

# LIFTING OUR VOICES, BUILDING HOPE

Listening to survivors of  
sexual violence in Colombia



tearfund

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## Listening to survivors of sexual violence in Colombia

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Tearfund is a Christian relief and development agency building a global network of local churches to help eradicate poverty.

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Cover photo: Sonia Luz Osorio Fabra

The research team would like to express their appreciation and respect for all the survivors who shared their experiences and their needs so courageously. Your strength and your sustained hope in a better future despite such suffering gives hope that communities affected by sexual violence in Colombia can be restored.

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Tearfund is an active member of We Will Speak Out, a global coalition of faith-based NGOs, churches and organisations, which is supported by an alliance of technical partners and individuals, who are committed to ending sexual violence across communities around the world ([www.wewillspeakout.org](http://www.wewillspeakout.org)).

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# 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fifty years of political conflict, fuelled by illegal drug trafficking, political corruption and an unequal distribution of wealth and access to development opportunities, have left an indelible mark on Colombia and the identity of its people. Colombia holds the record for the most prolonged humanitarian emergency.<sup>1</sup> One of the consequences of this is a climate of violence that has multiple causes and involves many actors. One group in particular has suffered all the different manifestations of this violence: women and girls, particularly those from rural areas and from minority ethnic groups, have been disproportionately affected and have been left with physical and emotional scars. Violence against women and girls has become the norm in Colombia, a widespread, systematic and invisible practice in the context of the conflict, as recognised by the Constitutional Court itself (Ruling 092 [2008], Ruling 098 [2013]).

However, the current political climate in the country, with ongoing negotiations to reach a peace deal between armed groups and the government, provides an opportunity for positive change for the people of Colombia. Women's groups have started to raise their voices against the violence they have endured, speaking out about the violence they experienced during the conflict and in their homes.

It is because of the experiences of these women and because of their hopes and fears that Tearfund commissioned this study. Its aim was: to listen to the voices of women who have experienced sexual violence and to find out their needs and priorities; to explore ways in which churches can act and mobilise their local communities to respond to and prevent sexual violence; and to engage local government and civil society organisations to help build capacity for the support of survivors of sexual violence.

The study was carried out in eight municipalities of the Caribbean region, in the departments of Córdoba and Atlántico and the sub-region of Montes de María. The researchers used the medium of focus groups and interviews. **A total of 67 women** took part in the process, some having experienced sexual violence at the hands of armed men, others by people known to them, such as family members. The findings of the study provide an insight into how much their lives have changed as a result of the violence: **its physical and emotional impact, and their sense of abandonment, rejection, stigma and fear**. The findings also present a pressing **need for protection for the survivors and for justice to be enforced to enable them and all women to live in safety**. The survivors spoke of the need for a movement that can **bring survivors together to share their stories**, express their needs and find a voice to advocate for justice. A priority for the survivors interviewed was meeting **the educational needs of their children**, as this reassures them that their children will not suffer in the same way they have, given that this violence is, in part, due to their poverty.

The findings also show that the **church has an essential part to play in strengthening processes of spiritual and psychosocial support** and establishing alliances to address the specific needs of these women and their families in terms of their holistic development. The results of the study reflect the extent to which the lives of the survivors of sexual violence have been affected, but also the resilience that has helped them survive and persist in demanding their rights while also supporting other women who remain silent because of threats. By listening to the voices of survivors, Tearfund is seeking to **mobilise faith leaders in Colombia to respond to and prevent sexual violence in the targeted communities**. Religious leaders have huge potential to influence and change attitudes and behaviours in their local communities.

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<sup>1</sup> UNFPA (2015) *The State of World Population 2015*. Retrieved from: [www.unfpa.org/swop](http://www.unfpa.org/swop)

# 2 INTRODUCTION

## 2.1 The context of sexual violence in Colombia

Colombia has experienced more than 50 years of armed conflict, the consequences of which are seen in the high death toll in the country (more than 200,000 deaths between 1985 and 2012, and 80 per cent of these were civilians),<sup>2</sup> internal displacement (the second-highest in the world, with more than 5.7 million internally displaced people),<sup>3</sup> human rights violations, forced recruitment of children and youth, the use of anti-personnel mines, extra-judicial executions, and disappearances of civilians. Socially and economically excluded groups, such as indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombian communities, and women and girls living in rural areas, have been particularly affected. In this environment, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has thrived and become endemic in Colombia.

*'Conflict has affected everyone in some way. But it has disproportionately affected women and girls and denied them their basic rights to health, to security, and to have the power and the means to decide whether, when or how often to have children.'*

Jorge Perra, UNFPA representative<sup>4</sup>

Whether in the context of conflict or in their homes, women are frequently the target of physical, psychological and sexual abuse. This environment of violence is intrinsically linked to the social, economic and cultural structure of Colombian society. The systems of patriarchy and the prevalence of gender inequalities in Colombian culture contribute to the high levels of gender-based violence. The unequal power relations and the cultural and social gender imbalances reinforce the idea that women's bodies are seen as the property of men.<sup>5</sup>

*'Patriarchy [...] not only affects social relations but it is present in interpersonal relationships and in the family, generating permanent spaces for the subordination and the obedience of women to be woven into the fabric of society, restricting their freedom and ability to control their own lives, thereby increasing the spiral of violence in the public and private sphere.'*<sup>6</sup>

The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war in the conflict in Colombia by all the armed groups involved – guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and state military forces<sup>7</sup> – has been recognised by the international community and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Sexual violence has been used in order to sow terror in communities, to control the sexual and reproductive rights of women combatants, to exploit women and girls as sex slaves and to force them to flee. It is used as a means to exert power over them, their families and their communities, as their bodies become property and objects in the conflict.

Intra-family violence is exacerbated by conflict and displacement and in situations where there is a lack of access to information and basic services.<sup>8</sup> Sexual violence is a major cause of displacement, with two in ten women fleeing their homes because of sexual violence and threats.<sup>9</sup> However, many face abuse when they

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2 Grupo de Memoria Histórica (2013) *¡BASTA YA! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad*. Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional. Retrieved from: [www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2013/bastaYa/bastaya-colombia-memorias-de-guerra-y-dignidad-2015.pdf](http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2013/bastaYa/bastaya-colombia-memorias-de-guerra-y-dignidad-2015.pdf)

3 UNHCR (2015). Retrieved from: [www.unhcr.org/pages/49e492ad6.html](http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e492ad6.html) (accessed 21/01/16)

4 UNFPA (2015) *The State of World Population 2015*, p 41. Retrieved from: [www.unfpa.org/swop](http://www.unfpa.org/swop)

5 Mesa de Trabajo: Mujer y Conflicto Armado (2010) *X Informe sobre violencia sociopolítica contra mujeres, jóvenes y niñas en Colombia*, p 22. Retrieved from: [www.uclm.es/fundacion/resolucionConflictos/pdf/enlaces/XinformeViolencia.pdf](http://www.uclm.es/fundacion/resolucionConflictos/pdf/enlaces/XinformeViolencia.pdf)

