with providing funds for a terrorist organization and the crime of rebellion. The Colombian government alleges that the funds that Obando raised overseas for FENSUAGRO's farming collective, *El Progreso*, was instead delivered to the FARC. Two and a half years later, the single mother of two remains behind bars even though she has yet to be convicted of a crime. Another of those interviewed, FENSUAGRO's National Secretary of Human Rights, Aidee Moreno Ibagúe, has also been investigated, along with numerous other civil society leaders, for allegedly collaborating with the FARC.

What the experience of FENSUAGRO members reveals is that the dirty war is not just being fought against those engaged in what may be called "activism." Indeed, simply belonging to a union or attempting to organize collectively in any form can be seen as a subversive activity. For women attempting to organize to improve their conditions of life, the constraints of family life and *machismo* add additional complexities to the more obvious barriers of fear and violence. While rural union activists may be a particularly endangered species in Colombia, union members and leaders of all sectors are constantly under threat. Of the unionists killed globally over the last two decades, almost 75 per cent were Colombian (Gibbs and Leech, 2009: 47). The personal narrative of union leaders such as Julia Gonzalez of CUT (*Central Unitaria de Trabajadores* – United Workers Central Organization) reveals an all too common story. Since the formation of the CUT twenty-four years ago it is estimated that up to 4,000 union members have been killed in the country. Gonzalez herself was displaced from her community for participating in student politics in the 1970s. She was involved in creating a student council which organized a strike to support professors fired for their political viewpoints. The matriculation of all those participating in the strike was cancelled. Years later in 1989, after struggling to complete her Master's degree in education due to a lack of family support, Gonzalez began to work in human rights and was involved in the creation of CUT in Sucre on the Atlantic Coast. Out of the 20 leaders, she was the only woman elected. Because she was the only woman, she was given the role of Secretary of Women. Later her work brought her to Bogotá. Gonzalez explained that because of the high profile of union work

in the capital, she faced persecution, office raids and assassination attempts. Eventually the union decided to move her to another city. She explained:

People don't really want to work in human rights in the union movement because of what that means in this country. To be a unionist is dangerous but to work in human rights is even more dangerous. I took on both of those roles...It's not easy to work under constant threat, harassment, to be displaced and to be required to walk around with bodyguards...you lose yourself...your personal life becomes public, it's very difficult. That's the context we work in because we have no choice.

In addition to these outside threats, being the only woman in the national leadership in the 1990s proved to be a difficult task within the union. The former Secretary of Women had been a man and he limited his work with women to organizing cooking classes, first aid and anything to do with the reproductive role of women. Gonzalez was part of a regional effort in the mid-1990s to push for better representation and leadership of women within the union movement. Three hundred women met and began to put pressure on the executive. Although they met with great resistance at first, they eventually managed to get three more women elected to the executive, increasing their number to four out of 21. Gonzalez explained that many women have left their positions within their unions because of problems with male members who would constantly block the advancement of women, causing many to quit.

In addition to the internal dynamics of sexism that have marginalized women within the union movement, Gonzalez and other unionists have identified the cooptation of union leadership under the government's neoliberal agenda as a key factor in the depoliticization of gender issues. As is the case in other countries of the region, the Colombian union movement has been severely weakened by the government's neoliberal policies. Neoliberal reforms were a significant contributing factor in the dissolution of more than 195 trade union organizations between 1991 and 2001, resulting in union membership declining by more than 100,000 workers during that period. With less than 5 per cent of the workforce unionized in 2007, compared with 15 per cent twenty years earlier, Colombia has the lowest unionization rate in Latin America (Leech, 2007). Workers

face lay-offs and changes in their contracts, while others face harassment, persecution, threats and assassination for attempting to organize. As some authors have argued, “[a]t the national level, democratizing reforms that might have lent support to the furtherance of women’s rights have stalled in the face of unpopular neoliberal policies which have continued to take a disproportionate toll on women, of growing conservative opposition to feminist demands and of declining government support” (Cornwall and Molyneux, 2006: 1178). In this same vein, Celestine Nyamu-Musembi (2006) argues that when national policies that would contribute to social and gender justice, such as those that may extend social security to sectors such as agriculture, are seen to conflict with overall market reform, they are actively avoided.

