

Building the City of Women: Creating a Site of Feminist Resistance in a Northern Colombian Conflict Zone

Abstract

Against all odds, in uncertain and violent times, Colombian women are mobilising for peace. They do so even when they face ongoing violence and personal threats from a variety of armed actors. Despite a well-established tradition of studying women's social movements in times of conflict, there is a lacuna when it comes to analysing feminism as a mobilisation strategy. This article uses the case study of the League of Displaced Women, the *Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas* (LMD) to illustrate the utility of Zulver's (2016) High Risk Feminism framework to explain *how* and *why* women chose to build the City of Women, despite the real and threatened danger that this implied. The article narrates the history of the LMD, from its foundations in a geography of marginality to its creation of a space of resistance for displaced women and their families. In all, this article demonstrates how feminist resistance has not only become a way of life for the women of the LMD, but also a strategy for creating pockets of safe places in the midst of a conflict zone.

Keywords: City of Women; Colombia; displaced women; feminist mobilisation; high risk feminism.

Colombian Women Constructing a Better Future

Colombia is currently in a state of flux, somewhere between an ongoing conflict and a nation in post-conflict, constructing a peace process. The 2016 Peace Accords signed by the government and the FARC-EP (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*, The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army) have established the conditions for ending the longest-running armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere. Despite this, the country has much to achieve before securing a lasting peace. As Palacios notes, there are multiple actors who have been involved in the Colombian conflict and who are responsible for an enormous and systematic violation of human rights that has left millions of victims who now demand reparation, truth, justice, and guarantees of non-

repetition (2016). The behemoth task of implementing the Peace Accords and improving the lives of the country's 8 million victims of the 54-year armed conflict remains (Amnesty International 2017).

The country's transitional justice project includes a variety of legal measures, which prominently feature reparation measures for millions of victims of displacement. Both the Law 1448 of 2011 (*Ley de Víctimas*, Victims' Law) and the Peace Accords establish access to reparations and other restitutive measures for victims of the conflict. It is widely agreed that women have suffered acutely from the conflict, and that their experiences must be addressed differentially to those of their male counterparts, as is recognized by both the academic literature (see Meertens, 2010) and the Colombia government (see Ministerio del Interior 2012). Indeed, Meertens discusses the *Auto 092* of 2008, a Constitutional Court Ruling that 'highlights the disproportionate impact of violence against women and called on the state to prevent gender-based – especially sexual – violence against women in conflict and during or after forced displacement' (2010, 155). The Peace Accords take a comprehensive gendered approach that recognises the unique ways violence impacts women. Moreover, the prior Victims' Law (2012) includes provisions for women's preferential attention when it comes to reparations (including access to judicial processes, land restitution, and access to land titles).

Despite these lofty aspirations and promising *de jure* provisions, this article will show that, for women, gaining *de facto* recognition and resources has been far from easy under circumstances of continuing violence, uncertainty and dissonance between what the government *says it will do* and what the government actually does. For example, the women of the LMD have still not received the collective reparations they are entitled to, despite qualifying for them in 2014 (see Zulver 2017). Furthermore, the enjoyment of formal rights and guarantees are not only hampered by state inaction but threatened by actions of violent non-state actors. As Grajales (2015, 541) notes, 'these formal rights suffer from prosaic,

underground and violent forms of reaction...often linked to paramilitary militias.' In that sense, remarkably little has changed from when Oslender (2004) wrote over a decade ago that communities in various regions of Colombia feel trapped between different violent actors, abandoned by the State, and without the means to protect themselves. Despite the Peace Process, the ongoing violence that women face in Colombia continues to render them vulnerable to multiple forms of marginalisation.

In the wake of the Peace Accords, violence in Colombia, its forms and perpetrators, may be changing, but it has not disappeared. Saab and Taylor (2009) note that against the background of the recent demobilisation of the paramilitaries, new emerging criminal bands (*bandas criminales*, BACRIM) have formed, looking to control lucrative illicit activities such as kidnapping, extortion, and drug-production and trafficking. Another guerrilla group, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) remains active in parts of the country (see Bargent, 2017; McDermott, 2014; Saab & Taylor, 2009). These violent non-state actors do not only fight over the power vacuum left behind by demobilising FARC forces, but there also seems to be specific targeting and killing of social activists (see Almonacid, 2017). In this context of continuing violence and perceived state absence, some Colombian women have taken it on themselves to construct a better future. Women who originally organised around a shared condition of victimhood now refer to themselves as survivors, and develop their identities as political activists (see Lemaitre Ripoll et al. 2014; Bergtora Sandvik and Lemaitre Ripoll 2015). They do so despite the continued dangers they face in their daily lives.

