

The Feminist Pacifist and Antimilitarist Movement in Colombia

The Experience of la Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres

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Cet article nous fait part des discours et des actions politiques de la Ruta Pacífica, un organisme féministe, pacifiste et antimilitariste en Colombie qui cherche à bâtir une éthique de non-violence et à développer de nouvelles méthodes par le biais de symboles pour arrêter les guerres et promouvoir la paix. La Ruta utilise une action politique, socio-culturelle et le lobbying pour intégrer et institutionnaliser une éthique de non-violence, A travers les arts, les marches, les assemblées, les veilles et les mobilisations, les femmes de la Ruta ont inventé de nouvelles formes de résistance, ont créé un nouveau langage pour construire la paix. De plus, elles ont appuyé la promotion des droits humains, du pouvoir accessible aux femmes et le développement communautaire.

Este artículo comparte los discursos y acciones políticas lideradas por la Ruta Pacífica. Este movimiento, en Colombia es feminista, pacifista, antimilitarista, y busca construir una ética de no-violencia y desarrolla el uso de símbolos para parar la guerra y promover la paz. La Ruta organiza acciones políticas, culturales y sociales, también presiona para internalizar e institucionalizar la ética de la no-violencia. A través del arte, teatro, marchas, mítines, movilizaciones y vigiliadas, las mujeres de la Ruta muestran nuevas formas de resistencia, crean nuevos lenguajes para construir la paz, apoy-

an y promueven el empoderamiento de las mujeres, de los derechos humanos, y el desarrollo de la comunidad.

Feminist vindications in Colombia for a life free from violence have been the result of struggles and public and private action, with a political and non-violent character. Those actions have achieved transformation in women's subjectivities and in the implementations of norms and public policies. They have led to the construction of national and international alliances and networks between women and women's organization around the world. Those actions have also promoted strategic and specific alliances with public institutions, with law and policy makers, as well as the media, and permanent debate and research about women's status in Colombian society and human rights violations.

However, as feminists, we are conscious of the fact that these feminist struggles and vindications have not been enough in a country at war, and full of violence and militarization. For that reason, we have articulated our theoretical production and political and social actions to promote pacifism, antimilitarism, and new forms of resistance. This activism is part of a diverse feminist and political position against war and violence. In this regard, La Ruta Pacífica, as a movement, is today one

of the most consolidated social and political organizations to represent this position in Colombia. La Ruta, like most of the peace initiatives in the country, emerges and resists in the middle of the conflict.

This paper shares some of the feminist, pacifist, and antimilitarist discourses and practices La Ruta has engaged in more than ten years of activism as part of the women's movement against the war in Colombia. The first part of the article presents general considerations of women's issues and human rights violations in this context of war and violence. The second part describes La Ruta's national mobilization against the war as one of its main political actions of resistance. Finally, this paper presents some of the challenges and tensions that la Ruta's discourses and practices face in the Colombian context.

Violence Against Women in the Context of the Colombian Conflict

Over the last 40 years, Colombia has endured one of the longest lasting internal armed conflicts in the world with serious effects and systematic violations of human rights. This conflict has roots in political intolerance and profound injustices such as the concentration of land ownership in few hands (male hands) and the



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inequitable distribution of wealth. Currently, these conflict dynamics are characterized by the dispute between the guerrillas and the State, and also between those of different national and international economic agents who desire to obtain control of strategic territories in terms of natural resources and the drug trafficking. Within those dynamics, the paramilitary phenomenon arose with strong links to State structures and together with the development of the drug trade, reached a position of power from which it infiltrated the social, economic, and political structures of the country, and therefore financed and deepened the conflict.

