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Afro-Colombian Women's Organisations in Post-Accord Colombia: Gendering and Racialising Violent Pluralism across the Conflict Continuum in Bogotá, Colombia²

When it comes to Afro-Colombian women's mobilisation in so-called post-conflict Colombia, demands cannot be understood without employing a lens that draws into focus the specifically racial/ethnic dynamics that both shaped and continue to shape their experiences. Cynthia Cockburn is clear that conflict exists along a spectrum for women, and that the official end to hostilities does not necessarily represent an end to violence for women (2004, 2013). When it comes to Afro-Colombian women, however, we are presented with an additional plane of violence.

Colombia's armed conflict shone a light on how violence against Afro-Colombian women was shaped by entrenched patterns of racism established during colonial rule; in this sense, gendered racism became particularly visible during the conflict. These violences, however, transcend binaries of war/peace. Racialised instances of

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violence against women have not disappeared with the end of the conflict. As such, Afro-Colombian women's ongoing resistance highlights a struggle to redefine the racist and patriarchal hierarchies that still function in Colombian society today.

This article will examine the mobilisation strategies of two groups of Afro-Colombian women now living in Bogotá – AFROMUPAZ and the Colectiva Matamba – in order to add an intersectional dimension to growing calls for ongoing theories on the gender of violent pluralism (see Sandvik 2018). Indeed, by recognising and addressing the specific ways in which Afro-Colombian women experience violence because of their positions in society, we will be able to better understand the strategies they continue to employ in an attempt to obtain guarantees on their rights as citizens, as victims, and as women.

Gendered and Racialised Dynamics of Conflict

Women suffered disproportionately during the Colombian conflict (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2017). More than half of the registered victims of displacement are women and to date the Victims' Unit has registered more than 29,000 victims of sexual violence (RUV 2019). Studies have further noted cases where women were specifically raped or sexually tortured by armed actors in order to disrupt the social fabric of the community (see, for example, GMH 2010; CNMH 2011, 2012).

Scholars highlight the multiple ways that experiences of displacement are gendered (Meertens and Stoller 2001; Meertens 2010, 2012; Zulver 2018b, 2020). Meertens notes in a report that the relationship between displacement sexual violence is threefold:

Sexual violence may have been part of the violent acts that caused the forced displacement; threats of sexual violence may have been the direct cause of displacement; and sexual violence may continue as one of the particular vulnerabilities of women during and after displacement (2012).

When it comes to displacement itself, Meertens and Stoller further highlight:

Women are victims and survivors of displacement and uprooting in the first place as widows of rural violence, heads of household suddenly expelled toward the cities; in the second place as spouses, when the effects of violence and uprooting and the necessities of survival touch them differently from men; and in the third place as leaders whose experiences of participation and organization help them to forge new life projects, individual and collective, in the city (2001, 134).

Beyond this, however, evidence shows that Afro-Colombian women have been further targeted based on their position as women and as racialised subjects (Marciales Montenegro 2013, 2015; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2017; Zulver 2020). Marciales' study on victims of sexual violence in the south of the Chocó department documents that violent actors employed racist language, practices, and stereotypes when violating Afro-Colombian women. Perpetrators forced them into sexual relationships, into prostitution, or raped and sexually tortured them. These acts can be considered a symbolic expression of not only gendered domination of women's bodies, but also of structural racism in the context of armed conflict.

Her argument, then, is that the intersection of race and gender results in a "differentiated impact" of violence for Afro-Colombian women. This violence is historical, and must be studied as such, given ongoing discourses about Black women that date back to colonial times (2015, 72). This is expanded on in a report by the National Centre for Historical Memory, which outlines the ways in which sexual violence against Afro-Colombian women is part of a colonial legacy of domination (2017, 294).

The report outlines:

Social hegemonic discourses about Afro-Colombian women (and their bodies) represent them as inferior humans and ardent/hot-blooded savages. These labels automatically place black women in contexts whereby they are socially discriminated, economically excluded, and likely to be victimised by the armed conflict. Armed actors inflict(ed) violence on them for being women and for being black (paraphrased in Zulver 2020).

Violence on the Continuum

Despite the historic signing of a peace agreement between the FARC and the Colombian government in 2016, ending more than half a century of internal conflict, Colombia continues to face multiple and intersecting dynamics of insecurity (Maher and Thomson 2018; Rettberg 2019). This is particularly the case for many social leaders in Colombia, who have been attacked and killed for their social engagement (Prem et al. 2018). The U.N. Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders noted after his time in Colombia that “in the case of women human rights defenders, they are also exposed to gender specific violations, including gender-based violence, both within their community and organizations and by external actors” (Forst 2018). Violence against social leaders continues, and as such, mobilising for intersectional gender justice remains a high risk activity (Zulver 2018b).