6 *Ibid.*

7 ABColombia (2013) *Colombia: women, conflict-related sexual violence and the peace process*. London: ABColombia. Retrieved from: [www.abcolombia.org.uk/downloads/ABColombia\\_Conflict\\_related\\_sexual\\_violence\\_report.pdf](http://www.abcolombia.org.uk/downloads/ABColombia_Conflict_related_sexual_violence_report.pdf)

8 Wirtz, A L et al (2014) 'Gender-based violence in conflict and displacement: qualitative findings from displaced women in Colombia.' *Conflict and Health* 2014, 8:10. Retrieved from: [www.conflictandhealth.com/content/pdf/1752-1505-8-10.pdf](http://www.conflictandhealth.com/content/pdf/1752-1505-8-10.pdf)

are displaced: armed forces<sup>10</sup> issue threats to family members; children and young women are captured, raped and recruited as soldiers or sex slaves; and intra-family violence and intimate partner violence are exacerbated during displacement.<sup>11</sup> Fifty-two per cent of displaced women have experienced some form of physical abuse and 36 per cent have been forced to have sexual relationships with strangers to obtain food or shelter.<sup>12</sup>

It is difficult to quantify the exact number of women who have been sexually abused in Colombia, whether at the hands of armed forces or by family members. However, testimonies and stories have been recorded and collected over the past ten years, revealing that sexual violence has become habitual and a generalised practice in Colombia.<sup>13</sup> One particularly significant survey, covering a nine-year period from 2000 to 2009, revealed that almost half a million women in Colombia suffered some form of sexual violence in areas affected by the conflict.<sup>14</sup> However, the true number is likely to be even higher, as the same survey suggests that up to 82 per cent of cases go unreported.

The current political and social climate in Colombia presents new opportunities for peace in the country. In November 2012, the Colombian government and the country's largest left-wing rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), met in Cuba to begin formal peace talks, trying to end more than five decades of conflict. Both sides are expected to reach an agreement on this peace process in March 2016. This particular climate in Colombia is making survivors expectant and hopeful of change: with the support of civil society organisations, this peace deal could bring opportunities to seek justice and reparation from the government. In this light, an increased number of survivors of SGBV are coming forward with their stories for the first time. This could also create a potential safe space to speak of the underlying harmful cultural attitudes towards women.

## 2.2 Tearfund's work on sexual violence

Tearfund's commitment to work with churches across the world to tackle issues of poverty and justice arises from a holistic vision, empowering the most vulnerable to be resilient and strengthening their capacity. Since 2010, Tearfund has been working to mobilise and equip faith leaders and communities to prevent and respond to SGBV. In partnership with the Anglican Communion and UNAIDS, Tearfund set up an international coalition known as We Will Speak Out, which brings together faith-based organisations and individuals in the fight to end SGBV. Tearfund also supports a growing movement of survivors, and advocates for their engagement in the response. Tearfund has been working with partner organisations in the prevention of sexual violence through the local church in Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, South Africa and, more recently, the Central African Republic and Kenya. Following the success of these pilot projects and amid a growing recognition of the role of religious communities and leaders in combatting sexual violence, Tearfund is looking to respond to the growing needs associated with SGBV in the Latin American region, starting with Colombia. It is hoped that, by sharing the findings of this study, the voices of survivors will inform the work of key stakeholders, in particular faith leaders, to prevent and respond to SGBV in Colombia.

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9 Oxfam (2009) *Sexual violence in Colombia*, Briefing Paper, 9 Sept 2009. Retrieved from: [www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bp-sexual-violence-colombia.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bp-sexual-violence-colombia.pdf)

10 The use of 'armed forces' in this report makes reference to all actors involved in the armed conflict in Colombia. This includes the Colombian military, left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary groups and criminal bands.

11 Wirtz, A L et al (2014) 'Gender-based violence in conflict and displacement: qualitative findings from displaced women in Colombia.' *Conflict and Health* 2014, 8:10. Retrieved from: [www.conflictandhealth.com/content/pdf/1752-1505-8-10.pdf](http://www.conflictandhealth.com/content/pdf/1752-1505-8-10.pdf)

12 Oxfam (2009) *Sexual violence in Colombia*, Briefing Paper, 9 Sept 2009. Retrieved from: [www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bp-sexual-violence-colombia.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bp-sexual-violence-colombia.pdf)

13 Ibid.

14 Casa de la Mujer (2011) *First survey on the prevalence of sexual violence against women in the context of the Colombian conflict 2001–2009*. Retrieved from: [www.usofficeoncolombia.org/uploads/application-pdf/2011-03-23-Report-English.pdf](http://www.usofficeoncolombia.org/uploads/application-pdf/2011-03-23-Report-English.pdf)

## 2.3 Purpose of the research

The purpose of the research was to explore the experiences and identify the needs of survivors of sexual violence in selected areas of the Colombian Caribbean region, specifically Barranquilla, Soledad, Montería, Montelíbano and Tierralta, El Carmen de Bolívar, San Jacinto and San Juan. The intention was also to hear from survivors themselves about the role of the church in responding to their needs. In this way, it is hoped that the research findings will inform an effective response and engagement from local faith-based organisations and churches in their communities.

### Specific research objectives

The questions that framed the focus group discussion were designed to achieve the following objectives:

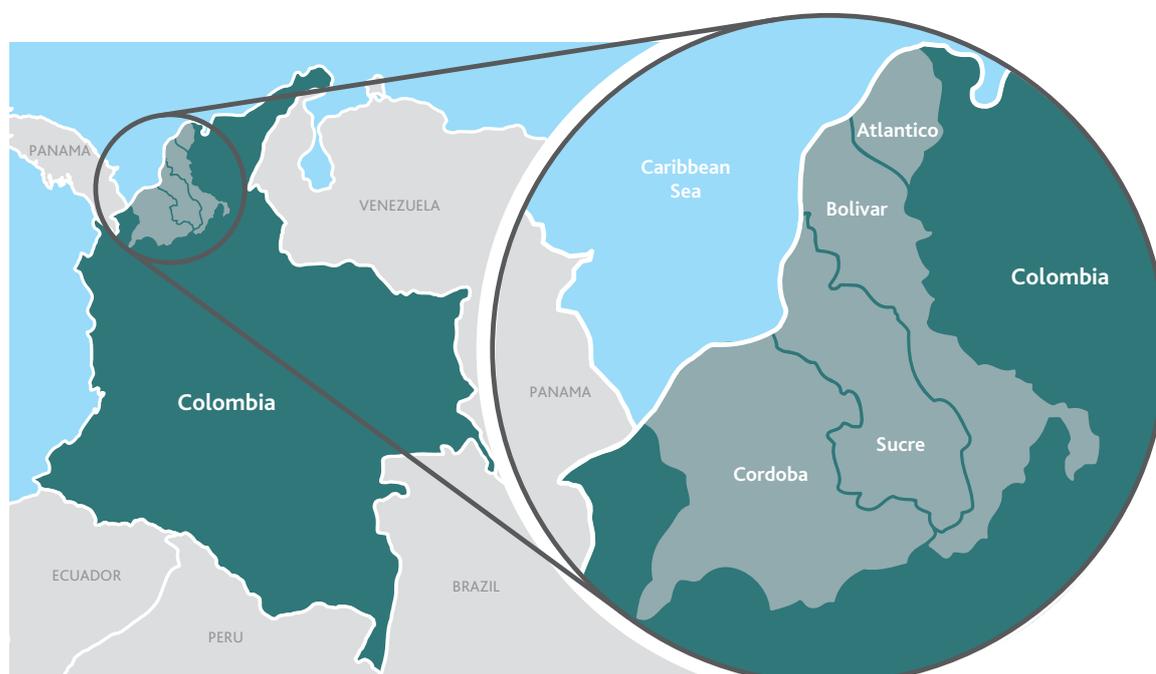
- to explore survivors' understanding of sexual violence
- to understand the impact of sexual violence on the lives of survivors
- to map the priorities and needs of survivors of sexual violence for their healing and recovery
- to identify the role of faith-based organisations and the church in meeting their needs.