Violence against women in Colombia is interwoven with and exacerbated by the armed conflict, and, therefore, also by structural problems of socio-economic inequity. In the context of the armed conflict, women increasingly suffer partner

violence and domestic violence. In addition to partners and other traditional actors, there are also illegal armed actors, who consider women's bodies war booty, commit sexual crimes including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, forced nudity, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced use of contraception, forced sterilization, forced prostitution, sexual mutilation, sexual slavery, trafficking of women, and assassinations. In July 2007, a national newspaper, *El Tiempo*, reported that paramilitary groups forced 70 women into prostitution and assassinated five when they tried to escape in the province of Putumayo (on the southeastern border with Ecuador). In 2005 alone there were 232 assassinations of women, 95 by the military and police, and 17 by guerrilla groups (Forensis 2005). Armed actors also impose norms around women's behaviour,

dress, curfews, sexuality, and relationships, and make "examples" of women who subvert these norms. They also persecute women who participate in social organizations and who exercise political and social leadership. At the hands of armed actors, women from Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities are victims not only of uprooting from their ancestral lands, but also systematic sexual violence.

Additionally, the response and social mobilization of women's organizations and female victims of violence has been persecuted and threatened. Women who represent organizational processes that demand respect for victims' rights have been assassinated. One notable example is the assassination of Yolanda Izquierdo and Judith Vergara in 2007, leaders of victims' organizations that were working on processes that demanded respect

for human rights to truth, justice, and reparation. In the last year, the self-named paramilitary group, the “Águilas Negras,” threatened 17 female leaders from different organizations causing great concern given that this is the first time this kind of threat has primarily targeted women as military objectives. After five years of the paramilitary demobilization and reinsertion process in Colom-

de la Nación (the Attorney General’s Office) within the framework of the demobilization process of the paramilitary, only 21 are related to sexual violence (CODHES).

It is in this context of armed conflict and violence against women that La Ruta emerges as part of the women’s movement against war and for political negotiation of the armed conflict in Colombia.

periences that come together with a common goal that has the challenge of weaving together this diversity. As a result, different interests are represented in the attempt to stop the war and promote peace, and social and economic development. Its organization by regions takes into account the cultural diversity and different dynamics that can be observed in the country; the move-

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bia (through the implementation of legislative, administrative, and legal mechanisms), human rights violations against women have not been recognized or investigated nor have effective procedures been put in place to respond to the needs of female victims for truth, justice, and reparations.

Furthermore, violence against women is still not generally visible given the patriarchal and sexist character of Colombian society. Within the framework of the armed conflict, violence against women is not considered a crime on the same scale as assassinations, disappearances, tortures, massacres, etc., which leads to underreporting and the impossibility of creating a baseline and effective evaluation of intervention. The State has yet to create an effective policy that registers, prevents, condemns, and effectively responds to the violations of women’s human rights. The levels of impunity in relationship with violence against women, in spite of institutional efforts (laws and policies), are a product of state negligence in working against these dynamics, and the direct and indirect State participation in this kind of violence. Of 80,000 reports of violence filed with the Fiscalía General

The Birth of La Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres

According to María Eugenia Sanchez, La Ruta was born because “we need to be together against the opprobrium of a patriarchal system that treats us as victims and spoils of war. One afternoon, in the middle of a coffee break, we dreamt that many of us could yell out a pacifist resistance in the territories most affected by the conflict” (qtd. in Atención). From this dream, La Ruta was founded in 1996. Currently, it is comprised of more than 300 women’s organizations and thousands of women participants.

La Ruta is a social movement of women peace activists, supported in women’s organizations, worker unions, political parties, and Indigenous, peasant and Afro-Colombian organizations. La Ruta unites women across barriers of race, class, and background with very different experiences. In the words of Martha Colorado, it connects intellectuals, politicians, simple women from communities, peasants, natives, lesbians, poets, women who think and question relationships and gender systems; women who try to express the wisdom of the east and the west, all with diverse knowledge and ex-

periences that come together with a common goal that has the challenge of weaving together this diversity. As a result, different interests are represented in the attempt to stop the war and promote peace, and social and economic development. Its organization by regions takes into account the cultural diversity and different dynamics that can be observed in the country; the move-

ment, as well as its idea of nationhood is built from the country’s different regional needs. The organization was named *Ruta Pacífica* (Peaceful Route) because once it mobilized action in the areas most affected by the conflict, the mobilization was able to paralyze tense violent conflict between armed groups. This symbolic recovery allowed women to create a peaceful corridor to enter into the conflict area and provide humanitarian aid to women’s victims. The organization then expresses solidarity, gathers information, and denounces human rights violations. As a result of these mobilizations, La Ruta was able to witness and analyze the situation of women in conflicted regions of the country, and has called publically for truth, justice, and reparation of the human rights violations against women.