Indigenous Women and the Defence of Territory

Neoliberal policies have been identified as a key structural concern for indigenous women who frame their national struggles for autonomy, unity, culture and territory within the context of the government’s top-down, democratically and environmentally problematic development model. In a group meeting with three women indigenous leaders—Maria Olaya, Elena Cupitra Aroca and Luz Garay—affiliated with ONIC (*Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia* – National Indigenous Organization of Colombia), it was explained that territory trumped all the other themes in significance. For the indigenous, the defence of territory is directly related to their capacity to promote culturally appropriate and relevant education, health and traditional medicine, and to defend their culture, their rituals, art and spirituality. In the context of neoliberalism, the indigenous struggle for territory has inevitably become a struggle over control and access to resources (Chomsky, Leech and Striffler, 2007; Hristov, 2009). In a June 2009 interview, Marco Romero, director of the CODHES (*Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento* – Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement), stated that women are seen as key to these struggles both in terms of their role in protecting their rights of access to the land and because they face a disproportionate burden as the victims of displacement.

Throughout the country, indigenous groups are fighting the encroachment on their traditional lands. For indigenous people on lands surrounding Cundinamarca, for example, life is difficult as

the city of Bogotá expands with large-scale tourist developments and the construction of hydroelectric projects. Maria Olaya noted, “[i]n theory, the indigenous are supposed to be managing some of these projects but it hasn’t worked out that way. Instead our communities are at risk, as water is diverted in these mega projects, we end up having to pay for water to cultivate our maize.” The social dislocation associated with these projects disproportionately affects women and highlights the ways in which the traditional development model—focusing on large-scale productive projects and economic determinants of wellbeing—by necessity ignores the incredibly important role that women play in social integration. As Luz Garay noted:

We from the poor countries, the “underdeveloped,” we are building alliances with other organizations in South America and in other societies of the North whose governments finance multinationals to draw attention to the fact that these mega-projects are exterminating the indigenous and negatively affecting the rest of Colombian society. In this struggle, women play a very important role: we are the conveyors of knowledge, we raise up our culture, we raise our children, we populate the territory, we are the central axis of our communities.

In addition to their role in maintaining social cohesion, women are seeking to be seen and treated as active subjects in their community’s development and not as the passive recipients of externally defined “development.” Garay noted, “[a]s women we are at the base of the movement. Before we didn’t have the opportunity to participate in public space, not even in a meeting with the elders. Only men participated, but thanks to our struggle we have gained access to these spaces.” Part of Garay’s work has been to strengthen the role of women in indigenous reservations: “We are promoting the idea that women are not only housewives but that they are active participants in the broader society. Unfortunately, we have so many displaced that this affects our capacity to work effectively in strengthening our organizations.”

All three ONIC leaders consider the battle to defend their land as central. In the context of Colombia’s civil conflict, displacement has become a form of violent land speculation wherein paramilitaries are given space by the army to clear territory containing valuable

resources for multinationals. As Harvey Suarez, the former director of CODHES has noted, “[d]isplacement isn’t a collateral effect of the war—it’s a central strategy of the war. It is entirely functional” (Quoted in Leech, 2006: 141). While government support to the internally displaced decreased with Uribe’s slashing of social spending, indigenous women are particularly vulnerable. There is a process in place where one has to apply for internally displaced person (IDP) status and it can take up to six weeks for the status to be granted. In the meantime, families must somehow find money to survive. As Olaya explained, rent in the city is around \$US 300 per month and indigenous families tend to be large, with 5 or 6 kids:

On our territory we don’t pay for light, the sun is our light; we don’t pay for water. Here in the city you have to pay for the bus. You need money for everything. On our lands we cultivate yucca and maize and are able to feed ourselves. The conditions of displacement are contemptible... the women live in fear with their children, separated from their culture without psychological support. It is a vicious circle of difficulties.

In addition to the harsh living conditions and the dislocation of family and community networks, displacement is ultimately one of the key challenges to effective social organization of the poor across Colombia and in recent years it has disproportionately affected indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. With some notable exceptions (Leech, 2009, Hristov, 2009), the problems of displaced communities tend to get framed in the language of meeting humanitarian needs and are rarely discussed as a key component of the political economy of neoliberalism.

For Olaya and her fellow indigenous leaders the key is resistance, which takes the form of promoting traditional medicine and maintaining control over education and food sovereignty. According to Olaya, “[a]bove all, we are mobilizing ourselves and developing awareness within the broader Colombian society that it is not only the indigenous who are affected (by the war, displacement and multinational megaprojects) but all of Colombian society. We have our own broadcasting networks and we are constantly seeking to unite with other sectors of society.”