# 3 METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Research locations

Three main regional areas have been chosen for this research, with specific municipalities selected among them: Córdoba, Montes de María and Atlántico. These regions were chosen, based on considerations including access and the researchers' security, the presence of Tearfund partners, high incidence of crime and sexual violence, displaced populations due to conflict, historical and current presence of armed forces, and the emergence of active civilian peace and women's movements.

Map of Colombia showing research locations



### 3.1.1 Córdoba department

Córdoba is one of the largest departments on the north Colombian coast. The southern part of Córdoba is a key area in the armed conflict and an important corridor for the movement of illegal armed groups. The researchers met with survivors from the municipalities of Montería, Montelíbano, Puerto Libertador, Tierralta and Valencia. The paramilitaries, guerrilla groups and criminal gangs that have had a strong presence in Córdoba include:

- FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
- EPL (Ejército Popular de Liberación – Popular Liberation Army)
- ACCU (Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá – Peasant Self-Defence Forces of Córdoba and Urabá)
- AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia)
- BACRIM (criminal bands)

This area sees high numbers of death threats, forced disappearances, targeted murders, forced displacement, forced recruitment, collateral involvement of civilians, sexual violence and restrictions on freedom of movement. Caught in the middle, women have been used as spoils or weapons of war and as sex objects both by state officials and illegal armed actors, as well as by members of their own families.<sup>15</sup> As it is expected that a forthcoming peace agreement will put an end to the armed conflict, processes have been set in motion to help survivors of violence access justice and reparation. Women's groups have begun to help survivors break their silence and face up to the threats from those who are still exercising violence in the region.

### 3.1.2 Montes de María sub-region

The sub-region of Montes de María covers territory in both Bolívar and Sucre departments. The municipalities of San Juan Nepomuceno, San Jacinto and El Carmen de Bolívar were chosen for this study. This area of Colombia has been significant in the struggle for land repossession and has been a particularly violent place for civilians, with the FARC and AUC present in this area displaying extremely violent behaviour and being responsible for more than 40 massacres. The region has had a great deal of internal displacement and the municipalities chosen for the research have been both a source and host of displaced groups. Despite the violence, and perhaps because of it, this region has also become home to a wide range of peacebuilding actors and initiatives. The region has strong women's networks, such as the Montes de María Women's Network and *Narrar para Vivir* ('Talking to Live'). These networks provide psychosocial care to conflict survivors and raise awareness of their issues with the authorities. Many of the women we met during this research were found through these networks.

### 3.1.3 Atlántico department

As the home to the most important industrial corridor in the Caribbean region, the province of Atlántico attracts people from all over the region, from different socio-economic backgrounds. The research team met with survivors from the municipalities of Barranquilla, Malambo and Soledad, as these areas have received high numbers of internally displaced individuals fleeing conflict-ridden areas of Colombia. Atlántico province has had an increased concentration of organised criminal bands fighting over the micro-trafficking of psychotropic drugs and the sex trade, as well as other urban gangs. Atlántico has some of the highest rates of violence against women and girls, some of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy and high rates of school drop-out, particularly in young men: all of this contributes to a climate of violence.<sup>16,17</sup> The preliminary preparations for this research found that, though there exist many cases of sexual violence in Barranquilla, Malambo and Soledad, many women from those areas chose not to participate for fear of being found.

## 3.2 Research team

A team of two consultants undertook the research in the targeted areas, with guidance from Tearfund's SGBV team in the UK and the support of Tearfund's country office in Colombia. Participants in the research were found within the network of churches and women's groups of a Tearfund partner organisation in the region, CORSOC (Corporación para el Desarrollo Social Comunitario – Corporation for Social Development at Community Level). The research took place between November and December 2015.

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15 ABColombia (2013) *Colombia: women, conflict-related sexual violence and the peace process*. London: ABColombia. Retrieved from: [www.abcolombia.org.uk/downloads/ABColombia\\_Conflict\\_related\\_sexual\\_violence\\_report.pdf](http://www.abcolombia.org.uk/downloads/ABColombia_Conflict_related_sexual_violence_report.pdf)

16 Taken from *El Heraldó*, 25 November 2015. Retrieved from: [www.elheraldo.co/tendencias/el-duro-camino-de-las-mujeres-en-su-lucha-contra-la-violencia-de-genero-230302](http://www.elheraldo.co/tendencias/el-duro-camino-de-las-mujeres-en-su-lucha-contra-la-violencia-de-genero-230302)

17 Taken from *El Heraldó*, 11 October 2015. Retrieved from: [www.elheraldo.co/judicial/homicidios-de-mujeres-aumentan-41-en-barranquilla-222049](http://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/homicidios-de-mujeres-aumentan-41-en-barranquilla-222049)

### 3.3 Research participants

In total, the researchers met with 67 women in three provinces. Their ages ranged from 18 to 71 years. These survivors of sexual violence were identified with the help of CORSOC from within the network of churches, women's groups and community associations in the chosen areas. The researchers also made contact with some of the women who participated in a symbolic march on 22 July 2015, where survivors of sexual violence walked 19km to reach the town of El Salado, where one of the worst massacres of the conflict took place. Similar marches took place all over Colombia as part of the campaign *No es hora de callar* ('Now is not the time to be silent').<sup>18</sup>

Of these 67 women, just under half were Christians. In relation to the circumstances of the sexual violence they experienced, 39 of these women were raped by men from armed groups, as a direct result of the conflict, while the remaining 28 women were abused by family members.

The researchers also met with different representatives in the municipalities, such as pastors, individuals involved in counselling ministries within the faith-based organisations, and leaders of women's groups and associations, as well as local government representatives. The findings from these meetings can be found as an annexe at the end of this report.