This article focuses on the League of Displaced Women (hereafter LMD) and their struggle to construct a more peaceful and secure existence in the midst of continuing violence. This article uses the case of the LMD to illustrate a wider phenomenon within the Colombian context, that of women employing specific mobilisational strategies in order to protect themselves from the dual threat of perceived absence of the state and continuing

threats by violent non-state actors. Specifically, the article retraces how and why the women of the LMD built a City of Women, as attempt to realise their desire for peace, and, retells the manifold challenges they faced along the way.

The LMD is an organisation of approximately 160 women who fled from their homes because of the armed conflict, and now live in the northern department of Bolívar. Homeless, and often newly widowed, these women arrived in Cartagena with their children, and found themselves the victims of new types of violence at the hands of other paramilitaries and gangs engaged in a power struggle within the city's marginalised neighbourhoods. Since 1998, these women have come together to build their dream of a dignified life, their *sueño de una vida digna* (the way that interviewees consistently refer to the housing project, and also the title of the Bergtora Sandvik et al., 2014 document). In doing so, they constructed the City of Women, the *Ciudad de las Mujeres*, a physical manifestation of their mobilisation. However, the city itself is more than a physical space to provide housing for displaced women; it is also a symbolic representation of their persistent agency that has strengthened the organisation. In particular, the City represents peaceful resistance to violence in the middle of a conflict zone.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE].

Methodologically, the article draws on extensive fieldwork with the LMD between July and November 2016, and initial interviews conducted in 2015. 55 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both leaders and rank and file members of the LMD. They are complemented by many hours of participant observation of the daily workings of the organizations, behind closed-door deliberations of its leadership and open organisation-wide meetings. To learn as much as possible about the lives and challenges of the women of LMD ethnographic methods were employed, spending time with various

women on public transport, at their homes, or at the LMD office. Considering the context of violence and sensitive nature of issues discussed, unless otherwise stated, the article omits names to protect participants' anonymity.

The article proceeds as follows to answer *how* and *why* LMD women chose to build the City of Women, despite the real and threatened danger this implied. First, it reviews the literature about women in conflict, transitional, and post-conflict contexts, highlighting the gap that emerges when it comes to explaining and documenting feminism as a mobilisation strategy. Second, the article introduces its theoretical framework, drawing on ideas of High Risk Feminism first outlined by Zulver (2016) in the context of El Salvador. Third, the article narrates the history of the LMD, from its foundations in a geography of marginality to its creation of a space of resistance for displaced women and their families. Fourth, it discusses the various layers of meaning that the City of Women represents for the LMD and how it resisted past and present threats to construct a more peaceful future. The conclusion draws the different strands of the discussion together and addresses problems that the City of Women still faces.

From Gendered Violence to Gendered Resistance to Violence

There is well-established academic tradition of studying issues of gender, violence and armed conflict. Cockburn (2013) outlines the myriad ways that conflict impacts women differently than men, and posits that concepts of security must also incorporate these differential experiences in order to secure lasting peace. El-Bushra and Gardner (2016, 444) highlight the importance of using a gendered frame of reference as 'gendered power relations illuminate understandings of conflict in important practical and theoretical ways.' Boesten and Wilding (2015, 2) refer to a 'consensus in feminist literature about the continuum of gender based violence: the idea that violence against women may take different forms and be of a different

scale during periods of conflict.’

In the Colombian context, Moser and Clark (2001) discuss the need for a gendered understanding of the nature of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. They note that ‘a gender perspective recognises that men’s and women’s experiences and actions during conflict are determined by gender roles and identities assigned by society’ (ibid., 30). Forced displacement has also been experienced differentially; as Meertens (2010, 154) notes in regards to the conflict in Colombia:

The armed conflict has had a considerable and disproportionate impact on women, as they suffer specific risks and confront specific vulnerability because of their gender. Examples include: forced displacement in conditions of marital abandonment or widowhood... gender-based violence and especially sexual violence by armed actors as a weapon of war.

Even in situations that are nominally designated as post-conflict there is a need to understand the ways that gender and violence interact. In her book on violence(s) in El Salvador, Hume develops a feminist standpoint ‘on the multiple aggressions that shape the “everyday”’ (2009, preface). Violent contexts are rife with power dynamics that often serve to subjugate the experiences or perceptions of women of their quotidian environment. In Hume’s view, any study of violence in El Salvador must reject the ‘notions of violence as removed from everyday power relations’ (ibid., 21). As she writes in her book:

Mainstream approaches to violence have failed to acknowledge or simply ignored the gendered politics of violence in both public and private realms. A key contention of a feminist approach has been that historical epistemologies of violence have been constructed on a reductionist and binary logic of exclusion/inclusion, with a clear distinction between what counts as violence and what does not, ignoring its important ideological and discursive dimensions (ibid, 4).

