

COLOMBIA

Sexual violence (SV) remains a major problem in Colombia due to high impunity rates and the ongoing internal conflict in the country, which has taken a particular toll on women over the past 50 years. The Colombian government's efforts internationally and at home have demonstrated a commitment to tackling SV; however, state capacity to implement laws is poor. A landmark law on access to justice for victims promoted by women's organisations and aimed at enhancing the status of sexual violence survivors so that they can receive reparations, psychosocial support and medical free care, was signed in June 2014. In December 2015, the Government and FARC reached an agreement on truth, justice, reparations and guarantees of non-repetition for victims of the conflict. For the first time Colombia has a comprehensive transitional justice process that recognises the disproportionate impact conflict and conflict-related sexual violence had on women, which identifies sexual violence as a grave crime that cannot be amnestied. The transitional justice system will now have to be developed by Congress and the challenge ahead will be to guarantee that what is on paper not weakened in implementation.

1. What are the issues surrounding the stigma faced by survivors of sexual violence, their families, communities etc.

- There is no clear analysis of stigma for victims of sexual violence but we know that the patriarchal and catholic society play a central role. Victim blaming, guilt, shame and fear also deter women from speaking up.
- State institutions are one of the main reproducers of damaging stereotypes, lacking knowledge about legislation and their own responsibility to support victims of sexual violence. Lack of trust in the Colombian state and fear of exposure/stigmatisation stop women from seeking redress.
- Victims of sexual violence, although entitled under Colombian law to protection and unconditional access to health/medical care, are sometimes reluctant/unable to seek timely treatment due to untrained civil servants who regularly re-victimise them when seeking attention.
- When reporting cases of gender based violence, media usually uses inappropriate language and perpetuates negative societal attitudes towards victims.
- To avoid becoming victims of abuse, entire families sometimes escape to neighbouring communities. People who return home often face difficulties in their economic and social re-integration
- The Ombudsman Office found that sexual violence in the household is one of the main drivers for underage boys and girls to join the ranks of illegal armed groups.

2. Who is doing something already in these countries incl. FCO, DFID, Champion countries, local initiatives (NGO, government, leaders)

- In Colombia there is an extensive presence of the **international community** working with an active civil society and the Colombian government for women’s rights. Main donors working with victims of sexual violence and women’s organisations are: Sweden, the US, the UK, Norway, Canada, UN agencies like UN Women, UNDP and UNICEF, and other multilateral and international bodies like ICRC and OAS. International NGOs like Oxfam, Save the Children, and the Norwegian Council for Refugees NRC also have been working with survivors for many years.
- The **UK** has funded projects of the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative since 2014, working with victims and the Colombian government at the national and local level. This year we are funding a programme to expand and strengthen the “Network of Women Victims and Professionals” to implement prevention plans for sexual violence in 11 regions in Colombia; empowering new leaderships; delivering prevention plans in schools; increasing documentation of SV and collective reporting sessions before authorities; and promoting a change in attitude in communities with a communication campaign addressing stigma. The Network is working with victims to better understand what stigma means to them; train women and local media to improve reporting, and identify main priorities for the future.
- **UK** funded project to support survivors to access their rights in the context of transitional justice by documenting 20 cases with the International Protocol, providing psychosocial accompaniment and based on the cases gathering lessons to provide recommendations to the legal development of the transitional justice system in Congress
- **UK** funded project offering technical advice to integrate gender considerations into the implementation of the Peace Agreements.
- **UK** funded project with six other donors supporting the gathering of 500 women who are local leaders from all regions so they understand the contents of the Final Peace Agreement.
- Several initiatives from **civil society** to make visible and tackle sexual violence are being implemented. Campaigns like “It Is Not Time to be Silent” work with journalists, the government, men and women to change societal attitudes and maintain the issue in the public agenda. Women’s organisations work across Colombia with victims providing support, training civil servants, etc. Sustained funding remains a challenge for women’s organisations.
- Engage with the Colombian Forensic Institute on disseminating positive experiences through cross-regional and country-to-country experience sharing; provide support to ensure the continued inclusion of conflict-related sexual violence in the peace process.¹

¹ Team of Experts: Role of Law/Sexual Violence in Conflict: Table of Activities 2016-17

3. Specific activities that need doing e.g. access to legal or medical care, judicial reform, evidence gathering, etc.

- Ensure adequate capacity for continued monitoring of violations, including CRSV, which can undermine peace and reconciliation.²
- Capacity building for prosecutors and civil servants – the government has set up a comprehensive legal framework to tackle SV but the implementation of laws is poor. Despite the progressive legal framework, institutional capacity constraints at local level and the under-reporting of cases continue to be both a cause and a consequence of impunity for sexual violence.³
- Encourage civil society to develop the International Protocol as a working documentation tool and the Attorney-General's office to adapt it to national guidelines for prosecutors that investigate CRSV.
- More analysis of the stigma for victims of sexual violence to better understand and start diffusing stigma and helping survivors overcome its impact.
- Challenges persist in implementing progressive legal frameworks the local level owing to institutional capacity constrains the under reporting of cases
- Proposed Team of Experts work includes engaging with the Colombian Forensic Institute on disseminating positive experiences through cross-regional and country-to-country sharing; providing support to ensure the continued inclusion of conflict-related sexual violence in the peace process.

² SRSR Report: Conflict Related Sexual Violence 2016

³ Team of Experts Annual Report 2015