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Raped and Escaped: A Colombian Mother's Fight to Protect her Sons

Word spread quickly that day in 2002 in Santo Domingo, a small town built into the mountains near Medellin, Colombia. People told Nury Ciro that the notorious paramilitary group that recently moved into her town had taken her teenage son. But none of her neighbors, out of fear for their own lives, would tell her where her son was.

She rushed through town, begging, crying, calling his name as she made her way past the houses and shops lining the broad stone stairway carved into the mountain. A man walked by and whispered, "Keep climbing the stairs."

In a panic and out of breath, on a landing Ciro saw her son kneeling down, his hands bound behind his back, tears flowing down his cheeks. Several paramilitary soldiers kept their guns on him, trying to force him to smoke marijuana cigarettes.

"Smoke!" they commanded. "That will turn you into a man."

Ciro ran to hug her son, but the paramilitaries began beating her with the butts of their guns. They knocked her down, and kicked her. They said they were going to take him to enlist and fight with them.

"They said that my son would be for the war. I told them no. I will not allow that," Ciro said.

She managed to get to her feet and untie her son's hands. They ran as the paramilitaries screamed threats.

Ciro managed to protect Yeison – along with her three other sons – from being abducted by the paramilitaries. But she paid a steep price. Today she describes her ordeal – beatings, rapes, threats to kill her and ultimately forcing her to flee. Wearing black, half-framed, square glasses, her face wrinkled around her brown narrow eyes. She fidgeted on her psychologist's couch in Medellin and told her story. Now 48, Ciro has lived her entire life in Colombia's half-century civil war.

Nury Ciro is one of the many victims of rape and displacement in Colombia's ongoing civil war. Most of the victims have been civilians, and many of them women, according to the National Center for Historical Memory in Colombia. Like many women, she has only recently felt confident enough to come out and reveal memories that were once suppressed and discarded.

"Women's rights didn't even exist until recently. The militants that went to war were convinced that women had no rights and this aggravated the violation of human rights on

women,” said Adriana Arboleda, a lawyer in Medellin who handles sexual abuse cases. “We have the violence around the conflict that denies women participation in society.”

Many Colombians were hopeful about the peace talks between the Colombian government and the country’s largest rebel group, the FARC. These talks were making progress in their second year until it was suspended in November 2014.

The dialogue was a pillar to resolving the country’s ongoing war, the government and the FARC did something never before done—they agreed to include victims in the conversation. Just last year, the government had appointed two women to join in the peace talks.

“These are rights that we are struggling for,” said Patricia Bedoya, Nury’s psychologist in Medellin. “We want to tell the world there is something happening here, and we have to do something about it. So it’s not only up to women. It’s not only up to Colombian women. It’s up to Colombia.”

But, the war isn’t over.

“There is still a conflict with many victims. This is what Nury lives in today,” said Bedoya. “The conflict is still here and women are in the middle, paying with their bodies, with everything, struggling from early morning until dawn, finding a way to save their lives and her children’s lives.”

The notorious paramilitary group known as AUC came to Santo Domingo in July 2002 to oust guerrillas of the FARC that were living there.

“The arrival of paramilitaries meant a greater aggression towards women,” said Adriana Arboleda, a lawyer in Medellin who handles sexual abuse cases. “This helped to show their power against other groups like the guerrilla groups.”

Nury Nury was a leader in the town, the mother of four sons – three teenagers, and one boy. She was the owner of a small store. She was a member of the Parent’s Association in the town’s school, director of the barrio’s Youth Group and treasurer of the Community Board. When the AUC came into town, other leaders went missing, were killed and dismembered.

“The fear was ever-present, but that did not keep me from working,” said Nury. “I was never one to go down without a fight, I have never let anyone step over me.”

The Threats

After that incident with Yeison, Nury couldn’t bring her sons to school and none of them wanted to leave the house. She realized she couldn’t leave the barrio either. They would get on the bus she was on and pull her off and beat her.

Members of the paramilitary group would come to her store and take drinks and food, and demanded protection money, a toll everyone had to pay for the “protection” of the AUC.

“I told them, ‘I am not working to give you my money.’”