Negative peace, as in the absence of violence between the state and non-state actors that a

peace accord can achieve, then, does not necessarily translate to the absence of violence for women affected by violent 'everyday' social and power relations. As Boesten and Wilding (2015, 3) note: 'when everyday violence is ongoing and pervasive, formal 'peace' may provide no more security for women than societies experiencing political conflict...indicating an uncomfortable peace at best, or a continuation of war at home at worst.' For instance, Meertens (2010, 159) reports that even after the demobilisation of the paramilitaries in Colombia, women 'still experience threats to their human security, in their intimate (sexual violence), personal (assassinations), and organisation (persecution of female leaders) lives.' Despite superficial progress towards formal peace, an 'enormous security gap' persisted, meaning that the Colombian state was unable to uphold basic guarantees and the rule of law in the local settings in which many vulnerable women live (ibid.). Finally, it is important to note that women in Colombia do not experience violence *solely* as a result of having been displaced by armed groups, but also because of a patriarchal society in which women are subject to broader forms of violence on a daily basis (see Thomas 2017).

Building on this existing literature, the article articulates the idea, that Colombia, despite its recent peace process, is still in a state of pervasive violence and risk experienced in differential ways by marginalised groups such as displaced women. How such residents of a geography of marginalisation respond, resist and actively construct a space protected from pernicious forms of gender violence is the topic of the article. It is argued that the way in which women leverage their identity, draw on social ties and pursue strategic collective action as feminists in order to resist violence and construct peace has to be understood.

While there is also a literature that speaks to the ways that women can *actively* participate in forging peace in their daily environments, feminism as a mobilisational strategy is not widely theorised within the literature on women and conflict/post-conflict. Moosa, Rahmani, and Webster (2013) acknowledge that women have a unique ability to build peace at

local levels. Violence against women, then, poses a significant barrier to peace-building. Arostegui's article on gender, conflict, and peace-building notes that in the aftermath of conflict, women often become activists, and use these experiences to 'reshape societies, rewrite the rules, and advance women's rights' (2013, 535). She further proposes the idea that 'the trauma of the conflict experience also provides an opportunity for women to come together with a common agenda' (ibid.).

Despite this important strand of the literature, it is argued that a gap exists in the understanding of how women in post-conflict – but continuingly *high risk* – settings choose to come together in organisations to protect themselves. Recently authors have begun to pay attention to women's mobilization against violence as women. Speaking about the role of feminism in mobilising for peace Cockburn (2013, 445) notes:

Feminist activism for peace ... proposes a transformation of gender relations. Unless purposeful steps are taken to interrupt and change the social shaping of genders, the gender regime that emerges from war is likely in the short run to disturb the peace with continuing violence, and in the long run to maintain militarism and war-readiness.

Zulver (2016) further notes that in a context of high violence and in the absence of effective state measures for protection, women in El Salvador employ feminist mobilisation as a base by which to generate social ties that provide them with 'strength in numbers' that make them their own protagonists. She explains that women who live in locations of high risk '[create] opportunities and avenues for mobilisation in defence of their own safety and well-being' (ibid., 172), using a generalised collective, *feminist* identity.

This article builds on the High-Risk Feminism (HRF) Framework, first postulated in the context of women's mobilisation in post-conflict El Salvador (Zulver, 2016), by applying it to the case of the LMD. The following section will outline what this strategy looks like, and why it is appropriate to use it to analyse the tactics of the LMD.

The High Risk Feminism Framework: A Strategy of Resistance

Resistance in the case of the LMD is the act of rejecting the marginality caused by displacement and the resulting manifold forms of violence. Zulver's (2016) HRF approach explains that the successful employment of particular strategies by women allow them to mobilise as feminists to defend and secure rights, overcoming significant barriers in the process. Those strategies include: (1) collective identity creation, (2) social capital building, (3) (legal) framing, and (4) acts of certification. The rest of this section is dedicated to briefly outlining the component parts of HRF, before moving on to discuss how this framework can be used to describe the actions of the LMD in the pursuit of their dream for a dignified and peaceful life.

First, an understanding of how collective identity is created, and how it brings perceived utility to members has to be understood. Taylor and Whittier (1992) note that movements are able to establish consciousness by attaching meaning to their group affiliation and collective action. They further state that when examining any politicised identity community, it is necessary to analyse the social and political struggle that created this identity. In a context of high risk, participants unite *as women* and as feminists (whether self-defined or not), to draw attention to social injustices, and create a shared narrative of consciousness in an attempt to rectify these injustices.

Second, within this framework of identity creation and consciousness building, the idea of social capital is a further component part. For Moser (2001, 43), social capital is the 'rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity, and trust embedded in social relations... that enables its members to achieve their individual and community objectives.' The idea is that consciousness-building strategies employed by women's groups build social capital which helps 'connecting, empowering, and integrating people and organisations,' and can serve to

build communities that are resilient in the face of pervasive violence (Colletta & Cullen, 2000, 113). Participation in women's organisations builds social ties that provide material and immaterial benefits to the individuals and the organization.

