

How the Global Pandemic Intensifies Vulnerabilities for Colombia's Women Social Leaders

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Women social leaders in Colombia say that the biggest danger posed by the global pandemic comes not from contracting the virus, but rather from non-state armed groups taking advantage of the quarantine to violently pursue social and territorial control. This article details three phenomena that highlight how existing vulnerabilities for women social leaders have been sharpened by the global pandemic: (a) women's community work increases while state and institutional support decrease; (b) armed groups' ability to target violence increases while women's ability to self-protect decreased; and (c) armed groups' ability to act with impunity is increasing as access to justice is limited.

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Women social leaders in rural Colombia say that the biggest danger posed by the global pandemic is not contracting the virus itself (Zulver, 2020). Rather, COVID-19 presents a threat that highlights and intensifies the gendered precarity of the spaces they occupy. As the government rapidly enforced a strict quarantine on 24 March 2020, it concurrently withdrew much of its presence from rural parts of the country, as did national and international humanitarian organisations. Armed groups have taken advantage of this opportunity to expand their social and territorial control, particularly in areas of strategic value to illegal economies (El Espectador, 2020; Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2020; Janetsky and Faiola, 2020).

Rural parts of the country have witnessed ongoing violence against the civilian population, new incidents of forced displacement and confinement, and heightened opposition to forced eradication of illicit crops. Although these patterns 'are not new and cannot be attributed to COVID-19, it is impossible to ignore that they are occurring in this context' (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2020). Moreover, since 2016, the country has been plagued by the killing of hundreds of social leaders (Prem et al., 2018; INDEPAZ, 2019), which has increased during the lockdown (El Tiempo, 2020). In the midst of these dynamics, it is important to apply a gender lens to reveal how, in particular, women social leaders are affected.

The pandemic throws into stark relief the gendered power dynamics that govern the territories in which women social leaders operate. They have seen their work increase, as they scramble to meet the humanitarian needs of their communities; this requires

exposing themselves to violence at the hands of armed groups who do not look kindly upon community organising that challenges their authority. Moreover, specifically *women* social leaders are seen as transgressing the masculinist social norms by which armed groups govern their territories.

This article makes the argument that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated women's existing vulnerabilities in Colombia's post-accord context, noting that women also suffer as a result of intersecting identities, including race and ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and geography. The research is based on nine unstructured phone interviews with existing contacts living in rural Nariño, Putumayo, and Norte de Santander, conducted in April and May 2020. The research forms part of a larger agenda about women's high-risk leadership in Latin America.

Figure 1 identifies three concurrent phenomena that reveal how existing risk factors and vulnerabilities for women social leaders in Colombia have been intensified by the global pandemic: (a) women's community work has increased while state and institutional support have decreased; (b) armed groups' ability to target violence increases while women's ability to self-protect has decreased; and (c) armed groups have an increased ability to act with impunity as access to justice is limited. In what follows, I detail how each of these phenomena contributes to intensifying the existing risks of lethal and non-lethal violence for women social leaders in Colombia.

Figure 1. How Women Leaders' Existing Risk Factors have been Intensified by the Global Pandemic



Source: created by the author.

State and Institutional Support Decreases and Community Work Increases

Colombia's quarantine reduced the state's capacity to provide essential services to the population, particularly in rural areas already characterised by limited state presence, insufficient infrastructure (such as hospitals and roads), and sparse access to public services: 'if it is difficult for the state to arrive in a "normal situation", during COVID-19 its absence and weakness is all the more noticeable' (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2020).

It is in these rural areas that women social leaders' community work has increased. In our conversations, women social leaders described how they are conducting informal censuses to assess needs, organising and delivering humanitarian aid such as food and supplies, and mobilising their communities to make demands on the government. They noted that they feel pressured because many of them now represent the only source of support for increasingly vulnerable populations facing a loss of income. One woman living in a rural community near the Venezuelan border told me that although the government is sending cash transfers, none of the women in the community group she leads were able to access this money, as the chosen wire service does not have branches in the region.

There are other examples in Latin American history of women mobilising to take care of practical needs, like food, in their communities. The community kitchens in Peru and Bolivia in the 1980s were stark reminders that the state was not meeting the material needs of vulnerable women (Schroeder, 2006). In the current Colombian context, however, this increased and public community engagement has the added risk of exposing women social leaders to violence at the hands of armed groups who actively discourage cohesion. Their increased visibility during the pandemic means that armed groups find it easier to locate and use violence against them (Parkin Daniels, 2020; Zulver, 2020).

Ability to Self-Protect Decreases as Armed Groups Can Better Target Violence

The case of Carlota Isabel Salinas Pérez in Bolívar department is illustrative of this phenomenon; a leader of a local women's organisation, she had been collecting funds to buy humanitarian supplies on the day she was assassinated outside her house by armed groups, on 24 March 2020 (Front Line Defenders, 2020). Her murder highlights another dynamic that increases women's vulnerabilities during the pandemic: their ability to self-protect is decreased. Women leaders in Colombia have long developed protocols to ensure their security. My previous research with women's organisations has highlighted that they do not see the state security provided through the National Protection Unit as sufficient to meet their protection needs. They are accustomed, therefore, to creating context-specific risk assessments that allow them to move around rural parts of the country (Zulver, forthcoming).

Strategies include lowering their profile by not wearing identifying clothing, not working in public spaces, and taking different routes when they travel. They also create networks between grassroots women's groups, supportive state institutions, and international organisations. However, when the state and humanitarian organisations largely vacate the territories, this leaves women unable to implement such strategies. They cannot travel accompanied by allies, their ability to maintain a low profile is limited by quarantine requirements, and they are forced to stay in their homes more. A woman leader in the south of the country said: 'If you stay in your house, they come to your door, call your name, and kill you right there ... the state offers us no protection' (Zulver, 2020).

Access to Justice Decreases and Ability to Act with Impunity Increases

I have suggested elsewhere that the violence women social leaders face at the hands of armed groups is an example of ‘patriarchal backlash’, whereby they are punished for their engagement in activities that include facilitating other women’s economic empowerment, encouraging the reporting of gendered crimes, and supporting the peace process. Such activities are seen as transgressing the gendered social norms that underpin the militarised masculinities of non-state armed groups (Zulver, forthcoming).

The pandemic has created a context where there is decreased access to justice, particularly in rural areas. Practically speaking, as the state withdraws its territorial presence, and mobility has been restricted by quarantine, women leaders have been unable to report threats and crimes, including those related to patriarchal backlash. As local justice offices close, mobile justice units stop visiting rural areas, and women leaders could no longer travel to urban centres to denounce crimes, armed groups were aware that they could act with heightened impunity. The pandemic – and the resulting lack of access to justice – therefore offers further insights into the nuances of women social leaders’ specific vulnerabilities and security needs in the context of a reconfigured armed conflict.

Conclusion

This article offers empirically grounded arguments to demonstrate the heightened threats to women’s safety and security in Colombia during the lockdown. The abrupt withdrawal of the minimal support structures available to women social leaders makes clear the magnitude of the risks that they face in territories controlled by armed groups. Both during and in the aftermath of the pandemic, women social leaders working in ongoing conflict contexts like Colombia require the guaranteed support, protection, and resources of international humanitarian and development organisations, state institutions, and national and international civil society organisations. At a policy level, it is critical to engage with women social leaders’ contextualised and gender-specific vulnerabilities – and what inclusive peace and security would meaningfully entail – or else run the risk of exposing them to unacceptable and increasing levels of risk.

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