ONIC works at the international level to build this solidarity and to strengthen the role of women at the various levels of decision

making. Giving women a voice in the broader political economy has required their participation at the national level and, just as crucially, at the local level where challenges are perhaps the greatest. Olaya identified education as a key ingredient to women's emancipation, noting that this is also becoming more complicated with the privatization of education: "[t]his is more complicated for indigenous people because we don't have the resources to study... despite the fact that the UN Millennium goals include eradicating illiteracy."

Elena Cupitra Aroca explained that a key challenge in organizing indigenous women is the culture of timidity: "[w]omen have always been part of the struggle but sometimes it was like we weren't there because the men made all the decisions. We were instrumental in the taking of lands. The Constitution gives women rights and equality and we have started to work on issues of gender but it has been difficult. We didn't really know at first what it meant to work on gender." Women began this process in the department of Tolima about ten years ago and at first some men thought that they were trying to create parallel organizations, others were supportive. Aroca described the situation: "[w]e began with a process of 'consciencization' with women and men on the meaning of working with gender. Ultimately we didn't want to work independently, we wanted to strengthen our collective organizations. This process opened up spaces for women." The women of ONIC have used this space to gradually make an impact on the direction of the organization, ensuring that issues critical to women have become more prominent in the orientation of ONIC's work.

The women interviewed constantly placed their narratives of daily life within the broader context of the neoliberal policies of the government, emphasizing that women's access to land and resources could only be understood within this framework. So while gender issues have become part of an internal discussion within organizations like ONIC, thereby strengthening the role of women in decision-making at the institutional level, it is confronting women's marginalization within the government's broader development agenda that is seen as critical to achieving social justice.

Confronting Social Exclusion: The Social-Democratic Left

A new force has emerged within the left in recent years, which challenges both the right and the traditional left in Colombia.

While social democracy is not new to Latin America, the emergence of the *Polo Democrático Alternativo* appeared quite radical in the Colombian political context given that no parties left of centre had previously been able to survive and that many on the left in Colombia still face harassment, persecution and death. Latin American history is rife with examples of populist projects, many of which could not claim democratic credentials. The *Polo* is interesting and important precisely because it has attempted to confront Colombia's poverty and to ask questions about social justice while being firmly committed to democratic practice in the broadest sense of the term. Although this is a path fraught with challenges in the context of such a polarized political context, the *Polo* has made some important inroads at the local level, and in terms of gender.

Within many municipalities, party leaders and local volunteers are engaged in a process of activating communities to identify their social development problems and to create strategies to tackle them. Under the administration of *Polo* Mayor Luis Eduardo "Lucho" Garzón (2003-2007), a large-scale campaign to confront poverty in the country's capital was initiated through projects such as "*Bogotá sin indiferencia*" (Bogotá without Indifference) and "*Bogotá sin hambre*" (Bogotá without Hunger). The campaign extended beyond public works, housing and schools to address cultural issues, suggesting that confronting poverty is not just about throwing money at problems but consists of building understanding as to why poverty exists, showing respect for people who face difficulties and empowering communities to develop their own solutions (Botero, 2007). The elected mayor of Bogotá appoints the mayors of the 20 "*localidades*," or districts of the city. Challenging business as usual, Garzón appointed women to all of these positions. Since the 2007 mayoral elections, Garzón's successor Samuel Moreno has brought in more men but women still make up an impressive 50 per cent of the local mayors.

In a June 2007 interview, the former local mayor of Usaquen, Martha Botero, one of the 20 female local mayors, explained the *Polo* strategy:

It is about creating consciousness about the role people play in the larger society...that we are not individuals functioning separately, we are part of the social gears and if we create obstacles in those gears, we create fractures... To ensure that people understand this, we have to provide

services, to guarantee rights, to ensure a fundamental commitment to social justice, to an administration that is connected to the people...From there we can plant seeds in the minds of the people about their worth, their possibilities, their responsibilities and their sense that they are constructing the future through their management of the present.

Botero is part of a class of women who began their political life in families engaged in local politics through organizations such as JACs (*Juntas de Accion Communal* – Communal Action Councils) and civic committees in their neighbourhoods. Bogotá has a long history of community organizing and the degree of militancy has varied depending on the issues of the area. Botero herself became active in the urban guerrilla group M-19 and in 1979 was imprisoned for two years. It was during those years, in the company of a rich diversity of women, that she became even more conscious of the need for collective action and solidarity.