Women also continue to suffer outside of the context of social activism. In June 2018 alone the *Red Feminista Antimilitarista* documented 56 cases of femicide (2018). Disaggregated data show that the majority of these crimes took place in departments that experienced high levels of violence during and in the aftermath of the conflict, including Antioquia and Valle del Cauca, again showing how conflict can be liminal for women (Berry 2018).

A member of the Matamba Collective highlighted that in parts of the country with historical state abandonment and a presence of illegal economies and violent actors (Idler 2019), Black women in particular are deprived of their dignity. The Collective works specifically in the Pacific region, where they say that “ongoing feminicides... are a sign that people are trying to silence the movements of Black women” (Interview, 13 August 2018).

Moreover, there is evidence that shows that young girls— and particularly young Afro girls—are susceptible to nefarious dynamics that draw them into sexual slavery and human trafficking. The *Observatorio de Drogas de Colombia* notes in its report on microtrafficking that girls are vulnerable to becoming consumers of drugs and/or joining distribution groups, particularly in gang-controlled neighbourhoods(2016).

The women of AFROMUPAZ further report that their sons are recruited into drugs gangs as look-outs and small-time dealers.

The Afro-Colombian women interviewed throughout my research have experienced both conflict-related and post-Accord acts of violence. For example, in 2010, long after being displaced, María Eugenia Urrutia was kidnapped from the AFROMUPAZ office in Usme by other paramilitaries and was taken, with her cousin (also a member of the organisation), to the town of Mosquera. Over the following days, they were repeatedly sexually abused. She was told that she had been kidnapped and abused this way as punishment for encouraging other to women to denounce the crimes they had suffered (Gómez Carvajal 2015; Moloney 2014). Although 2010 was not officially a post-Accord moment, Urrutia is clear that this violence was a reaction to her gendered and racialised mobilising, rather than related to conflict dynamics writ large.

Afro-Colombian Women's Collective Action

One of the case studies for my doctoral research focused on the organisation AFROMUPAZ, the *Asociación de Mujeres Afro por la Paz*. The group was founded in 2000 by Urrutia, has about 70 members, and is based in Usme, a suburb of southern Bogotá. The members of AFROMUPAZ are displaced women from the Pacific coast, and all of them have survived episodes of conflict-related violence and multiple displacements.

The women of AFROMUPAZ participate in three main activities:

psycho-social healing programmes based in traditional practices, providing economic security to displaced Afro-Colombian women through a series of small business ventures, and legally denouncing past and present acts of violence committed against members of the organisation (Zulver 2018b).

One of their main focuses is the *huerta al perejil* (parsley garden) programme. The 14 steps use dance, song, acting, and relaxation exercises to holistically allow victims of trauma to heal from their pasts. Participants are giving the opportunity, to

remember, heal, forgive, and move forward. Urrutia and the women designed this programme themselves after they found that services provided by the state (sporadic access to psychologists) were not adequately addressing their specific needs.

Beyond this, AFROMUPAZ offers a social safety net for displaced women. The organisation has a house in Usme, a poor neighbourhood in the south of Bogotá. Here, women come every day to engage in the organisation's small businesses; they make beauty products, sew clothes, and bake desserts. They have a nursery where they can leave their children and are offered a hot lunch every day. While the members of AFROMUPAZ do not generate a wage yet, at the time of research (2017) they hoped to expand their businesses so that they no longer have to seek informal employment outside the organisation as well.

They also actively try to engage with the community when it comes to cultural activities. They have open-houses and hold cultural fairs in different part of the city. Finally, they have an active policy of denouncing ongoing violence, including the recruitment of their children. They do so through making reports at the *Fiscalía* and by engaging in protests, marches, and sit-ins. In the past, their activism and their ongoing communications with the Victims' Unit led them to become subjects of collective reparation, a measure within Colombia's transitional justice architecture that allows for collective compensation in cases where the armed conflict had a negative impact on community organisation, culture, etc. (see World Bank 2016). They are one of the few specifically women's organisations in the country that is currently receiving these holistic pay-outs, which include money for new sewing machines, a new headquarters (their own as opposed to rented), and funding of their healing programmes.

On the other hand, the *Colectiva Matamba Acción Afrodiaspórica* (Matamba Afro-Diasporic Action Collective) is an organisation of 13 young Afro-Colombian women based in Bogotá. Some were born in Bogotá, while others suffered displacement from other parts of the country. The group describes itself as a group of "activists, empowered female warriors who display courage and tenacity" (Zulver 2018a).

