

RED FLAG

REPORT ON SOCIAL LEADERSHIP IN COLOMBIA
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



A PROJECT BY MENSEN MET EEN MISSIE & FEDERICO RÍOS

INTRODUCTION



THE RED FLAG BECAME A SYMBOL THAT INDICATES THE NEED FOR HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE IN COVID-19 TIMES. IT REPRESENTS A CRY FOR HELP OF THOUSANDS OF FAMILIES IN COLOMBIA TO THEIR STATE OR COMMUNITY.



For vulnerable communities in Colombia, the consequences of the mandatory COVID-19 quarantine are immense. This is especially the case for people in precarious health conditions and people facing a humanitarian crisis due to a sudden termination of their incomes. Moreover, afro-descendant and indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by this crisis. Historically, these groups have had less opportunities and access to quality education, health services, housing and food. Consequently, the measures taken in relation to COVID-19 result in revictimization and an increased vulnerability of these communities.

This pandemic also results in a challenging context for those who lead peace processes in their community: social leaders and human right defenders. They are facing life threatening situations. Since the beginning of this year, 112 social leaders and human rights defenders have been assassinated, 35 of them during the quarantine (Indepaz, 28 March 2020). Almost 40% of them are indigenous and afrodescendants.

Besides that, sexual and domestic violence against women is rising. There has been an alarming increase of life threatening incidents against women, from 32 calls in 2019 to 209 during this quarantine (Violentadas en cuarentena, 19 de mayo 2020).

A similar situation is occurring in human trafficking. In the first five months of 2020, 20 cases of female victims of human trafficking were registered, of which 15 are Venezuelan migrants (in comparison: in 2019, the total number was 12).

This report aims at illustrating the importance of the role of (female, indigenous and Afro-Colombian) social leaders in Colombia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following topics are highlighted:

1. The increase of gender based violence, particularly sexual and domestic violence and human trafficking.
2. The absent, limited or malfunctioning assistance from the state in vulnerable urban and suburban neighbourhoods, where many (displaced) indigenous and afro Colombian communities live who are and have been victims of the armed conflict.
3. The limited support to local peacebuilding networks in Afro Colombian and indigenous communities and the insufficient prevention of the assassination of (female) social leaders.

This project is developed by Mensen met een Missie, in collaboration with photojournalist Federico Rios, and the Colombian civil society organizations Sercoldes, Asociación Codo a Codo, La Pastoral Afrocolombiana de Cali, la Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC) desde la Consejería de Mujer, Familia y Generación, Corporación Espacios de Mujer y Corporación Amiga Joven.



SHARING A HOUSE WITH YOUR AGGRESSOR

Female social leaders avoiding feminicides in Soacha, Bogotá

Women living in Soacha are greatly affected by COVID-19. Before the pandemic, many of them went out to work and earn a daily income. Now they are forced to stay home, with no income and the daily threat of living together with their aggressor. This generates situations of psychological, physical, sexual and emotional violence.

The abuse has increased significantly during the quarantine. We have to abide to what our husband says, otherwise we are in trouble. We, as female leaders, have learned to be autonomous and not enter into submissive roles, but when we say no to our aggressors, we are violated.”

Zoraya Garzón, May 4, 2020



Zoraya Garzón decided to be a social leader 17 years ago. In 2014, she was threatened and persecuted by urban paramilitary groups, who wanted to capture and recruit her 20-year old daughter.



Since the quarantine, the exact number of women who are at risk of experiencing domestic violence, is unknown. Clemencia López Ríos, feminist and human rights defender since 21 years, created a safehouse for women called Ernestina Parra. Together with Zoraya and the female social leaders movement of Soacha, she gives legal and psychological support to female victims of gender based violence. During the pandemic, she provides on-line psychological support to avoid feminicides.



The violence generated during a paramilitary attack in Altos de Cazucá 21 years ago, in Soacha, motivated Clemencia to adopt a leadership role. As a result of this, she had to leave her house due to threats against her life and that of her family.

The evolving humanitarian crisis around COVID-19 has a major impact on the lives of women in many different ways. In Altos de Florida there are 2,500 families in need of humanitarian aid. But aid from the municipality is only given to those who own a house.

Yet, there are many women who only rent a room. For those women there are absolutely no guarantees of receiving the humanitarian aid they need. That is why Zoraya, together with the Assembly of Women of Soacha, presented a petition to the local government for the re-examination of the humanitarian aid distribution in Soacha.



“In this neighborhood, the myth exists that families living in brick houses do not need help, but many of these people are without work and daily sustenance, as they have only informal jobs and live from day to day.”

Zoraya Garzón, May 4, 2020





The house of Zoraya Garzón's mother has become a central place for the delivery of food supplies and humanitarian aid during COVID-19. Her leadership has resulted in access to humanitarian aid for almost all women of Soacha, who come to receive their aid package at the house in the Julio Rincón neighborhood, comuna 4.



SURVIVING WITHOUT ANY INCOME

Indigenous resistance in urban jungles

During the armed conflict, people of 19 different indigenous communities from all over Colombia were forced to flee to large cities like Bogotá. There, they face great challenges in their political organization, the conservation of their traditional culture and access to housing, education, reparation and non-repetition.