Botero has identified herself as a feminist since the 1970s when she worked in her community as a social worker. When asked about her experience as a woman in politics, she explained that it was difficult at first, particularly dealing with groups such as the police and professionals: “There was an attitude among the police, not directly stated but obvious: ‘She may run the show behind those doors but out here I run the show.’ But after a while you start to work as a team and develop mutual respect...” Botero explained that despite the fact that women earned the right to attend university fifty years ago, macho culture is still alive and well: “Still there are those who think women are not as smart, that our brains are smaller, that we are slower to understand...we have this mental ‘verticalism’ in Western societies...There is still the belief that the man is the head of the household, then it’s the mother, then the eldest child and so on...we believe in hierarchies.” Botero said she has worked through local programs to transform this mentality and to create horizontal family structures based on consensus building within families.

Usaquen is a relatively wealthy locality in comparison to other parts of Bogotá, but there is still a poverty rate of about 25 per cent. As mayor, one of Botero’s challenges was to ensure that the 75 per cent who live reasonably well continued to do so and that those in poverty could be supported in improving their quality of

life. Botero identified the informal sector street vendors as an issue, suggesting that they are often seen as a social threat, as engaged in the “invasion of social space.” She noted “[t]his is not only a problem of our locality, it is an issue to be resolved in the entire city, in the country as a whole.” Every day displaced families arrive in Bogotá searching for safety and opportunities for work. Botero worked with her administration to obtain legal status for vendors and to change attitudes about their plight. About fifty per cent of Colombians are engaged in some way in the informal economy and every locality is confronted with issues concerning legalization of land titles, street vending, and crime in areas where there are few opportunities.

Like other *Polo* mayors, Botero worked with local businesses to support social programs and her administration collaborated with international NGOs in some neighbourhoods to support projects with women and youth. One such project, conducted in collaboration with the World Bank, trained mostly young women, many of whom are single mothers, as hairstylists and beauticians due to the demand in this particular part of the city for these services. While this project may not be transforming the oppressive structures of Colombian society, the collective nature of the training, which has included sharing personal life stories through presentations and journaling, has clearly increased the self-esteem of these women and given them some hope that they can get jobs at the end of the program. Like others working for the *Polo*, Botero attempted to find spaces for the marginalized to participate in social and political life, but these projects continued to function in a highly polarized society where she claimed the general population is disconnected and generally indifferent to political life. This is reflected in the fact that less than half of Colombia’s 24 million eligible voters participate in elections, which opens the system up to manipulation. “For this reason”, said Botero, “we are not likely to have a *Polo* president in the near future. We have to continue our work with intensity.”

In another part of the city, the local mayor for Bosa, Jannethe Jiménez Garzón, attempted to confront the high levels of poverty and marginalization in her locality. Jiménez Garzón, a single mother, is well-known for her community work and is respected in the community. Her path to becoming mayor, however, was fraught with difficulties as she lacked the backing of a political party. This poverty-ridden barrio of Southern Bogotá, long ignored by the central government, is expanding rapidly as displaced families arrive daily

exacerbating the problems of crime and pollution. Approximately 80 per cent of the community survives by engaging in the informal economy. Jiménez Garzón's administration worked to legalize these entrepreneurial activities and to find ways to give families legal title to the lands they have come to occupy. But despite these efforts, women still face the double burden of poverty and sexism. And even though many women are the heads of displaced households, according to Jiménez Garzón, "the 'law of beer' reigns supreme."

Nevertheless, the achievements of Jiménez Garzón's administration are impressive; it built schools which provide meals for its students (particularly focusing on neighbourhoods with high levels of malnutrition), constructed housing developments and built "justice centres" where families can access legal and psychological services. In addition, the administration worked with the displaced, attempting to provide employment opportunities and to clean the polluted river that surrounded the neighbourhoods. The marginalization of these neighbourhoods contributed to a crisis of security. In some neighbourhoods, Jiménez Garzón pointed out, there are up to seven families living in one house or seven or eight people living in the same room. This is not just a result of the arrival of the displaced but part of the historical poverty of the area. This has put women, and particularly young women, at risk of sexual abuse and violence. There are 407 neighbourhoods in Bosa with only one police officer for every seven residents. Reflecting on women's leadership throughout the city, Jiménez Garzón noted, "[I]ast year (2006) we had the most effective budget management that this city has seen and it was a process led by 20 women... we are demonstrating—and the figures bear this out not only at the local but at the district level—that as women we are capable."