Participation categorised by municipality and department is summarised in the table below.

| Department   | Town/municipality    | Date      | No. of women |
|--------------|----------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Córdoba      | Montería             | 10 Nov 15 | 19           |
|              | Tierralta            | 11 Nov 15 | 9            |
|              | Montelíbano-Valencia | 12 Nov 15 | 4            |
| Bolívar      | El Carmen de Bolívar | 18 Nov 15 | 6            |
|              | San Jacinto          | 19 Nov 15 | 5            |
|              | San Juan Nepomuceno  | 24 Nov 15 | 17           |
| Atlántico    | Barranquilla         | 23 Nov 15 | 4            |
|              | Soledad              | 23 Nov 15 | 3            |
| <b>TOTAL</b> |                      |           | <b>67</b>    |

### 3.4 Qualitative research approach

In order to explore the experiences and needs of survivors of sexual violence, the research followed a qualitative process. This approach enables a more thorough understanding of the depth and breadth of the impact of sexual violence on individual lives in the context the participants find themselves in.

A qualitative model was therefore followed throughout the study, drawing information from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Focus group methodology emphasises the perceptions of the participants and encourages a conversational process, as participants react to what others say. This research used a semi-structured interview process as a framework but allowed participants to express themselves and shape the discussion within each topic.

<sup>18</sup> Taken from *El Tiempo*, 24 August 2015. Retrieved from: [www.eltiempo.com/colombia/otras-ciudades/mujeres-victimas-de-el-salado-no-es-hora-de-callar/16276980](http://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/otras-ciudades/mujeres-victimas-de-el-salado-no-es-hora-de-callar/16276980)

Using the approach of focus group discussion also enabled the participants to overcome fear and shame in sharing their experience of sexual violence. Knowing that others had gone through similar experiences enabled each participant to answer the research questions.

### 3.4.1 Data collection

The focus group discussions were conducted in Spanish. The discussions were recorded, with the consent of the participants in each focus group. The researchers worked in pairs, so that one could facilitate the discussion while the other listened and took notes.

The specific questions used to structure the discussions were:

- What do you understand by sexual violence? How do you define it?
- Why do survivors of sexual violence stay silent about it?
- How has sexual violence affected your life?
- What do you need to be healed/to recover?
- What benefit, if any, can a survivor movement bring to the life of the individual survivor?
- What role could faith communities play in responding to sexual violence?

These questions were discussed with the groups, allowing different participants to respond. At the start of each discussion, participants were given the option to withdraw from the research process if they wanted to do so at any point.

### 3.4.2 Data analysis

Once all the group discussions had taken place, the research team listened to the recordings and reviewed their notes. The researchers studied the transcripts from the recordings to identify common themes emerging across the groups. The responses given by the women, both in the discussion groups and in the individual interviews, were categorised according to each research question. A thematic analysis and interpretation was conducted by the researchers, returning to the data and using the main themes to identify categories, and considering the inter-relationship between categories, as well as common language. For each of the key questions, the main themes were then summarised and the original data used to illustrate each category.

### 3.4.3 Data management

The process and purpose of the research and all data collection was explained to all focus groups and signed consent forms were gained from all research participants. Hard copies of the recordings and related information are kept in a secure place by Tearfund. This data will remain stored for two years, after which time it will be disposed of. The research team signed a confidentiality agreement with Tearfund. According to the General Law on Archiving,<sup>19</sup> which stipulates that individuals and organisations must guarantee the protection and the adequate storage of primary data which could represent historical and cultural memory of the country, all primary source material (recordings and signed forms) has been converted to electronic data and is stored on Tearfund premises, on a password-protected computer that only the research team is authorised to use.

## 3.5 Ethical considerations

The research team adhered to key ethical requirements for the duration of the research, to ensure protection and respect for all participants. This was particularly important given the sensitive nature of the research and the vulnerability of the participants. For this reason, it was important from the outset to establish rules

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<sup>19</sup> Congress of the Republic of Colombia. Law 594, Bogotá, 2000

of understanding in the groups in order to guarantee the confidentiality of the information shared and to protect the identity of the participants. Information was provided about the process and about how the data would be used. After each focus group discussion, the participants were offered the opportunity to speak to a counsellor, providing a space to deal with any emotional pain triggered during the discussion. The following ethical principles were adhered to.

### **3.5.1 Voluntary participation and informed consent**

The research team explained to all participants in the focus groups the nature and process of the research and how the information would be used. The researchers made it clear that the women's participation in this research was entirely voluntary. Participants were reminded that they were free to withdraw at any time and that they had the right not to answer certain questions if they did not wish to. None of the participants left the focus groups but nine participants chose to have individual interviews. The research team obtained informed consent from all respondents.

### **3.5.2 Confidentiality**

Ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of study participants was key. Rules of confidentiality, anonymity and sensitivity were proposed to the participants, who understood and accepted them. The identity of participants was protected and the researchers informed them they could use a pseudonym if they wished. They were assured that neither their names nor those of their organisations would appear in the research report. The participants were asked to keep all information confidential and not to disclose anything discussed within the group beyond the group setting. The focus group discussions took place in a private space, and a safe atmosphere was created in which the survivors were able to express themselves without fear of the rest of the community knowing.

## **3.6 Challenges**

One of the challenges was to find a sufficient number of women willing to come forward to participate in the research to create a good sample. Many women live in fear, as the perpetrators are still around them and frequently issue threats. Because of that, fewer women than anticipated came forward, particularly in Atlántico.

A further challenge was to maintain the primary focus of the research while remaining sensitive to the needs of many women who were sharing their experiences for the first time, reliving the pain, shame, anger and powerlessness that they felt when they were abused. This meant that the discussions had to be paused while those who needed it received support and basic counselling.

A further challenge occurred during the group discussions in Montelíbano: it was necessary to put urgent protection measures in place for two women and their families as they had received threats from criminal groups and were not safe in their homes. This meant that the research was interrupted and resumed thereafter.

# 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings have been arranged according to the discussion topics and the common themes emerging, which were drawn out through analysis of the data from all the groups. Wherever possible, comment and analysis have been kept to a minimum to allow the survivors' own words in the quotes to speak for themselves.

***Please note:** some of the testimonies from the survivors are graphic and can be upsetting. This reflects the challenges these women face and the difficult emotions shared during group discussions.*

## 4.1 Survivors' understanding of sexual violence

### 4.1.1 The worst thing that can happen to a woman

When asked to explain what they understood by sexual violence, the women expressed that it was any sexual act taking place without the consent of the woman, which leaves her in pain. Some women included non-physical acts such as emotional abuse and harassment in their understanding of sexual violence. The survivors also acknowledged that sexual violence can be experienced between husband and wife, when a husband demands sex from his wife.