Under pressure and constant threats, Ciro had to close her business. The paramilitaries continuously confronted her and asked her where she was hiding her children.

“I did not provoke them or answer them,” she said. “I told them nothing for my children's safety.”

Child recruitment by armed groups is underreported in Colombia, according to the United Nations. At least 81 Colombian children had been recruited – or kidnapped – into illegal armed groups in 2013, according to a report by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the Children and Armed Conflict. Colombia remains one of 23 countries listed by the UN for grave violations committed against children.

Mothers in Colombia are well aware of these statistics from first-hand experience.

“It's difficult for a family because we have to take care of our children that are chosen for war,” said Stella Ciro Gomes, Ciro’s sister that lives in the mountains of Medellin.

And Ciro was not going to let this happen to her children; she needed to get them out.

Two Down, Two to Go

The threats escalated. In October 2002, after she had rescued Yeison, she was told that the paramilitaries were intent on enlisting her two oldest sons – or killing them.

From then on, she began to think about how she could get them out of Santo Domingo safely. Fifteen days passed until she heard that a neighbor was moving to another barrio and saw an opportunity.

Ciro begged her neighbor to dress them as movers then she glanced over and saw a chiffonier, a three-compartment piece of furniture. Ciro had an idea.

The next day at 6 a.m. Ciro put her two oldest sons into that furniture and it was the first thing they placed into the moving truck. Ciro went home to pray for their safety. At 2 p.m. she got a call at a neighbor’s house that her two sons made it to her aunt’s home safely.

“I was so happy,” said Ciro. “I told myself: two down, two to go.”

The paramilitaries soon noticed that Ciro’s two eldest sons disappeared and they threatened her. She was worried about getting her two younger sons out of Santo Domingo, too.

Consequences Paid

On December 16, 2002, a friend asked to take her son Anderson to a few Christmas masses at the church. Her other son, Jhonny begged to go too. Ciro agreed but told her friend to let them stay the night instead of bringing them home late.

After her sons were gone, she changed into pajamas and was ready to relax in an empty home when there was a banging at the door at 6:30 p.m. She asked who it was. There was an eerie silence. When she asked again, it was members of the AUC. Fearful that something happened to her sons, she swung open the door.

The first thing she saw was a weapon pointed at her forehead and four paramilitaries pushed her back into her house. With liquor bottles in hand, they pushed her towards the bedroom and shut the front door behind them.

Ciro begged, "What's going on?"

"What did I do wrong?"

One of them, known as "Perroch" said, "We told you, you would pay the consequences."

Her mind was scattered and in her mind she thought, "I am dead, they will kill me."

They took her by her head and pushed her on the bed. They ripped her pajama and took off her underwear. They tied her hands and feet at each corner of the bed and raped her through the night. They drank alcohol and walked around the house naked, taking turns with her.

After they left the next morning, she untied herself.

"All I could do was take a shower," said Ciro. "I locked myself in for three days. I did not come out of the house for anything or open the door to anyone." At first, she did not report the crime.

"Women feel guilt, embarrassment and denial. If they report that, they lose possibility of safety, said Valeria Eberle, an anthropology professor at ICESI University in Cali. "It's a way to mark that population. They kill the men and mark the women."

When Ciro finally went to the police station in Santo Domingo, the police refused to take her complaint. They said she had probably been out on the streets late at night, dressed provocatively.

"Ever since then I blamed myself. I thought I had brought that upon myself, by dressing the way I dressed," said Ciro. "At that point I thought justice did not exist. I went back home and I went out less."

“In Colombia, we still have this paradigm, or a certain belief that women have some responsibility when they are sexually abused,” said Bruno Angel Madrid Lopez, a psychologist for victims in Colombia. “It’s because you’re wearing a skirt, because you had a lot of lipstick on, because you were walking alone at night.”

In Colombia, sexual violence cases have a 98 percent impunity rate, according to an international forum for women held in Bogota called, “Dialogues in White-Purple.”

“When there is impunity, the woman feels that she is not capable of telling her story to the world or to a professional or to the public institutions,” said Lopez. “Hence, there are many women who suffer the agony of sexual abuse in silence.”