To women of the Eperara community from the Pacific Cauca region, like social leader Imelda Perdiaga, traditional handicrafts have become a main source of income for their families. Nevertheless, the pandemic has made it incredibly difficult for them to survive. Being female, indigenous and victim of the armed conflict living in an urban setting, they have almost no access to other job opportunities, emergency aid or support regarding gender based violence.

"During this pandemic, indigenous women are completely forgotten by the Colombian state. Cases of indigenous women who are victims of domestic violence stay invisible — often because we speak our own language - we have the limitation of not speaking in the 'correct' way."

Imelda Perdiaga, May 4, 2020



Her previous experience in leading her community, gave her the opportunity to become the leader (Gobernadora Indígena) of her people in Bogotá, representing her community, before the Colombian State and other indigenous communities.



Since her arrival in Bogotá, Imelda has led peace processes and fought for the visibility of indigenous women in urban contexts.

HISTORICAL NEGLECT OF AFRO- COLOMBIAN COMMUNITIES BY THE STATE

Leaders providing humanitarian and spiritual support in the suburbs of Cali

In the current situation, the challenges for Father Venanzio Mwangi, social and spiritual leader of the Afro-Colombian Pastoral from Cali, and his team, are immense.

Due to the armed conflict, many Afro-Colombian communities from the Pacific Region were forced to flee to cities like Cali. Here they are again confronted with (drug related) violence, marginalization and neglect, resulting in limited access to education, housing and healthcare. The discrimination they face also generates challenges for the (re)construction of historic memory, trauma healing and appreciation of the afro culture, spirituality and beliefs.





The Mojica neighborhood, commune 15 in Cali, was built to consolidate an irrigation district that supplied the city with raw materials for the industry. It became the home of families who are victims of displacement from rural areas such as Valle del Cauca, Chocó, Nariño and Norte del Cauca.



For more than 500 years, ever since the afro Colombians arrived on this continent, the state has neglected them and treated them as second rate citizens. This neglect is again exposed because of the humanitarian health crisis caused by COVID-19.



Mojica or "The void", as they call it, is one of the red zones because of the alarming increase of COVID-19 cases. This neighbourhood is overcrowded and many people are facing hunger. The Afro-Colombian communities have to debate whether to distribute food among pregnant women, children or elderly people first.



Since his arrival from Kenya to Colombia, 18 years ago, Father Venanzio has worked to strengthen the social fabric of Afro-Colombian communities. Dominant “westernized” cultures form an imminent challenge to their cultural identity, their ancestral values and their own traditions and customs.



HEALING OF STRESS AND ANXIETY IN TIMES OF THE QUARANTINE IN PALMIRA

Female Afro-Colombian leaders face anxiety utilizing their ancestral knowledge

Limited opportunities and access to decent employment, along with the mandatory measures and social distancing, has generated an increase in mental illness, stress, anxiety and depression among the Afro-Colombian people in Palmira.

Marciana Lerma de Sanchez, 87 years old, is expert in herbs and local knowledge of the Cauca Pacific. Together with her daughter she lives in quarantine; they are far away from their native territory in Guapi. The strict isolation measures and closure of national borders are preventing her from returning home to her herbs.



"Our spirituality gives the strength to
transform reality."
Marciana Lerma de Sánchez, May 5, 2020



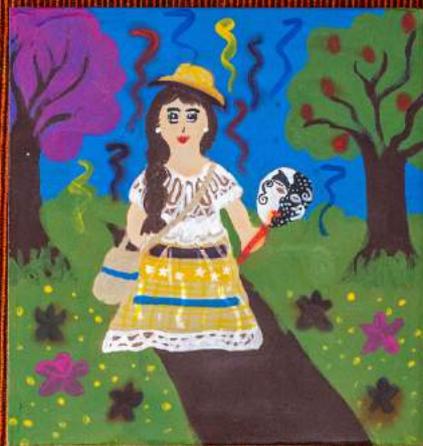
Marciana, with her knowledge of plants and traditional Pacific medicine, has become a great support for many communities. Despite her being far away from her territory, she continues sharing tips and natural remedies through on-line workshops. In these workshops, she shows local Afro-Colombian leaders the importance of spiritual guidance in these difficult times.

Her herbs and traditional medicines have become a cure for sadness, pain, headaches and respiratory complications. In this way, some of the consequences of the quarantine are treated with the knowledge of the ancestral Afro-Colombian culture.

For Miriam Gomez Carvajal, one of her first community tasks during her study was to promote literacy in Afro-Colombian communities who worked in the sugar cane monocultures around Palmira in the Valle del Cauca. This resulted in her taking up social leadership.



Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the leadership work of Miriam continues. Around 70% of girls and young women suffer from some form of gender based violence, mostly inflicted upon them in their own homes by their own family members. Staying home for some women and girl is a certainly not safe, as violence is increasing because of the quarantine. Given this worrying situation, they decided to organize themselves together with 370 people, including teachers, social workers, and social leaders. As a group, they wrote a letter to the Colombian president Ivan Duque, demanding government support for domestic service workers, leaders and unemployed social workers.