In contrast to AFROMUPAZ, Matamba tackles structural racism head on through targeted and deliberate community engagement activities. These include hosting anti-racism workshops and lectures for community members, monitoring femicide levels in Colombia, releasing public communications about acts of institutional racism, and participating in marches, protests, and sit-ins. They also participate in cultural activities, including painting murals of Afro-Colombian woman leaders in marginalised neighbourhoods and organising community theatre performances that speak directly about issues of racism. As noted in Zulver (2018a), one member highlights: “we talk about culture because our ancestors resisted through their use of culture, music, and art.”

They work with the *Red Feminista Antimilitarista* to document a monthly record of the murders of women in the country and use this information to lobby the government to better protect women – and particularly Black women – from gender violence by highlighting instances of impunity. They also publish communications via social media in order to ensure that incidents of femicide are pushed through the proper legal channels. Like AFROMUPAZ, Matamba also engages in more traditional iterations of political activism, by denouncing crimes, engaging in sit-ins, protests, and marches.

Different Intergenerational Approaches to Targeting Structural Racism

Studying the actions of these two groups, however, also offers insight into the different intergenerational approaches to targeting structural racism. Indeed, some of AFROMUPAZ’s strategies readily define it as a popular feminist organisation, or an organisation that engages in “class-inflected gender struggles” (Lebon, 2016). My previous research shows that although AFROMUPAZ participates in activities like sewing, cooking, and childcare, their “multiple identities intersect to create a differential feminism that intrinsically tied up with their racial identities” (Zulver 2020). Their community engagement is focused on redress for past (conflict-related) violences and reparation to create possibilities for a more equal future. While much of this is framed within the context of Colombia’s armed conflict, it also offers a critique of more long-term patterns of structural racism.

On the other hand, Matamba's strategies are more closely aligned with those described by Laó-Montes (2016), whose research discusses the emergence of a radical new generation of Afro-Latina feminisms across the region. He refers to a boom in Black feminisms that protest "against the negative effects of neoliberalism and [advocate] for distributive justice, radical democracy, ecological life, gender and sexual equity and anti-racial rights" (2016, 4). Indeed, Colombian academics/activists Vergara Figueroa and Arboleda Hurtado published a political statement that came out of the First International Seminar: "Afrodisaporic Feminist Conspiracy", held in Cali, Colombia, in 2011, which notes:

We conceive of an Afrodiasporic Feminist Conspiracy as a strategy of social mobilization, a practice of solidarity, and a claim for reparative justice. We further propose concrete areas of conspiratorial action focused on deconstructing and challenging entrenched forms of thinking and representing Black/Afro-descendent women in the larger society, as well as practices of domination that divide our movements and communities along axes of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (2016, 118).

The above statements pertain to the Matamba Collective. In an interview, one of the founders discussed the Collective's focus on intersectionality,³ which differentiates it from the older generations. For her, the Collective is engaged in an "anti-racist, anti-classist struggle [that includes the needs of] lesbian and bisexual Black women. Earlier generations did not understand that sexual orientation also had to be part of the fight" (Interview, 13 August 2018).

What unites the two organisations, however, is the importance that both place on the role of intergenerational exchange, including when challenging patterns of structural racism. Matamba members are well aware that other generations of women have been active in Bogotá for decades, and that they have "enabled many other young women to mobilise as well" (Interview, 13 August 2018). They readily

³ Intersectionality was first academically conceptualized by Crenshaw, who noted that sexism and racism do not exist on "mutually exclusive terrains", and that women of colour have different experiences (particularly in the context of violence against women) that are shaped by different dimensions of their identities. (Crenshaw 1991, 1243).

appreciate that they are able to pursue the strategies they do because of the groundwork set by the previous generation. Moreover, given these linkages with older women, they also consider it important to connect with younger generations as well. They hold workshops with young Afro-Colombian girls in marginalised neighbourhoods in the city, focusing on subjects like sexual education and consent, as well as preserving Afro culture.

AFROMUPAZ has a slightly different approach to younger generations. For these women, it is about ensuring that the children of displaced women do not continue to suffer ongoing violence, be this institutional or structural racism, or conflict-related violence. During an organisation-wide meeting, Urrutia was once moved to tears when discussing the trauma expressed by children of members. “It can’t be a child’s role to wake up to be strong every day... they have to be children,” she said (Group meeting, 4 April 2017). Although most of AFROMUPAZ members’ children were born in Bogotá, the organisation worries about ongoing trauma and racism that extends beyond the conflict context. Such violence, for AFROMUPAZ, is clearly linked to ongoing patterns of racism and racist violence in Bogotá.