Third, women have to frame their identities, grievances and demands to make them actionable. Framing serves a dual purpose, on the one hand, internally, to mobilise and build collective identities and social ties, and, on the other hand, externally, to make claims for goods, services, recognition and protections from a third party, such as the state. Snow et al. (1986) seek to explain support for and participation in social movement organisations by expanding on Goffman's idea of framing. Through frame alignment processes, they show the process of linking individual interests, values and beliefs such that they become compatible with an organisation's activities, goals and ideologies. For Goffman, a frame is a way for individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space (1959) (Snow et al. 1986, 464). In a high-risk context, the individual has reason to join a movement in which she feels that the collective identity offers some level of protection, despite the paradoxical fear that publicly mobilising may indeed bring a higher risk of violence. A second facet of framing involves thinking about and formulating demands in terms of legal action. By framing their grievances as illegal acts that are not being seriously considered by the law, women's organisations in contexts of severe violence against them are able to direct at least some of their mobilisation resources towards confronting a system that *should* be able to make a difference to the ways they experience violence and demanding remedies from the purportedly competent authorities.

Fourth, *certification* provides the 'action item' in the framework. This refers to the 'validation of actors, their performances, and their claims by external authorities' (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001, 145). For these authors, processes of certification explain why members of social movements spend energy in 'public affirmations of shared identities:

marching together, displaying shared symbols, acting out of solidarity' (ibid., 147). They explain that certification needs to be distinguished from ideas of the intrinsic value brought by social capital and collective identity. This sort of solidarity is in fact, is about making a successful claim of collective worthiness, of gaining recognition as a credible political player with the capacity to make a difference. As will be elaborated, examples of certification for the LMD can take the form of filing crimes or denouncing acts of violence – of making public the private suffering women have endured over the years. In terms of HRF, certification further addresses the question of why women participate despite the risks of doing so. Claiming a voice and a right to rights is a key factor in transforming a group from being politically and socially invisible, to being a legitimate force with which other actors (the state, institutions, individuals) will engage in dialogue. Certification provides an active way for women's organisations to continually define and redefine themselves in relation to their immediate perceived dangers, and make their identities public.

Zulver notes that her framework: '[gives] particular attention to the various forms of agency that women adopt, create, modify, and employ to counteract fragility in their daily lives' (2016, 172). The present article will apply the HRF framework to the case of the LMD in Colombia in order to shed light on why they chose to build a City of Women – a site of peaceful resistance – despite the risks involved in doing so. As well as providing a nuanced explanation of the actions of the LMD, the application of this framework further highlights its versatility in other contexts of high-risk.

The Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas

The following section provides empirical evidence on how the LMD has transformed its environment from a geography of marginalisation to a geography of resistance. The organisation has manipulated the spaces it physically occupies to create a safe place that

mitigates the risks of participating in a women's organisation in the midst of armed conflict. This section recounts the historical trajectory of the LMD, from members' experiences with displacement, to their resettlement in the City of Women, resistance to past and present forms of violence and struggle to construct not just a roof over their heads but a more peaceful community.

It is important to note that not all women in the LMD necessarily self-identify as feminists. Indeed Latin American women's movements have a long tradition of questioning and contesting (particularly Western, hegemonic) ideas of feminism (see Alvarez, 1999). Gargallo Celentani notes that women from different walks of life – particularly indigenous, women – may have multiple, intersecting, and diverse concepts of what concepts like empowerment, women's rights, or feminism(s) might mean. She highlights: 'there exist important lines of women's thinking that act in favour of women to better their life conditions, but reject... calling themselves feminists' (2012, 132). This article employs the term feminist not to designate the label used by women but rather the feminist dimension of their struggle: the effort to highlight gendered dimensions of violence and to secure a peace that seeks to ameliorate these. This concept is embodied in the comment made in an interview:

There are a variety of concepts of feminism... [in the City], there are women who say, "Yes, we are feminists." There are others who say "no." We support the rights of women... the organisation itself has feminism as its very essence.

Regardless of the label attached to it, the actions of the women of the LMD have the overarching goals of changing the ways society conceives of gender, and are thus engaging in *feminist actions*.

Displacement and Arrival in El Pozón

Colombia has one of the highest internally displaced populations in the world, with more than six million displaced people who in their majority (53 per cent) are female (IDMC, 2016). As mentioned above, however, women experience marginality differently than men.

Interviewees are often quick to recount their stories of displacement from various areas in rural sectors of the north of the country to vulnerable urban neighbourhoods. One interviewee discussed being displaced multiple times, and widowed twice. Originally from Valledupar, she moved to Cartagena with her children and without any money when her husband was murdered, and settled in El Pozón. Another woman and her husband – now both residents of the City of Women – discuss being present at the massacre at El Salado. Considered one of the worst massacres of the conflict, in 2000 the town witnessed paramilitary torture, sexually assault, and kill more than 100 local people. A third woman tells the story of having to spend every night staying at a different friend's house, so that armed actors could not find and kill her while she slept. A resident of Carmen de Bolívar, she was targeted by armed groups for being a community leader.