La Ruta’s first protest march was held in Apartado in the troubled northwest region of Uraba on November 25, 1996, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. One year before this mobilization, feminist and human rights NGO’s received reports that at least in one town of Uraba, around 95 percent of women had been victims of rape. In this mobi-

lization, 2,000 urban and peasant women marched showing solidarity with women's pain and resistance, making visible the impact of the war on women, and speaking out against the use of rape as a weapon.

Since the mobilization in Apartado, La Ruta has held annual national marches in support of women in Cartagena, Bogotá, Putumayo, Cauca, Chocó, among others regions. In 2001, 5,000 women converged on the river port of Barrancabermeja in central Colombia, where just a few months earlier, insurgents and paramilitaries had been fighting for control of the oil port city, and where many local residents were murdered in targeted and collective killings (Vieira). In November 2003 La Ruta organized a peace caravan of more than 3,000 women to Putumayo, protesting the impact of aerial fumigation of coca, drug trafficking, and warfare on women and their families as well as on the local economy. They shouted: *What is illicit, is the war, the displacement, the exile the fumigations, the destruction, the fear.*

The last mobilization in 2007 was to the Colombian border provinces with Ecuador, with the aim of making visible the violence, impoverishment, and discrimination that women from the border zone suffer in the middle of the armed conflict. These provinces have experienced the armed conflict's escalation and the presence of all the dynamics and actors of war in their territory. Colombian armed forces have carried out military actions in border regions of both countries and have caused, in addition to the forced displacement, environmental deterioration, and violations to the human rights of the population, as well as a crisis in the diplomatic relations between Colombia and Ecuador.

With these mobilizations, the women of La Ruta were able to raise awareness of women's situation in the middle of the armed conflict. La Ruta aims to work with other women's organizations, to jointly



Upper and lower photographs: Women's mobilization at the Colombian border with Ecuador. November 23-25, 2007.

build a women's peace agenda, and a develop a proposal of political and negotiated resolution to the armed conflict. Along with these expressions of solidarity, La Ruta not only denounces sexual, psychological, and political violence against women by armed actors, but also strongly denounces the violation of our identities as Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and peasant women.

As stated in La Ruta's 2005 *Official Communiqué*, women have marched

to demand that all armed actors demilitarize civilian life and territories, and in this way, guarantee the autonomy and permanence of our lives, territories, and communities. Women demand respect of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law. While the mobilizations facilitate the documentation of human rights violations, they also monitor the State's implementation of international human rights agreements, judgments by international

courts, and recommendations from international public organizations. Women also demand that armed actors take their trenches out of towns, cease child recruitment, and stop planting landmines (CRIC).

La Ruta's mobilizations against the war are more than simply protest marches. These mobilizations are acts of symbolic reparations of the territory and its inhabitants; they are

peace, and to support and promote women's empowerment, the protection of their human rights, and community development. These events represent a methodological political process, and a process of reflection, alliance-building, and active mobilization, which contribute significantly to the quest for peace and a peace culture in Colombia.

Practicing feminism in a context

with visions of a peace that includes women's empowerment, symbolic reparation, and new social relations based on balance, harmony, solidarity, cooperation, equity, and reciprocity. Under feminist, pacifist, and antimilitarist ideology, women of La Ruta replace passivity and submissiveness with active mobilization. Women's collective expression of determination and resistance

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expressions of pacifist resistance that seek armed actors' desertion and the return of autonomy and dignity. The voices that reject the confrontations that armed groups have led in our territory are also the voices of women's empowerment. In this sense, La Ruta's political mobilizations are feminist, pacifist, and antimilitarist actions. La Ruta brings back hope and the necessity to think deeply about a more concrete and capable feminism, feminism able to transform women's lives (Curiel).