*'Any kind of aggression against a woman is violence.'*

*'If you have a husband and he alone decides when he wants sex, this is violence.'*

*'Sexual violence isn't just penetration: it is dirty stares, harassment, insinuating and vulgar remarks, and groping.'*

*'When they force you to do something you don't want to and it causes you pain.'*

*'It's a terrible thing. I was forced to do it and it has left scars. I can't see any way of moving on.'*

*'It turns your life upside down: it is the worst thing that can happen to a woman or child, either at the hands of armed men or of a family member, which is even worse.'*

### 4.1.2 Conflict-related: armed forces

Of the 67 women interviewed, 39 had experienced sexual violence at the hands of armed men. The women spoke of being raped by members of armed groups as a way to silence them and instil fear in them and others. Some were raped repeatedly by different men. Some women spoke of being abducted from their family and being used as sex slaves for the armed forces. The women expressed how, as a consequence of their rape, they were left unprotected and vulnerable to more attacks: a third of the participants had been abandoned by their husbands as a result of being raped by armed men.

*'They abducted my husband. I was left on my own. They raped me and forced me out of the territory. I felt dirty. Only God helped me at such a difficult time.'*

*'I was raped by a group of armed men who killed my father and abducted my sister.'*

*'They raped me. They're threatening my family and my mother wants me to live with an older man for protection.'*

*'I was abducted by a guerrilla group when I was 15, brutally raped by a comandante to put a stop to my defiance, and then raped by anyone who wanted to in the camp. I only plucked up the courage to escape when I found I was pregnant with my first child. I don't know who the father is.'*

*'In the midst of the conflict, they used our bodies violently to get revenge on our husbands, who were either dead or who later abandoned us.'*

### 4.1.3 At home: domestic violence

Of the 67 women interviewed, 28 acknowledged that their experience of rape was within the family. A few of these women were telling their story for the first time. Some women spoke of being raped by their husband, an experience which is often not acknowledged or recognised as rape in families and communities, but rather as a domestic matter and 'a wife's duty'. However, these women have recognised the behaviour of their spouse as a violation of their rights and indeed a form of sexual violence. As these experiences occur, the perpetrator threatens the woman to keep her silent. The women expressed their fear of speaking about domestic violence, fear of being punished or rejected by their family.

*'I was ten years old when I was raped by a relative. He threatened to have me thrown out of the house if I told anyone.'*

*'I never knew what it was to be a girl. From the moment I opened my eyes, they were doing "that" to me.'* (Woman raped by her father and brothers)

*'I was forced by my husband to have sex. He threatened me and my children. It was only recently that I realised this was sexual violence.'*

*'My husband forced me to have sex. If I didn't want to, he would hit me. My family told me it was my duty.'*

## 4.2 Why do survivors remain silent?

When asked this question, the main feeling that prevailed in the focus groups was a strong sense of fear: fear of what would happen to them if they were to speak to family members or authorities about their experience, fear of abandonment, fear of rejection, fear of reprisals and threats, fear of stigma, fear of death. Many also spoke of the fact that speaking about what has happened would have no positive effect: many who had chosen to disclose what happened had been let down by family members and their local justice system.

### 4.2.1 Fear of reprisals and rejection

Most participants expressed fear about what would happen to them if they spoke about their experiences. Some women spoke of being abandoned by their husbands and their families; others spoke of death threats they have received which keep them from denouncing the crimes.

*'It's not easy to tell anyone. If you have a husband or partner, they will probably leave you. The family will split you up and people will speak badly of you.'*

*'It's been very difficult for me to come this far and even tell you what happened because it was my dad and brothers. I'm still afraid because I think he's going to do the same to a young nephew.'*

*'I said nothing for fear of dying. My family and I received death threats.'*

*'You generally say nothing because you're afraid. They tied me up, hands and feet. Four masked men dressed in black raped me. They tore my genitals and threatened me with something worse if I reported it. My husband came back from the fields and untied me. He told me that if I reported it, they would come back – and in any case I had clearly enjoyed it. Then he left: he abandoned me with four children.'*

*'My husband told me that if I left him, he would kill me – that if he couldn't have me, no one would.'*

### 4.2.2 Guilt and shame

Most of the survivors spoke of the shame linked to what had happened to them, and how people would call them names if they knew. There is a particular sense of shame felt when speaking to survivors of domestic violence, especially if the perpetrator is still in their lives. Some women spoke of protecting their children

from knowing their father's identity. Others spoke of the guilt they felt, as if they were responsible for the circumstances that led to their abuse.

*'You can't tell anyone for fear, for shame, because people say that you went looking for it, that you're a "slut".'*

*'I said nothing because I have a child from this crime. He doesn't know who his father is. He is into drugs. I lie and tell him his dad is in another town.'*

*'I didn't say anything for a long time because of my children, because of my children's father. Only my husband's grandmother knew what the paramilitaries did to me in the El Salado massacre.'*

*'It's very difficult for me to talk about this because it was my dad and brothers that raped me. Also, he is a man of authority in my community and no one would believe me.'*

*'I said nothing because I felt guilty, because we travelled to that village and my parents had told us not to go there. Then we couldn't leave because we hadn't got any money and, the following night, an armed group took the village and raped me and my sister.'*

*'I didn't say anything before because I was so guilty and ashamed. This happened 18 years ago and I still feel ashamed. The man pursued me and sent me love potions through other people to pressure me to go and live with him.'*

*'I told my brother and he went and had a go at them. They were part of an armed group and almost a year later they killed him. I feel guilty for having told him.'*

#### **4.2.3 Weak justice system and lack of safe spaces to speak**

Several participants said they felt unsafe and powerless in denouncing the crimes as they are not taken seriously by those in the local justice system. Some live with the fear of threats that they and their families would be killed if they were to report matters to the police.

*'An army officer raped me. I told my husband and we went to make a complaint to his military chiefs but they didn't believe me.'*

*'I only told a friend. I never reported it because you never know what will happen. The people dealing with your case might laugh at you or blame you, and it takes forever to get anywhere.'*

*'I reported a BACRIM member who raped me when I was 13. He has threatened me and I fear for myself and my mother.'*

*'It's not easy to talk about it, or cope with it. No one asks what happened or how they can help us.'*

*'It is much easier to speak in groups like this, in women's associations.'*

*'The first time I said anything was to a psychologist and then in group meetings to let off steam.'*

#### **4.2.4 Denial by family members**

Some of the participants spoke of how they were met with denial by family members as they shared what had happened to them. For those who had the courage to speak about what had happened, they were told it could not be true and were accused of lying.

*'I told my mum and she didn't believe me. She said he was a trustworthy person and that I was telling a lie, that perhaps I had wanted it, or I was just making it up.'*

*'I told my family but they told me I had to do my marital duty.'*

*'We told our mum but she hit us because we were "liars". She said we had made up what my brother was doing to my sister and me.'*

*'I told my family and they didn't believe me.'*

## 4.3 How are survivors' lives affected?

All the participants shared that their lives had changed as a result of sexual violence. Many of them spoke of how they themselves had changed, becoming quieter, bitter or angry. The physical impact on their lives included sexually transmitted infections and damage to internal and external sex organs, as well as wounds and bruising to the whole body. Some families had broken down as partners had left; some women had turned to alcohol or psychotropic drugs to deal with their trauma and pain. Women who carry to term the pregnancies resulting from violent acts suffered the stigma and pain of not being able to give their children a name or a face when they asked about their fathers. They tended to be overprotective of their children, worrying about them when they went out. They also expressed their vulnerability in the face of poverty.