Such anecdotes are unfortunately common among the women who have been displaced and now reside in the City of Women. Their exact experiences are distinct, but the reality itself is constant. Women (and their families) were forced to pack up what they could, and flee their homes at a moment's notice. Victims of displacement often arrived at El Pozón, a marginalised area on the outskirts of Cartagena. They fled from 'guerrillas, paramilitaries, hit-men, social cleansing, forced recruitment, child prostitution, and family violence' (Bergtora Sandvik et al., 2014, 14). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the slum was accordingly a place of 'necessity and anguish, with poor families displaced by the violence arriving daily' (ibid., 15).

The word *pozón* refers to a large well, or water source. The name is apt in the case of this neighbourhood; interviewees recount stories of waking up during the rainy season to find the house had flooded during the night. The walls of the temporary structures were made of cardboard, corrugated metal or plastic, or wooden pallets. Unsurprisingly, these materials would rot over time, leading to the disintegration of structures, and further exposure to the coastal weather. They were unable to store food, and engaged in a constant struggle to keep their mattresses dry.

For displaced women and children, El Pozón also represented a space of lawlessness – there was little police presence, and interviewees spoke about experiencing break-ins, robberies, threats, and various violent encounters with regularity. Far from constituting a safe space, the neighbourhood was overrun with common delinquency that ranged from theft and vandalism to physical harm and sexual abuse. While interviewees are usually reticent to talk about *who* constituted criminal elements, reading between the lines can infer that women were threatened by paramilitary factions and their successors, the BACRIM. Interviewees recount being physically and sexually abused in the neighbourhood.

Conditions in the slum put women in situations of extreme vulnerability. Poor security, as well as risks of natural threats like floods and heavy rains left women and their families at constant risk of physical danger. Moreover, the slum often did not have basic services like water, electricity, sewage, and medical attention (ibid., 19). The life of a displaced woman in El Pozón in the late 1990s was nothing short of precarious. While there were some existing women's self-help groups in the community, these were limited by a lack of resources, as well as tensions with other, male-led organisations (which were unable to operate on the basis that women experience conflict differently from men).

The Roots of the LMD: Building Collective Identity in a Displaced Community

One of the original leaders tells the story of the first action taken by the group that would go on to become the LMD. In El Pozón there was a group of eight women who met regularly to share food in a communal kitchen, an *olla comuna*. This way, each woman would contribute what she had, and could guarantee that there would be some nutritional variety in what she and her children ate. From there, collective action expanded beyond food to other areas of daily life. For example, the women organised themselves to pool resources to get a member of the collective to the clinic when she fell ill, and to buy her a coffin when she later died. As one of the members stated: ‘For us, this was an incredibly sad moment... and the first [conscious] action we took as a collective was to find a coffin so that we could give our *compañera* a proper burial.’ This event, interviewees recounted, consolidated their understanding of their shared situation of vulnerability, and brought them closer together as an informal support system. This is akin to Jokela-Pansini’s observation (in the case of women human rights defenders in Honduras) that: ‘the activist’s emotional connectedness with the network and its practices...is essential for constructing collective identities (2016, 1475).

It was in 1998 that Patricia Guerrero, a feminist lawyer from Bogotá, arrived in El Pozón. Through her connections with a local female religious leader, she was able to make the acquaintance of the group of the local women who had come together to bury their neighbour. Guerrero began to have conversations with this group about the specific way they experienced the situation of displacement as women. This discourse was appealing to the women involved, as the gendered particularities of conflict, displacement, and resettlement were ignored by the other existing social organisations. The idea of a women’s only organisation was particularly appealing – it consolidated a collective identity that allowed women to feel that they were not alone in their situation of displacement. As the group began

to meet more regularly, word of mouth in El Pozón meant that numbers of participants began to increase. Interviewees talk about the relief of realising that their situation was not unique, and that other women were having the same struggles as they were. They found solidarity in shared experiences, and were attracted to the meetings to give meaning to their daily hardships in the slum.

The first years of the LMD were focused on consciousness creation, the building of mutual confidence, and collective identity creation. Guerrero spent time educating the women about their human rights, their rights as women, and their rights as victims. Group membership expanded over time, increasing to other nearby slum communities, including another settlement of displaced people in nearby Turbaco. They had their first *encuentro* (gathering) in 2001, in which workshops about human rights continued building a collective consciousness.