Doing Feminism, Pacifism, and Antimilitarism in Colombia

La Ruta is recognized within the social peace movement as a pioneer in non-violent resistance to war in Colombia. According to Ochy Curiel, La Ruta's ideology positions itself as feminist, pacifist, and antimilitarist, something that was interpreted in early years as utopian and radical, but today is seen as political clarity. La Ruta uses political, cultural, and social action and policy aimed at internalizing and institutionalizing this ethic of non-violence. Using art, theatre, marches, meetings, mobilizations, and vigils, the women of La Ruta represent new forms of resistance, create new languages to build

of war and violence, La Ruta makes visible and denounces the differentiated effects of the armed conflict in women's lives and bodies. This denouncement entails the analysis and rejection of violence against women as strategy of power and domination. At the same time, La Ruta demands the acknowledgement of the political character of this rejection to war and violence. In this regard, La Ruta's political position emerges from a conscious process of reflection and analysis, and from women's collective knowledge and experience of war. It is not "women's essentiality or morality," but rather women's collective action for peace and conflict resolution, and a result of freedom and responsibility.

La Ruta's political practices and discourses provide new interpretations of violence and conflict in Colombia, rescuing women's voices, and naming the pain and also the political and economic causes of the war. Finally, La Ruta's feminist, pacifist, and antimilitarist ethos does not look for all the answers and solutions to the Colombian conflict, but aims to build a political project able to question and reject violence, and to transform women's lives.

La Ruta's political actions bring new dimensions of peace-building

does not allow coercion to operate. Women's abilities to gain social support provided them with the capacity to influence the power of the armed actors by reducing it and its sources. As fear is one of the main sources of oppression and control by armed actors, the women's movement practice of non-violent resistance challenges and negates the law of fear that armed actors impose everywhere inflicting repression. Supporting non-violent resistance has had a significant political impact and a profound effect on the collective imaginations of women's minds; it opens up spaces for healing from trauma and violence in the territory, while encouraging women's political participation (Sanchez 2006).

Challenges and Tensions...

Despite these gains, building a feminist identity and political position has not been easy in a country at war. Practices and discourses are not static, and there is a risk of going backwards within the political and social gains in Colombian context. The continuity of violence against women, the ongoing need to advocate for truth, justice, and reparations for women victims, and the relation with the State's institu-

tions, and mainly within a conservative and right-wing government, are important tensions and challenges for La Ruta. The armed confrontation and the extreme militarization led by governmental policies of security, as well as the involvement of the State agents in human rights violations against women, keep threatening this process. Furthermore, gaining recognition from this government of La Ruta's non-violent action and political position continues to pose difficult challenges to achieving peace in the region, particularly where these peace initiatives, human rights activism, and social movements are disqualified by the military, government representatives, and politicians. There are also challenges and tensions inside the movement and with relation to other women's organizations and political processes. Currently, there is consensus about the need to stop war and change women's subordination; however, women's organization can not represent or speak on behalf of all Colombian women, and women's and feminist movements appear fragmented (Sanchez 2004).

La Ruta, as a feminist movement, has a history of struggles, a compendium of theoretical research, networks, alliances, and regional and local processes (Sanchez 2004). At the same time, La Ruta faces new realities, new questions, and new strategies in the context of war, of economic globalization, and State reforms. These new realities create new challenges and tensions including dialogue with the State and the comprehension of the State's role in the situation of violence against women; the production of knowledge and new political and social practices and discourses; overcoming fragmentation; the tension between the national and local interests inside organizations and women's groups; the recognition of women's authority; and the theoretical and practical relation between feminism, pacifism, and resistances. These are challenges and tensions La Ruta is committed

to overcoming in its struggle to achieve peace and equity in the lives of women in Colombia.

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Patience Wheatley

Towards Light

The ovum in darkness

explodes and
tumbles
from hair to hair

to the narrows
full of flailing sperm
all perishing

but one

: bliss, as
mermaid-merman
loses first a tail
then identity

: a wriggling ball of cells
endlessly dividing
in perfect unity
juicy like a mulberry

: flowers from a
brain stem become
buds sprouting
organs, limbs

: movement
quiet
unfolding
swelling the sky's sphere
moves the little universe
towards that

beat, beat, beat
above

Patience Wheatley's poetry appears earlier in this volume.