At the national level women are also having an impact. The *Polo* includes many members of the Communist Party, such as *Polo* Senator Gloria Ramírez. As Ramírez noted in a June 2007 interview:

[w]e have worked from the inside of the Communist Party on the issue of women leaving behind the idea that gender is a purely theoretical concern. We can see the issue alive in the daily operations of the Party. From there we created the Department of Women and have held numerous conferences of Communist women to discuss the broader situation of women in Colombia.

Like many of the other women interviewed, Ramírez pointed out that from the official perspective, discrimination is seen as problematic in Colombia but that in reality a “patriarchal culture” exists making the choice to actively engage in public life different for women: “The cost of political activity is different for women than men because of the dichotomy that exists between the home, political life and even professional life.” She noted that working on “women’s issues” is still seen by many to be secondary to the “real” political work of the country. In addition, she explained that the work of political activism often happens on evenings and weekends when many women feel the need to be with their families: “In place of being involved in the struggle, women are marginalized, they don’t participate, they don’t put themselves forward for important positions to avoid the difficulties that this commitment would create.”

These issues, Ramírez noted, have led women to critical discussions within the Communist Party about such issues as to what should come first, class or gender: “We came to the conclusion, after an intense discussion, that the focus should be class with a gender perspective...we shouldn’t prioritize one over the other because both coincide in the conditions of women and men, and also in the *machista* sphere and the patriarchal order of society.” In addition, access to the formal, institutionalized world in Colombia has generally been limited to a relatively small class of people, although the *Polo* is trying hard to change this situation. In the same way, gender equality, reflected in policy changes, does not reach the poor majority. Although Colombia can boast of a progressive constitution and a developing culture of rights and democracy, women in positions of power, such as Ramírez, echo the concerns of human rights analysts such as Winifred Tate who have convincingly pointed to the limits of this legalistic framework in addressing the broader issues of poverty and social exclusion (Tate, 2007).

Ramírez identified three critical issues for women in Colombia that are at the root of the struggle for social justice: poverty, social inequality and displacement. Poverty, she noted, explains the incapacity to protect other rights such as the right to health, education, housing and a life of dignity. Thirty million Colombians live in poverty and 10 million live in abject poverty. Women make up 52 per cent of the population and because of the nature of their work, she argues, it is appropriate to talk of the feminization of poverty. Women in poor neighbourhoods, where there are no aqueducts, must

find other sources of water and carry it to their homes. Work in the home is not recognized or valued socially and thus women who are forced out of necessity to leave the home to find work are faced with double and triple burdens. Ramírez described the situation of some women, who cannot afford to leave their children in a “community home” and end up leaving them home alone closed in a room, not only exposing the children to danger but inhibiting the women from being fully productive due to increased stress. Women who have been displaced by the conflict face these burdens, in addition to the cultural and financial adjustment of moving to the city.

The problems of poverty and displacement described by Ramírez are epitomized by the struggle of women in the Mochuelo neighbourhood of Ciudad Bolívar, comprised of approximately 300 families, and one of the poorest areas of Bogotá. In a meeting of women of the community in June 2007 organized by a social worker from the National University, it was explained to the author that many local women became politicized through necessity. Coming from poverty and social dislocation, they formed community associations and began to organize to meet basic needs and to put pressure on the state to recognize their situation. One group of women trying to get the state to provide clean sources of water to the community formed a committee, the Community Aqueduct of Mochuelo Bajo, to collect money to build an aqueduct. According to Rosa Rodríguez, a committee member, “[i]t was a very difficult process. I don’t normally join groups but my suffering forced me to take action. I was going door to door from four in the morning to eight at night asking people for water so that I could cook food for my children.” While their involvement in community work may have begun out of necessity, their community associations have become a source of pride and strength. The women have organized to respond to problems of nutrition, health, water, childcare and safety within their community. Some of the women in the group represent the displaced population. Clemencia Melo de Forero explained that it was easier to meet basic needs in the countryside by growing food and bartering with neighbours. Many displaced women are now struggling to recreate the same sense of community in urban neighbourhoods.