More than 90,000 cases that have been reported during the half-century civil war, and fewer than 10 percent of the perpetrators have been sentenced, according to a report at the forum.

“When we confront cases where we can't find justice, we feel the impotency not only as lawyers but as human beings,” said Adriana Arboleda, a lawyer for victims in Medellin. “The victims look to us hoping for redemption.”

Among displaced women such as Ciro, at least half are victims of sexual assault, but only 10 percent of the victims take their cases to court, according to the non-governmental Observatory on Gender, Democracy and Human Rights.

“In Colombia, investigation and prosecution of this kind of crimes doesn't happen,” said Adriana Arboleda, a lawyer for victims in Medellin. “This has led victims to believe there's no guaranteed security for them.”

Arboleda says the new "victims law" in Colombia is not the resolution the country needs, because these laws are being made to look with “favor on victimizers.” It was a law to favor the victims monetarily but it was not designed to preserve justice.

“Justice? There is no justice in Colombia,” said David Villa, a university researcher in Medellin. “Most probably, these situations are going to stay in impunity in terms of justice.”

Last Two to Go

Ciro returned from the police station determined to get her two younger sons out of the village as soon as possible. On New Year’s Eve, Ciro’s son Jhonny said he was sick of being followed everywhere. He promised his mother he knew a safe path to his grandmother’s house, several villages away. She let him go. Later that evening, she received a call that Jhonny had made it to his grandmother’s house. He would stay there, safe.

Three days later, she had been able to send her youngest son to stay with his father's family. All four of her sons were out of Santo Domingo and safe from the paramilitaries. But she was not.

The paramilitaries soon realized her sons were gone. They came into her house through the garden and raped her again. She realized she needed to leave, too.

When a small hand-written note appeared under her door reading, "Today is the day we leave. Do not pack anything or it'll raise suspicion," she followed the instructions. The note was from a dissident member of the paramilitary group. He was trying to help its victims. The man, Fernando, came and led Ciro and several of her neighbors down the mountain paths to a small bus waiting for them. The paramilitaries spotted them and fired on them as they ran the last yards to the bus, but all 28 made it.

"I felt free and for the first time and I said to myself, 'They will not kill me.'"

That same year, Fernando was murdered. Ciro believes that he felt guilt from the acts of his paramilitary brothers and that's why he helped her.

Three years after Ciro escaped, the AUC "demobilized." But, in September 2013, the AUC was showing a presence in northern Colombia, according to reports.

In exchange for confessing their crimes, during demobilization, paramilitaries received 8-year sentences for committing crimes against humanity (this includes rape) in accordance with Colombia's Justice and Peace Law. One former paramilitary leader, Ramon Isaza was sentenced to 8 years for crimes committed over the course of a 30-year career. The UN has claimed that the demobilization of the paramilitary groups did not follow protocol.

Victims of Colombia's armed conflict have fallen into a grey area. This summer, victims of paramilitary groups found that they might have to face their attacker sooner than they imagined.

Approximately 160 incarcerated paramilitaries were released before December 2014 after finishing their 8-year sentences. About 2,000 paramilitaries that were demobilized are released.

Out of the four paramilitaries responsible for Ciro's rape two are dead, one has disappeared and one is out of jail.

Continuing the Legal Path

Nury Ciro has kept her rape a secret to most of her family even though she is currently fighting for her reparations, monetary compensation, the government's version of justice for war crimes.

Ciro has two cases open, one for displacement and one for rape. After two years in the system, Ciro's rape case is now under investigation. Nury's lawyer plans to hold the group's leader Don Berna Murillo responsible for the actions of his members. Murillo is currently incarcerated in Miami. Ciro is unclear when the next court date will be and continues to wait.

In the end, the only conclusions that can come from these cases are monetary. The system does not yet provide a deeper support.

“Unfortunately there is still not an extended, general program to psychosocially aid many women in this country,” said Silvia Garcia, Director of Women Who Create Corporation in Colombia. “A lot of women have gone through abuse but have no recourse to aid them.”

Ciro has flipped her experience and chooses to share her story to help other women come out.

“Little by little I can surpass this,” said Ciro. “The more I talk about it, the less I hurt.”

[INSERT VIDEO:]

THE END