Palmira is a municipality in which many victims of the armed conflict live. That is why Miriam initiated spaces of reconciliation and healing between women, a process that resulted in the Dolls That Tell Stories.



HUMAN TRAFFICKERS TAKING ADVANTAGE OF GIRLS AND YOUNG FEMALE MIGRANTS

Female leaders fighting against human trafficking

As a consequence of COVID-19, human trafficking has shifted from the traditional forms (brothels, street, bars, clubs) to on-line forms. The demand of webcam services has increased by 30%. Six up to nine hours a day, female sex workers, poor women and models (unable to work on the catwalks now) offer sexual and erotic services in front of the camera to internet users from the United States, France and England, three countries also strongly affected by COVID-19.



More than 1,000 Venezuelans, including minors, pregnant women, adults and older people, are sleeping in front of the town hall in Cali, outdoors, cooking on small fires and bathing in the river, waiting to return home. After this photo was taken, the government sent 20 buses to take them to the border with Venezuela.

Irregular migrant women and girls are exposed to greater risks of violence, exploitation and trafficking due to the travel restrictions, difficulties in accessing health services and medication, and by being undocumented.

These scenarios can easily lead to human trafficking as these women seek alternative ways of income for their own livelihood and that of their families. Human traffickers take advantage of the pandemic, it creates an ideal situation to recruit new victims.





The dream of many Venezuelan migrants is to find better opportunities for housing, food and security in the main cities of Colombia. After walking thousands of kilometers from the Colombo-Venezuelan border, there is still almost no guarantee of a stable and safe home.

During May, many inhabitants of invasion zones (zonas de invasión) in the cities of Bogotá, Cali and Medellín endured massive evictions from municipality properties by public officials. They argued that these are unstable properties, with a high risk of landslides and no place to build settlements. Among those evicted are displaced families who are victims of the armed conflict, pregnant women, mothers who are heads of their household and many children.



“We are especially concerned about a family of nine with five girls and young women. The dad and older sister used to work in a restaurant, but now this restaurant is closed so they are not receiving any income. Now they are on the street and extremely vulnerable to rape and sexual exploitation. ”
Marian Torres (director of Amiga Joven), May 25, 2020

Female victims of human trafficking face additional obstacles due to COVID-19 measures, for example when they need to flee violent situations or when they need to access protection measures or essential services that can save their lives.

Despite the mandatory quarantine, Betty Pedraza and her team from the organization Corporación Espacios de Mujer continue their processes of psychosocial counseling to victims of human trafficking through on-line means. They give psychosocial counseling sessions, and provide important practical information about how to access emergency aid offered by the municipality. The sessions also provide guidance on how to resolve a problematic situation and create viable alternatives during this quarantine, and support on self-care through tips about physical and mental health and childcare.



“The fight against human trafficking cannot be suspended or put on hold. It has to continue, not only during the lockdown, but also afterwards when the human trafficking routes are re-opened.”

Betty Pedraza (director Espacios de Mujer), May 5, 2020

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the face of the emergency situation caused by COVID-19 and the additional challenges for peace building processes led by social leaders in Colombia, we recommend the following:

- **Donate (or arrange the logistics around the donation of) new or second-hand computers, smartphones and/or internet plans** to grassroots organizations led by social leaders. This will significantly increase political participation and local peace building, since it helps social leaders to keep participating in for example municipal councils of social politics, development and transitional justice and tables of victims (Mesas de Víctimas). Moreover, it gives women and girls better access to help lines in cases of gender-based violence.
- **Facilitate capacity building of public officials and relevant international actors in the field of human trafficking**, so that they can respond adequately to the needs of the Venezuelan migrant population and refugees who are vulnerable to human trafficking, labor exploitation, sexual violence and other forms of exploitation.
- **Give financial and technical support to food security programs that stimulate the exchange of products, seeds and ancestral knowledge**, led by afro Colombian and indigenous communities at grass roots level. This helps to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic in social, political and economic terms, for example through the creation of home gardens, indigenous crops (chagras), traditional medicine and urban agriculture.
- Support the protection of the life and integrity of female and male social leaders, through the **sponsorship by international political actors** (for example, by spreading their stories on social media and through international contacts), and through **financial support to strengthen the security protocols of local afro Colombian and indigenous organizations** led by social leaders.

ABOUT MENSEN MET EEN MISSIE

Mensen met een Missie, a Dutch NGO with Catholic roots, has been working for peace and reconciliation in remote places around the world for nearly one hundred years. With our extensive network of local partner organisations, we are active in Africa, Asia and Latin-America. We foster equal rights and bring opposing groups together; we facilitate interfaith cooperation and offer trauma healing. We do this in exploited, oppressed or marginalised communities and in places where peace is fragile.

To bring about change we work together with local organisations and traditional, social and religious leaders at all levels. These are women, men and young people who envision a better future for their community and have the agency to change things. Our impact goes beyond the lives of the people who participate in our activities, workshops, sessions and training. By strategically selecting participants we reach an even larger group in their communities. Through radio broadcasts, social media and other channels our outreach is even greater. Together we have a greater impact.

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