In collaboration with social workers from the National University, the women participate in a municipal program called the “Basic Breadbasket” (ASUCANASTA) wherein each family

receives a minimum quantity of food to ensure nutrition for their children. This program was initiated as part of the Polo's *Bogotá Sin Indiferencia* campaign. Displaced families flock to Bogotá on a daily basis. According to the mayor of Bosa, Jiménez Garzón, five to six families arrive in that locality on a nightly basis. There are more than four million people displaced in Colombia. Senator Ramírez of the *Polo* notes that of this number, 57 per cent are women and of this, 36 per cent are girls. For this reason, she and others have pushed for a response to displacement that has a gender component. In addition to the particular problems of women as heads of displaced households, many of whom have lost husbands and sons to the war, there is also the problem of sexual violence. Displaced women and girls are particularly at risk because of the insecurity and desperate conditions in which they are forced to survive.

Back in Ciudad Bolívar, the discussion moved from the challenges of displacement to the role of youth. The youngest woman of the group, Yuri Viviana, explained how her involvement in community groups, and her participation in the formation of youth groups, has been a source of empowerment:

We have learned to ask for our rights to health, education, freedom of speech...for example we have no health centre near and that is a right we have. One person alone can't do much but together we've signed petitions and worked to promote the interests of the community. For example, we have been trained to recognize and denounce abuse in the home. Many women were silent on all of these issues but now they speak out.

While the *Polo* has faced many setbacks in recent years, their presence and transformative work in local communities remains impressive. Their failure to unite the left in the 2010 national elections is not surprising given the incompatibility of the agendas of the moderate factions as compared to the hard left of the party. While some influential members flirted with forming an electoral alliance with the Liberal Party, the hard left remained committed to a more transformative vision of the party viewing the Liberals as part of the oligarchy to which they had always been opposed.

The Armed Revolutionary Left

Some women in Colombia have, for various reasons,

decided that the only way to overcome the structural problems of poverty and inequity in the country is via armed struggle. During a three-day visit to one of the FARC's remote jungle camps in southern Colombia, I spoke with several women about how and why they became guerrillas. Women make up more than 30 per cent of the fighters in the FARC, Colombia's largest guerrilla group. Furthermore, they now constitute approximately 40 per cent of mid-level commanders in the rebel army. While these women are succeeding in shifting the gender dynamic within the structures of the traditionally male-dominated FARC, they are also fighting to dramatically change the country's political, economic and social structures. The FARC has been criticized for its violations of human rights, particularly kidnapping, the use of home-made mortars, and targeted assassinations. However, even mainstream analysts such as UN representative James LeMoyné, have suggested that it is a mistake to see the group as simply a criminal or terrorist organization, as it is labelled by the Colombian and U.S. governments (Leech, 2006).

Gladys Marin, one of the oldest female guerrillas in the FARC, explained in a June 2007 interview, why she became involved in the guerrilla group. "I liked the sound of the objectives they were fighting for: defending the interests of the people, the struggle against imperialism, against discrimination, for a radical change in the structure of the government." When the FARC was founded there were only two women involved. At first they did the traditional work of women, washing clothes and cooking. As Marin explained, "I'm not saying there's no machismo now, because we came from a macho state and society. Machismo is everywhere, in Colombia, in Europe, in the United States but here our norms, our documents tell us that we are equal, men and women, that we must be treated equally..."

Most of the women interviewed noted the culture shock of joining the FARC, not only because of the difficult conditions in which they are required to live, moving constantly in jungle terrain and living in fear of attack, but because of the extreme contrast in the role of women in the camps compared to their communities. Many female FARC members come from traditional peasant communities where the hierarchy of the family and the subordination of women in the household are deeply entrenched. So for most of the women interviewed, the FARC provided a liberation of sorts from traditional obligations and a recognition of their broader capacities as women.

As one guerrilla noted, “[w]e [women] say here that a woman is not just to serve for sexual exploitation or just for having kids, washing, cleaning and sweeping. We have to strengthen our own goals, to be someone in this life.” Another guerrilla stated: “[h]ere we have rights and responsibilities to live up to. A woman can find herself leading 50 to 60 men, just as a man can. She can give classes in politics and military strategy, and she can lead a team into combat...It’s great to see women commanders, exercising their authority.”