It was also in 2001, however, that ‘as the group was consolidating its identity’ (Bergtora Sandvik et al., 2014, 18) they began to receive their first threats from paramilitary groups. Unknown perpetrators raped two members of the LMD, and some of the women’s sons were forcibly recruited as child soldiers. More than one interviewee has mentioned these threats from armed groups in El Pozón. Groups would send pamphlets and make threatening phone calls to members of the LMD. One interviewee recounts: ‘they told us that they were going to ‘disappear’ us... as we were forming as a group, gaining consciousness, and empowering ourselves about our rights... we became a stone in their shoes.’

By this time, however, collective identity building was well underway, as emphasised in an interview: ‘we didn’t want to faint... we wanted to keep going! We knew that together, united we could achieve anything... because we were many victims together.’ It was in this context that the women began to dream about a dignified life, a life free from the multiple

sources of marginality that threatened their day-to-day existence. Another interviewee adds: ‘When we started to talk, we realised that each of us wasn't alone. This is something crucial, fundamental ... it was the process that gave the organisation its strength’ (quoted in Thomas Davis & Zulver, 2015).

Sueño de Vida Digna: Building a City of Women to Fulfil the Dream of a Dignified Life

In 2003, while in the United States, Guerrero made the acquaintance of Senator Patrick Leahy, whose support led to the bestowal of a USAID grant to build sustainable housing for the members of the LMD. Interviewees corroborate: ‘when *la Doctora* [Guerrero] came back from Washington, we had a meeting all together. She told us the surprise, and we cried with happiness. We had the initial drop [in the bucket] to start with a housing project.’ Ownership of one’s own house represented a possibility to overcome the vulnerabilities of living in precarious shelters in El Pozón. Moreover, owning the deed to one’s own home eliminated the threat of eviction by a landlord for not being able to pay the rent.

In a video about the project, Patricia Guerrero says ‘for the women, their house is an extension of their body’ (Señal Colombia, 2013). What she means by this is that a house is more than just a four-walled dwelling. In the context of displacement, owning a real house means giving back a piece of life that was stolen by armed groups. It establishes a level of normalcy for victims and their families. It represents their ability to survive displacement and take back a level of personal dignity that comes with home ownership.

In 2004, the process of building the City of Women began in full force. Before beginning construction, the women had to apply for government subsidies (the USAID grant provided money that counted as ‘personal savings’, but the women still needed to apply for housing subsidies from the Colombian government to generate the necessary funds for

building). This is consistent with a legal framing strategy – that women were able to apply via legal channels to receive monies they were owed is consistent with the tenets of HRF. 159 women completed the procedure for the government subsidy, and on 5 November 2004, 98 women were selected to receive the funds. From January 2004 to March 2005, the women constructed the City, a process that involved building the blocks to sell to the construction company, cultivating and preparing food to sell to the builders who helped with construction, and generating a credit fund for micro-loans.

The process of construction was an act of resistance in itself. The general contractor initially did not want women to be involved in the building process (pouring cement, building bricks, etc.), as he considered this men's work. Eventually, however, the women were able to secure their participation. Constructing the houses meant more than an albeit important roof over their heads, but also (re)constructing peace and a dignified life. As the Sueño de Vida Digna document (2014) notes: 'the theme of housing for these women is not just a theme of richness or poverty, but one with an important symbolic dimension.'

'Success and Threats go Hand in Hand': How to Move Beyond Fear

Despite the successes of their construction project, the women of the LMD were still not free from threats. In order to intimidate the women, cars filled with unknown men frequently drove around the neighbourhood, taking photos. In the wake of the demobilisation of the paramilitaries in 2005, BACRIM (criminal gangs) 'declared the "stupid women organisers" a military target, and ... threatened the women with sexual violence' (Thomas Davis and Zulver 2015). As explained by Saab and Taylor (2009), this behaviour is consistent with BACRIM fighting for control in marginalised neighbourhoods. Mobilising and empowered women threatened their project of dominance (ibid.).

The violence came to a head in May 2005 when Don Julio, the husband of one of the LMD members, was murdered while guarding the women's cement brick factory overnight. Some of the LMD left the City, fearing for their lives. Those who stayed discuss this event as a breaking point in the LMD; those who stayed 'created mutual strength' among them (Bergtora Sandvik et al., 2014, 27).

One interviewee emphasises:

This was one of the events that actually strengthened me. I did not have a house, and I had to believe in what we were doing. They [the armed group] wanted to destroy us, to undo our structure... that we would splinter, and that the organisation would go away. They wanted to finish us. We were able to move forward, though.

Another recounts:

We had a dream of building dignified housing, and the organisation, together, was able to achieve this. Yes, I was very scared. In fact, in some of the days following the murder of Don Julio I didn't come to work... but eventually I returned. The idea is to fight, to resist. Simona [Julio's wife] told us "my husband and I fought for this project. They want us to stop, to end this dream that we have. But they are not going to stop us...we have to move forward, united." And this gave us the force to continue.