### 4.3.1 Emotional and psychosocial impact

The women expressed how they have changed because of what had happened to them. Some of them felt bitter and angry. Others had turned to alcohol or drugs as a result or had had to go on medication. Some showed a tendency towards isolation, prolonged silences, sadness, fear, frequent nightmares and depression. Some of the participants presented suicidal tendencies and had attempted to take their life on more than one occasion.

*'My life was destroyed because of what happened to me. I feel only pain, anger, depression and loneliness.'*

*'I have forgotten how to be me. I tried to start afresh with another partner but I was raped again. He couldn't understand why I sometimes refused to be with him, and now I am very distrustful and afraid.'*

*'I took drugs and was an alcoholic for a long time.'*

*'My family was destroyed. I find it difficult to be with my husband, and I am taking medication for my mental health.'*

*'My family broke down. I felt alone. I became more isolated, depressed, and I tried to commit suicide several times.'*

Many of the survivors expressed that what had happened to them had left them afraid of men and generally distrustful of people. It had affected their relationship with their spouse and with other men.

*'I have not been able to settle down in a relationship.'*

*'I am afraid of relationships with men. There is so much insecurity and fear. My heart is full of sadness, resentment and bitterness.'*

*'I feel very distrustful and afraid. I don't believe anyone.'*

*'It haunts you and damages your relationship with your partner. I feel sick at the thought of intimacy. I don't trust men.'*

*'I ended up feeling hatred, resentment and a fear of the threats.'*

### 4.3.2 Physical impact

Many of the survivors described the long-term physical consequences of their experience of sexual violence, including illness or turning to drugs and alcohol. For many, the physical impact on their lives was permanent, as they had been left scarred or with damaged organs and illnesses for the rest of their lives. In addition, some still suffered physical pain that prevented them from having a healthy and enjoyable sexual life.

*'The men who attacked me squeezed my breasts so tightly they were bruised and swollen. I had to have an operation and I was left with horrible scars.'*

*'They tied my hands and feet. They bound the ropes so tightly that they took the skin off my feet. I have the marks of their evil on my body.'*

*'The worst thing is that I got pregnant because of the rape and aborted my child. I feel dreadful about this.'*

*'I caught a disease in my "parts" [genitals] and my tubes are damaged. Now I can't have children.'*

### 4.3.3 Impact on their families

Most survivors became pregnant as a result of rape and this had changed their lives dramatically. Most of them spoke of how they were abandoned and left to bring up their children on their own. Some have not told their children about their fathers and tell them lies to hide the truth, feeling guilty about not revealing to the children the true identity of their father.

*'They destroyed my dreams, my body and my family. My husband left me and I had to bring up my children on my own. The youngest was four months old. I never heard from my husband again. I've struggled through poverty to bring up my children. I got them through secondary school but now I have no money for them to go to university. I don't seek out the company of men any more: I don't let them near me.'*

*'My two oldest children are the result of two separate rapes: the first when I was abducted and forced to live with the guerrillas, and the second when I was on drugs and the guy selling them to me raped me. My first daughter does not know who her father is. I lied, saying that we were very much in love but that he was killed. My husband treated my second child as his daughter. I lived with him for ten years until he got fed up of waiting for me to recover.'*

*'My son doesn't know who his father is and nor do I. They were masked. They took me by force, they hit me and then one after another they raped me until I was nearly unconscious. Then they said, "This old woman's no good for anything else," and they left me almost dead. Now my son is a drug addict: I can't tell him the truth because it would make him even worse.'*

*'My first daughter was the result of a rape by a family member when I was still a child and the second was conceived following a gang rape by members of an armed group.'*

*'I never told my mum and now I'm afraid that my stepfather will do this to my little 13-year-old sister because, before living with my mum, he had a child by a stepdaughter.'*

Some women spoke of how their experience has changed the way they are as mothers: the fear that what had happened to them could happen to their daughters made them very protective of their children and caused them to want to work hard to give them opportunities they did not have.

*'I am afraid the same thing will happen to my daughters. I am overprotective and very distrustful.'*

*'They destroyed my dreams and I had to flee. I lost everything: all I have is poverty, and my daughters have no opportunity to study. I am afraid that what happened to me will also happen to them.'*

## 4.4 What do survivors need to heal?

When the women were asked what they needed to be able to heal and to see their lives restored, they gave different answers depending on the paths their lives had taken since the violence took place. Women who were recounting their tragedy for the first time were still experiencing a great deal of pain, anxiety and anger. They felt that they and their children needed psychosocial and economic support.

Those who had faced their trauma and were already involved in movements of survivors, who were fighting for comprehensive reparation from the state, spoke of their need for their political and economic rights to be recognised, educational opportunities for their children (as a guarantee that such violent acts will

not be repeated), decent housing and employment, and access to income-generation support, as well as psychological help, including forgiveness therapy.

Across the groups, there was a general consensus that healing would require a holistic approach which would address their spiritual, physical and material needs.

*'Healing is being well physically, morally, materially and spiritually.'*

In San Juan and El Carmen, 25 women said they wanted to give a historical account of the violence in the armed conflict: speaking about the violence they saw or experienced would help them recover.

*'We want to give an historical account of the sexual violence; this will help us to heal.'*

#### **4.4.1 Support from the faith community**

All of the survivors interviewed, Christians and non-Christians alike, said that the spiritual and emotional support they needed could be provided by a faith community.

*'We need counsellors in the churches, people trained to support and guide us properly.'*

*'It is important to know God and to put him first.'*

*'I need God; I need to learn to forgive.'*

*'We need emotional and spiritual healing.'*

*'We need believers around us to give us love and peace.'*

*'Spiritual support is necessary for the mourning process, telling your story until you no longer feel pain, in order to heal.'*

*'Healing is forgiveness and recovery; it is setting an example to others who have been hurt.'*

#### **4.4.2 Psychosocial support: building resilience together**

Many of the survivors spoke of the need for psychosocial support to help them become stronger and move forward beyond their trauma. Some mentioned the benefit of a support network, where they could feel safe to speak about what they had experienced and become stronger together.

*'We need a family support network to prevent domestic violence, pain, anger and frustration, and to put a stop to the fear that something bad is going to happen to our children, because this makes us very controlling and aggressive with them.'*

*'I need psychological help to overcome my fear and stop the nightmares.'*

*'I need to get my dreams back but my insecurity won't let me.'*

*'It would be good to meet other women and make contacts, to have a trusted and confidential support group.'*

*'It is important to create a women's network; this would enable us to support each other.'*

#### **4.4.3 Access to health care and legal services**

The survivors expressed the need to access good health services to help them heal from the physical wounds of their trauma, obtain medicine to treat their ailments and be free from pain. They also spoke of the need for the state to support their desire for justice but also to provide better training to health and police staff, in order for survivors to receive medical and judicial services that are judgement-free.