Young people (children and teenagers) are also purposefully included in group activities. At a community event attended by members of AFROMUPAZ and their now adult daughters, women took part in a memory activity, whereby they tossed a ball of yarn between them as they stood in a large circle. As the ball crossed between them they created an *atarraya*, a large fishing net. At the end of the activity, one of the leaders (a woman who was displaced to Bogotá decades previously) said to the participants:

As we build the *atarraya*, we are building a new future here in Bogotá. There were many things we couldn’t achieve, but our children can. Bogotá is a new territory for us, but we have a duty to build peace in our communities... the end of my string connects to many other strings, other lives. This activity has allowed us to reflect and think about which moments we want to remember and which we need to forgive. We come from enslaved roots. We don’t have to forget, but we need to make peace in our homes and our daily lives. (Activity, 20 March 2017).

Importantly, many of the Bogotá-born daughters of displaced people in AFROMUPAZ commented throughout the day how important it was for them not

to forget their roots. Particularly given ongoing dynamics of violence, they draw inspiration from their “mothers, aunts, and grandmothers” who are the descendants of *cimarronas*, escaped slaves. This call back to the colonial era once again highlights the understanding that although structural and gendered racism was made visible during the armed conflict, it still exists in the post-conflict moment.

Despite these organisations’ ongoing efforts directed towards healing and preventing violence, Afro-Colombian women in Bogotá continue to face various obstacles. The story of Urrutia and her cousin’s kidnapping provides an example of violence as a direct consequence of gendered and racialised mobilisation. One member of the Matamba Collective highlights: “Regardless of whether the conflict has ended or not... this victimisation shows us the structural racism that doesn’t allow our communities to rebuild themselves” (Interview, 13 August 2018). Despite this, the same member highlights, “if we did not have hope, we wouldn’t still be here. Our capacity to [protect ourselves] ... means that we don’t let the system destroy us” (ibid.).

Mobilisation in the Post-Accord Era

When it comes to mobilisation in the face of violence more generally, wisdom can be taken from Nordstrom, who notes:

[violence] isn’t a passing phenomenon that momentarily challenges a stable system, leaving a scar but no lasting effects after it has passed. Violence becomes a determining fact in shaping reality as people *will* know it, in the future. Part of the way violence is carried into the future is through creating a hegemony of enduring violence across the length and breadth of the commonplace world, present and future (2004, 226).

Auyero expands on this in his work about contentious identities; even after revolts subside, protestors (with no previous experience of collective action) think of these

episodes in personal terms – “their lives have radically changed” (2003, 2).⁴ Especially given the protracted power dynamics of the conflict, high risk mobilisation is a way that women can gain a semblance of control over their own lives; mobilisation is therefore sustained because it has proven successful in the past, and this reinforces its ability to modify the “tomorrows of violence” that women might otherwise feel are inevitable (Nordstrom 2004).

In this sense, mobilisation during the armed conflict provided a prism to assess the ways in which violence against Afro-Colombian women was more than simply a question of conflict-related violence. Indeed, it was based in historical, colonial legacies of racism. The women of AFROMUPAZ, then, mobilised within this conflict context, but also in the post-conflict moment in order to shine a light on the additional challenges faced by Afro-Colombian victims of the conflict.

The Matamba Collective, whose members for the most part did not suffer violence during the armed conflict itself, mobilise against the structural racism that was highlighted and addressed by women like those in AFROMUPAZ. Activism is conveyed through the generations given the transversality of structural and gendered racism beyond the bounds of the conflict/post-conflict moment.

Conclusion

This paper has noted that the Colombian conflict disproportionately impacted Afro-Colombian women, but that elements of this violence has its roots in structural racism that both predates and outlives the armed conflict itself. It further described the characteristics of an established organisation of displaced women, as well as that of a more radical new generation of Afro-Colombian feminists to explain the ways in which both organisations have a deliberate focus on continuing to mobilise against structural and gendered racism.

⁴ See also (Escoffier 2018).

Sandvik notes that the dearth of attention to feminist and women’s organising has left the violent democracies paradigm (Arias and Goldstein 2010) insufficient in its conceptualisation of violence as both gendered *and* political. She continues: “there can and should be many theories on the gender of violent pluralism” (2018, 13). This article has therefore aimed to contribute to a conversation about the need for more in-depth analysis of violent conflict as both gendered and political and, importantly, racialised.

Beyond this, it has aimed to begin a conversation about the “tomorrows of violence” in Colombia,. Although there are different styles of resistance – particularly notable when it comes to organisations of older vs younger generations of Afro-Colombian women – there are also important cross-overs related to fighting ongoing racism that require further analysis. Although AFROMUPAZ and the Matamba Collective’s strategies, and even their defined ‘end goals’, are different, there is a shared understanding of a pursuit of gender justice that critically includes race. Both generations of Afro-Colombian women recognise that an intersectional inclusion of Black women needs to be considered when talking about holistic and lasting views of security – and equality more broadly – in Colombia.

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