Despite consistent death threats and further disappearances, the women continued to live in the City. It was in 2007 that a group of unknown men burned down the community centre. Long-time donor agencies provided the funds for the women to rebuild the centre, which has now been named the Heart of the City of Women.

When finished, the City consisted of 98 houses, each 78m², covering five blocks. Half an hour outside the city limits of Cartagena, in the municipality of Turbaco, the City has electricity, water, and sewage. The houses legally belong to the women, although men and children also live in the City.

The construction process was an act of resistance consistent with High Risk Feminism. The risks of building the City were real. The belief that the 'pain of one was the pain of all' (quoted in Thomas Davis & Zulver, 2015), however, allowed the women to continue. The HRF framework allows us to analyse women as both victims and protagonists, residents of geographies of marginalisation, and creators of geographies of resistance. The story of the LMD is one of resistance – the women stood up against the experience of displacement, against the various sources of marginality and insecurity in El Pozón, against the lack of state support or protection, and against the threats and acts of aggression carried out by paramilitaries and BACRIM. Against all odds, participants built a City of Women, which for them represents a geography of resistance. They did so via a narrative based in feminist values, as has been elaborated via their creation of collective identity and social capital, and strategic use of framing and certification. In such a way, HRF has utility in explaining how and why these women choose to mobilise despite the risks this entails.

The City of Women as Peaceful Resistance

As this article has outlined, the City of Women is far more than just a physical city. It is an attitude, and an act of certification. The women of the LMD engage in High Risk Feminism as a strategy; spending time with one of the leaders of the LMD highlighted the frequency with which she referred to the organisation's own brand of peaceful resistance. When asked what she meant by this, she replied:

Peaceful resistance is the strength that we have as women. Despite so much pain, so many violations, so much damage, the voice of us women has always survived. We have decided not to silence ourselves. [Together, we] decided to implement a strategy, an agenda of justice, where we will denounce crimes. [This strategy also means] that we have to stay united ...and demand our rights.

Another interviewee was even clearer about what she meant by peaceful resistance:

The act of building a city in the middle of an [armed group] controlled zone is an act of peaceful resistance. Especially despite the threats, especially as Don Julio was killed here. Despite all of that, we used our voices and our actions to build peace in the middle of a war... Living in the City of Women is a sign of hope for the rest of Colombia.

The High Risk Feminism of the LMD: Resistance in the Face of Violence

The four elements of the HRF theoretical framework outlined above (collective identity, social capital, (legal) framing, and certification) can be productively applied to the case of the LMD to make sense of its struggle to resist its geography of marginality and violence and construct the City of Women.

In regards to drawing on a learned repertoire of action developed through repetition and learning what works and what does not, Patricia Guerrero discusses the way that the LMD repeats actions to achieve results:

To get anything, anything at all, you have to fight for it - fight with sit-ins, fight by knocking on their doors. You knock on the door, they open it, they close it in your face, you knock again, they open it, they close it in your face again, you knock on the door, they open it, you push it open (Thomas Davis and Zulver 2015).

For Guerrero and the women of the LMD, the ability to participate in these learned patterns of behaviour is, at times, exhausting, but they continue in the knowledge that in the past such determination has proved efficacious, and that (despite having to deal with rejection) are still feasible in contemporary conditions.

Concerning the centrality of the formation of a shared identity, it is instructive how the role of women as protagonists is constructed. In a regional meeting organised by the LMD, the Director of Social Development for the Department of Bolívar said in a keynote speech: 'we have to recognise ourselves in each other's stories... we [women] need to be the protagonists of the [Peace Process].' Another keynote speaker finished her speech with the

refrain: 'we need to construct peace with a woman's face.' In gaining a collective identity, women of the LMD weave together stories of victimisation and stories of resistance to create a narrative that unites them in their struggle.

That the social ties, bonds of solidarity and sharing of past and present experiences provide women in the LMD with a sense of belonging but also more tangible benefits was affirmed by one interviewee who describes how she became involved in the LMD. She noted that before joining the organisation she did not know that as a displaced person she had special victims' rights. Participation in group meetings reinforced her understanding that 'each person alone wasn't going to achieve anything,' and that in order to effectively protect herself she would benefit from being part of an organisation.

The organisational and mobilisational resources of the LMD were not only used internally but to more effectively demand assistance from a state, most notable in its absence. Focusing framing their demands in legal terms, one arm of the LMD is dedicated to filing claims regarding collective reparations against the state. From 2006 to 2009, the women documented and compiled 159 instances of their members' experiences of displacement and violence and filed these with the Public Prosecutor's Office. Furthermore, in 2010, the LMD filed a complaint of impunity with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) against the Colombian state.