Women and men share equally in cooking, cleaning, guard duty and combat. Many of the guerrillas that the author spoke with noted that discrimination of any sort is met with sanctions. Sociologist James Brittain, who has visited several FARC controlled regions, and spoken to many FARC women, corroborates this point and notes that crimes such as rape and sexual assault have been met with particularly harsh punishment including, in certain areas, the death penalty (Brittain, 2010: 192).

The issues identified as primary concerns in Colombia by the FARC women did not differ significantly from those identified by other interviewees, although the language to frame them reflects a Marxist orientation. While other women identified poverty, inequality, displacement and corrupt politics, FARC women spoke of imperialism and capitalist exploitation. Many of the women interviewed, particularly *campesinas* and women from the poor barrios of Bogotá, tended to frame their politics in very immediate struggles for rights, food, water and land, but FARC women were clearly working towards a socialist society, an overthrow of the current order. Deeper conversations with some women from the former groups revealed desires for a radical restructuring of Colombian society but many of the women are so busy, engaged in survival politics, that ideology and utopia seem like luxuries.

Reflecting a frequently voiced opinion, one guerrilla explained the necessity for armed struggle:

In Colombia there have never been political guarantees. ...There have always been massacres of people who organized for change...the world witnessed what happened to the Patriotic Union when over 2,000 of their representatives were slaughtered in the 1980s. They were basically exterminated. We learned a lesson there about pursuing change solely through political channels... These rifles that we hold ensure that we are listened to

with more respect, because without them, they'd screw us, as they always have. Today we work through both channels, we have people working on the political front and others focused on military strategy.

Whatever critiques one may have of the FARC, it is interesting and notable that probably more than in any other sector of Colombian society, gender equality is practiced on a daily basis in the practical work lives of the group's members. This existential, rather than simply theoretical, experience has clearly been transformative for thousands of women guerrillas (Brittain, 2010).

Conclusion

While many other women activists and community leaders point to significant efforts towards transformation in their organizations, political parties and communities, most use the language of "struggle" and sometimes "battle" to describe their attempts to promote gender equity. This may be another reason that women have seen the need to frame their issues in the broader framework of social exclusion and poverty or, to begin, as Senator Gloria Ramírez suggested, with the notion of class. This is not only because these women recognize the most fundamental need as being one of economic and social justice in Colombia, but also because they see an intimate and critical link between this struggle and their hopes for achieving gender justice. However, unlike the social movements of previous eras, women are not "waiting for the revolution" to succeed before talking about gender. Rather, they are insisting that gender be regarded as a critical element in any redistributive project and, by extension, that it be a key component of the social movements to achieve that vision, whether it be at the level of the neighbourhood, within the union movement or in national organizations working for change.

I have attempted above to place the perspectives of activist women in a broader structural analysis of Colombia, exploring both the economic and human rights aspects of their political work. While some women frame their work in ideological terms, many, particularly poor women, are too busy focusing on the immediate needs of their families and communities to entertain broader, more utopian visions. However, echoing the arguments of feminist scholar Nancy Fraser (2007), there is implicit in the narrative of these women a call to move beyond identity and rights based approaches

to social justice towards a redistributive agenda in which gender and rights are critical axes. While, as Fraser notes, there was a shift in recent decades from a focus on redistribution to recognition in feminist analysis, in the practical world of politics in Colombia and throughout Latin America we are now witnessing the pendulum shift back to an emphasis on redistribution.

In this context, it is imperative to place an analysis of gender politics within the broader political economy of Colombian society. Senator Ramírez explained that there are two realities for women in Colombia. There is the official culture of non-discrimination, reinforced by the mainstream media and there is the reality of broad-based social exclusion. The media, she notes, focus on the fact that there are women in positions of leadership in Colombia, that women have access to positions of power and that there is political space for women. Ramírez pointed out that these few spaces are the result of a long and difficult struggle by women. The reality for most women is markedly different, she argues, they do not participate in these spaces. According to Ramírez, “[e]quality is not just a numbers game...simply filling positions with women does not guarantee policies that serve the interests of women in general. We are a patriarchal and capitalist culture. We have to attack the problem on both of these fronts.”

Endnotes

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2. The parapolitics (*parapolítica*) scandal refers to the current investigations of more than 70 local and national political figures for suspicion of collusion with right-wing paramilitary groups. *Polo Democrático* Senator Jorge Enrique Robledo has called the scandal “*parauribismo*” because the scandal mostly implicates supporters of former President Alvaro Uribe.

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