*'We need good health services. Many of us suffer the effects of violence on our bodies and we do not have specialist medicine to treat our illnesses or the difficulties that physical violence has left us with.'*

*'We need access to specialist health care in order to exercise our right to a healthy sexuality.'*

*'The staff in institutions require training so that they are sensitive to and can understand women's needs.'*

*'We need state reparations and support so we can lead a decent life, but we also need everyone to be willing and committed [to make this happen].'*

*'[We need] to forgive but also to seek justice from men.'*

#### **4.4.4 Access to education and work for survivors and their children**

Some of the women expressed a desire to go back to studying or spoke of having that wish for their children. They spoke of needing access to training to enable them to start up small businesses and earn an income. Studying or working represented a form of healing in their journey, which would enable them to be financially independent, earn an income and work in a trade, generally staying active and moving forward. Across the groups there was a recurrent theme relating to the needs of their children, particularly in regard to education.

*'Being active, working, this helps me keep busy and survive.'*

*'We need training to be able to get a decent job or set up a business: we need money to set up a small business.'*

*'It is important that our children have training opportunities. The kids finish school and they can't find a job or go on to university or a technical course because we don't have the money to send them to the city to study.'*

*'To be able to have a business because I make confectionery. That way I could leave my husband. He mistreats me but I depend on his financial support.'*

*'Healing is achieving the level of education we want, having a profession.'*

## **4.5 Would a survivor movement be of benefit?**

The idea of a survivor movement was welcomed by all of the survivors across all the discussion groups. They said that such a movement would be beneficial as it would allow them to join forces, provide mutual support to each other and raise their voices to advocate for their rights. Some did raise some concerns about the risk of being exposed through involvement in such a movement but nevertheless thought it would be a positive endeavour.

### **4.5.1 Build a support group**

Most of the participants mentioned that a survivor movement would be useful as it would enable them to provide mutual support and help each other in their healing.

*'It would be really useful: unity is strength.'*

*'Yes, because you feel the same way as other women and so can help them.'*

*'I see it as a positive process for women. It's important to do it.'*

*'It would be nice to have a big and strong group like the ones we have seen in other places. We need to build our strength so that they can hear us and put things right.'*

*'It would be useful as it will feel as if we have a space where we can talk, where we can denounce what has happened and we'd have the right conditions in place to receive support.'*

## 4.5.2 An instrument for advocacy

Most women felt a survivor movement would help them build up the courage to raise their voices to higher authorities and lobby the government about the restitution of their rights, their social and economic inclusion, and their physical and emotional health. They would press for the local authorities to prioritise their and their children's well-being.

*'Yes, it's beneficial, but we need to take care to avoid threats.'*

*'[We need] preferential policies to give female survivors of sexual violence a home, a job, education for both them and their children, and seed capital for business enterprises.'*

## 4.5.3 Risk of exposure and threats

Most of the participants welcomed the idea of a survivors' movement but warned it would have to be done very carefully as it could put them at greater risk. Some of the women had concerns that belonging to such a group would put them at higher risk of being identified as survivors and therefore invite more threats or stigma.

*'I think it is important but I am afraid because, just as the leaders who are pushing for land restitution are being killed, we could be attacked too.'*

*'I see it as a positive process for women. It is important to do it. But from a safety point of view, we could receive threats'*

*'It is very important and necessary that we have a survivors' movement because it allows us to visualise the number of survivors of sexual violence. But we shouldn't call it sexual violence because it would bring the past into the present. It could be called 'women survivors of the armed conflict on the north coast of Colombia'.'*

## 4.6 What could the role of faith groups be in responding to sexual violence and to survivors' needs?

As mentioned above, survivors in all the focus groups identified that faith groups could play a key role in supporting them. Both Christians and non-Christians agreed that the church or faith groups could meet part of their needs. Firstly, they saw that there was a potential for faith groups to play an important role in helping them to heal from trauma by providing counselling and creating safe spaces in churches where they could go. Faith groups could also facilitate the creation of support groups where they could come to speak about their issues and receive advice from others.

### 4.6.1 Provide counselling and a safe place to gather

The majority of survivors saw the church as having a special role to play in providing counselling for them as well as being a safe space for them to go to. The church could provide for their spiritual needs in a way that other service providers could not.

*'Psychological counselling through therapies and meetings that enable bonds of friendship and solidarity to be forged between survivors.'*

*'Support and an assurance of confidentiality.'*

*'To make God known and to continue to promote events such as this [focus group]. He is central to everything. He must come first because he restores, heals and releases.'*

*'It is the church's role to remind people that there is a God, because sometimes we receive material and psychological support but not spiritual input.'*

#### 4.6.2 Facilitate dialogue and community awareness

A few survivors recognised that faith leaders and the church could help build awareness in communities by speaking about the issue of sexual violence and breaking the silence to avoid further victimisation and stigma. The church could organise support groups where the survivors could in turn learn how to break the silence within their family and allow a process of reconciliation and healing.

*'The church can have support groups to find out how to talk to your family, how to face the truth with your children, above all those who are born as a result of these exceptionally cruel acts.'*

*'They should organise talks in the neighbourhoods to prevent sexual violence.'*

#### 4.6.3 Provide financial and educational support

The survivors also spoke of the role the church could play in providing training for them to support other women, but more significantly with regard to teaching them business skills. Many spoke of the need to provide for their families and of their wish to set up their own small business.

*'Train us to help other women, support us to organise and let us have more time to meet and share ideas with other women, and even set up businesses to help us.'*

*'Train us to be able to provide for our families and set up small businesses.'*

*'Money to set up a business, because no one wants to give us work and we need to do something to provide for our families.'*

*'Support an art school and teach dressmaking; give us the material and everything we need to be able to set up a workshop.'*

#### 4.6.4 Advocate on their behalf for better medical and judicial services

The survivors spoke about the potential of the church to advocate on their behalf to the government to provide them with better medical and judicial services. A third of the women interviewed felt they could not speak about their health issues to medical professionals, feeling shame in explaining their situation. These women wanted the church and faith-based organisations to petition the government to train the staff of medical institutions to be aware of their issues and to see to their needs without judging them. This issue was also raised during the discussion on what they need to heal.

*'Train the staff of [medical] institutions to be sensitive to the situation of survivors of sexual violence. Many government employees pay no attention to us. They are not patient. They don't clearly explain what we need to do.'*

*'Petition the government.'*

*'We suffer many consequences and we feel ashamed to have to explain to doctors and nurses who say they can't do anything.'*

# 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of the research was to listen to the needs and priorities of survivors in order to inform an adequate response from key stakeholders. The intention of the study was also to gain a better understanding of the role of the church and faith-based organisations in responding to some of these needs. By giving survivors a voice, this report should enable key stakeholders, including the government, non-governmental organisations, church leaders and other actors, to understand more fully the realities and priorities of survivors of sexual violence in the Caribbean region of Colombia.