Finally, certification provides the women of the LMD with a 'call to action,' to draw attention to their situation and redefine themselves and their situation not simply as passive victims but active protagonists in constructing their lives to keep their pasts of conflict, violence and displacement from repeating itself. As one interviewee put it:

We were the victims of forced displacement and of the country's armed conflict. As a result of being resettled, organised, and trained, we have been the victims of various

other acts of violence that have impacted us as an organisation. But we continue to resist, and we continue to organise. To continue denouncing everything that happens to us is a way of preparing ourselves...making public everything that happens to us is still clouded by impunity, but it makes us resistant... because we know that if we keep quiet, things will get worse.

Based on these actions, experiences, and accounts retold in interviews, it is argued that the LMD engaged in High Risk Feminism as a strategy for constructing peace in the middle of a high-risk setting. This peace is internal – the knowledge that being part of a collective distributes the way that one assesses risk. It is also physical – having a house to call one's own and to shelter one's family is key to re-establishing the dignity that was stolen via the act of forced displacement. From collective identity building in El Pozón, to capitalising on the individual and collective benefits of social capital, to learning to frame their conditions of marginality as illegal, to building an actual city (the ultimate act of certification), the women of the LMD have resisted and rejected their condition of being victims. They are the protagonists in their own lives, and they rely on each other to overcome the daily struggles associated with forced displacement. The City is a beacon of hope for the women of the LMD.

Continued Marginality in the City, Continued Resistance of its Inhabitants

Despite the undoubtable progress made, life in the City is not necessarily without struggle for the women of the LMD. Turbaco – the municipality in which the City is located – remains violent. As mentioned, paramilitaries and their successors have had a monopoly on economic and social power since the early 2000s. Moreover, the suburb exists in a strategic location for narco trafficking – with close access to the Bay of Cartagena. The demobilisation of the paramilitaries during the 2005 Law of Justice and Peace involved the return of many young men to Turbaco who had been involved in paramilitary organisations, augmenting the

feelings of insecurity in the neighbourhood. Interviewees note that while threats from armed groups have diminished in recent months, they are still not free from violence and re-victimisation processes.

Incidents like this lead the women to comment that their dream of a dignified life is not yet complete. Aside from direct violations of their safety, the women continue to face the vulnerabilities that come from a lack of financial security. While they own their houses, the ability to earn enough income to pay for food and bills (water, electricity, gas) is far from guaranteed. They do not have affordable transportation, nor do they have access to health care. Moreover, despite years of legal actions, the LMD have still not secured the collective reparations to which they are legally entitled.

Feminist Mobilisation as Peaceful Resistance

This article applies the High Risk Feminism framework to the case of the resistance of the *Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas* to past and present marginalisation and victimisation to show why and how women continue to mobilise despite the risks this involves.

The LMD is a *feminist* attempt to make society less violent for women specifically. That is, the strategy of coming together in organisations is a form of resistance – concerted effort to build a shield of social capital that may militate against the mental and social deleterious effects of pervasive violence against women. As women adopt a feminist identity, they begin to encourage others to organise as a function of being women living in high-risk conditions who want to change the gender relations in society. Such organisation fortifies the protective functions of social capital by adding strength in numbers. Forming a community group and giving value to collective identity can be seen as an insurgent act – an act that makes a demand for physical security, for gender security, and for rights writ large. In turn, these groups can engage in certification techniques, acts that involve assuming risks given the

violent context, but which also have the potential to establish a certain level of legitimacy as actors on a public stage, further encouraging even more women to join.

While there is ample literature about the role of women in conflict and women in post-conflict contexts, not just as passive victims of violence but protagonists and agents of peace, there is a gap when it comes to examining women's use of feminism in their mobilisation. The City of Women represents a form of peaceful resistance based on a reaffirmation of feminist identity both in spite and because of a context of high risk and pervasive violence; from a place where women were marginalised on a daily basis, the City was built as a geography of resistance against the myriad intersections of violence they face.

Despite manifold setbacks and obstacles, the women of the LMD maintain that it is better to use their collective voice than it is to be quiet. Resistance – in the form of High Risk Feminism – has not only become a way of life, but it is the strategy for creating pockets of safe places in the midst of a conflict zone. At the end of one interview, upon being asked what she envisaged in the future of the LMD, the interviewee replied: 'Now we have a *voice*. What we built has a weight... It gives us force. A woman working by herself doesn't have the same result as working in a group – a group of feminists... this gives us force.'

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Notes on Contributor

Julia Zulver is working on her doctoral research under the supervision of Professor Leigh Payne at the University of Oxford. Her doctoral thesis examines women's mobilisation in Latin America, with a focus on Colombia. The thesis aims to test and refine the parameters of High Risk Feminism (HRF),

an original framework with the potential to shed light on the lived experiences of women living in conditions of high risk, and how and why they mobilise. She can be contacted at julia.zulver@sant.ox.ac.uk.

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