This study provides qualitative information and insight into the experiences of survivors in the targeted communities. It documents their perspectives and their needs and sets out their thoughts on how faith groups and other actors could support them, as well as the potential for a movement of survivors. It is hoped that by sharing these findings, these survivors' voices and felt needs will help shape a collective response on the part of all stakeholders, including the church, to sexual violence in Colombia and to its prevention.

## 5.1 Conclusions

The voices of 67 women survivors of sexual violence in the Caribbean region of Colombia have been presented here. More than half of these women (58 per cent) were victims of violence at the hands of armed men from rebel groups, criminal bands and paramilitary groups, as well as national police and FARC. The rest of the group (42 per cent) were attacked in their own homes by people known to them, particularly family members, with stepfathers or brothers being the main aggressors. Of this group, ten women (15 per cent) said they were abused by their spouses or long-term partners.

All of them have changed as a result of their abuse. There has been a physical and emotional impact on their lives, and all of them live with the fear of rejection, stigmatisation and threats. The women expressed various needs which are not being met. The institutional response to the needs of the survivors interviewed is slow, at times non-existent. In San Jacinto, a woman shared that two of her children were raped by two neighbours related to them: they reported this to the ICBF (Instituto Colombiano para el Bienestar Familiar – Colombian Institute for Family Well-being) and the public prosecutor's office, but only one of the suspects was prosecuted and the two children were not given the psychosocial care they needed. The youngest, at the age of six, is now showing signs of delay in his cognitive development.

Some areas are still under the threat of attack from armed forces, providing a difficult environment to operate in, particularly as regards creating safe spaces for women to speak of their experiences and heal from their trauma. In areas such as Córdoba, the church is fearful of getting too heavily involved in the issue of sexual violence, given the threat posed by the presence of armed groups. In such areas, women are afraid to report their experiences, because they are fearful of aggressors and of the social stigma, and because of the pain of recounting their stories.

Whether they have a Christian faith or not, most survivors agreed that the church could provide for some of their needs, particularly in the areas of psychosocial and spiritual support, as well as in training and education.

## 5.2 Recommendations

The situation in Colombia remains highly complex due to the diversity of actors and causes that contribute to the occurrence of sexual violence. An effective response to sexual violence in Colombia will require a holistic approach, working in alliance with all relevant actors, with a commitment to act from national authorities, government ministries, service providers, policymakers, the international community and local faith communities, among others. Given its findings, this report puts forward the following recommendations:

### **Recommendations to the Colombian government:**

- Commit to protecting survivors of sexual violence and ensuring their rights are upheld.
- Scrutinise and strengthen the judicial system to hold perpetrators to account and end the culture of impunity; for example, commit to improving mechanisms for the investigation and prosecution of sexual violence.
- Support increased recruitment and training of technical specialists, including female police officers, who specialise in dealing with cases of SGBV.

### **Recommendations to regional and local authorities:**

- Commit to protecting survivors of sexual violence and ensure they have access to adequate medical and legal services in their localities.
- Ensure that staff in health and support centres are adequately trained to respond to the specific needs of survivors, providing a service that is confidential and free from stigma and judgement.
- Consult and engage with local communities, faith groups and faith leaders, such as local church leaders, to create support groups for survivors and address the causes and consequences of SGBV, particularly those linked with discriminatory social norms and behaviour.

### **Recommendations to non-governmental organisations:**

- Continue to build awareness of the issue of SGBV and promote gender equality among the general public and the government.
- Support initiatives seeking to build capacity for the social and economic inclusion of survivors, and improve access to education and training for survivors and their children. Establish support networks for survivors, as well as early warning systems and exit routes from conflict zones for women and project staff under threat.
- Lobby the government and local authorities about giving survivors access to quality services, including health services, legal advice, education for themselves and their children, financial support and protection.
- Engage with local church initiatives on the response to SGBV and strengthen their capacity to support survivors, for example, including them in counselling training and awareness-raising about referral systems in the community.
- Support the process of producing an historical account of the armed conflict from the viewpoint of women survivors of sexual violence.
- Put in place robust systems of beneficiary selection and survivor identification, to counteract fraud and identity theft.

### **Recommendations to faith leaders:**

- Show leadership and challenge the prevalence of SGBV by speaking out against the negative values, behaviours and attitudes at its root.
- Mobilise pastors and church leaders with the skills to respond to survivors' needs. Challenge them to provide support to all survivors, whether Christian or not, and to meet their practical needs.
- Create a safe and confidential space within the church for survivors to come and receive psychosocial support, prayer, counselling and practical help.
- Equip key people in churches with basic counselling skills.
- Work with others to ensure good referral systems and respond to survivors' need for training and education.

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# APPENDIX

## Local actors working on SGBV in targeted areas

As the researchers travelled to the target areas to meet with survivors, they also took the opportunity to meet with key stakeholders in the area to gain a better understanding of the current actors who could support the target groups. Below is a breakdown of the actors currently working in the areas, whom the researchers met during their research.

### Women's associations and civil society organisations

In the provinces of Atlántico and Córdoba, and the sub-region of Montes de María, women's associations and networks are carrying out advocacy work around recognition of the fundamental rights of women. These groups include the Narrar para Vivir association, which brings together some 800 women from the 15 municipalities of the Montes de María subregion; ASOMUJERES, operating out of Montería; and the Angela Davis Association of Black Communities in Atlántico. Considering the limits on their organisational capacity and resources and the threats they face, the work being done by these groups is of great value: they are providing women with emotional support and encouraging them to speak out about their experiences. These organisations are also actively negotiating with the government about public policies and projects, which will enable them to develop their capacity to participate in decision-making that affects them on a social and personal level.

### Faith-based organisations

In terms of support from the church and faith-based organisations working to support survivors of sexual violence, two churches were identified in Barranquilla. These churches are running women's and family support groups, giving particular attention to women and girl survivors of sexual violence. These two churches provide counselling and run workshops and activities to help families build healthy relationships. In San Jacinto, through a foundation, one church is working with women survivors of sexual violence, providing spiritual and psychological support to them. This church is also addressing violence in young people, running activities with boys and girls and working with young gang members. The churches contacted in Montería, Tierralta and Montelíbano had no specific programme for addressing SGBV; these churches recognise that they could be playing a more active role, particularly in providing spiritual support and helping these women to recover from their trauma and find hope.



Tearfund is a founding member of We Will Speak Out, a global coalition of faith-based NGOs, churches and organisations, supported by an alliance of technical partners and individuals who together commit themselves to see the end of sexual violence across communities around the world.

[www.wewillspeakout.org](http://www.wewillspeakout.org)

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