

COVID-19

GNWP Mitigation and Adaptation Strategy and Appeal

October 2020

Country Update

Colombia

Context and government response:

As of October 15, 2020, Colombia has registered 936,982 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 28,457 deaths. Initially, the government implemented a series of containment measures to mitigate the spread of the disease, including a national lockdown, the suspension of all national air travel, the closure of all borders, mandatory social distancing and the suspension of all in-person classes. After nearly five months, on September 1, national authorities lifted these measures. The government has now allowed local authorities to impose their own restrictions based on the rate of infection in the area. The World Health Organization has reported on June 3, 2020 that Latin America is now the new epicenter of the pandemic. Regional experts are also warning that if nothing is done, the region will see major setbacks, including a massive increase in poverty levels.

Summary of impact:

The pandemic continues to have a profound impact on existing gender disparities. The government measures have aggravated women's economic inequality, particularly for informal workers, who make up 46,8% of employed women in Colombia for the quarter of June to August 2020. According to some interviews conducted by GNWP, women have been more likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic than men. The Colombian National Department of Statistics (Dane) describes that 2.5 million Colombians were unemployed in June 2020, one million men and 1.5 million women.

Moreover, women complain that the national government has not taken effective measures to address their specific needs and demand a basic income for female-headed households since they have been the most affected by the effects of the pandemic. Women are facing increased burdens of unpaid care work at home due to lockdowns and school closures. The household economic survey reported that they spend around 7.1 hours a day on unpaid work, while men spend 3.2 hours a day on these tasks. The burden has also increased for women who were able to keep their jobs, and had to reconcile them with the increased demands of housework and unpaid care. In a way this is seen as a regression and as a reinforcement of patriarchal values, since it forced women to return back to the domestic sphere.

The lockdown measures have exacerbated the risk of gender-based violence. The volume of calls to "Línea Purpura" helpline in the capital, Bogota during the period March-September 2020 increased by 200%. A GNWP partner observed that the large volume of reports slowed down the response of the Police and Prosecutor's Office. They noted that there have been cases, in which women were not able to get through to the helpline, or were hung up on.

The government measures taken to contain the spread of COVID-19 have had a significant impact on other vulnerable populations, including indigenous populations, internally displaced persons (IDPs), Venezuelan refugees and migrants, Colombian host communities, and low-income households. They were already in a dire food insecurity situation, in June 2020, OCHA reported that 45.6% of displaced people in Colombia are facing food insecurity. Food shortages have also disproportionately affected indigenous communities, for example in Cauca and Gujara, and those living in rural areas. Furthermore, indigenous communities in Colombia's Amazon region have little access to health facilities and safe drinking water supply systems, and are forced to travel for several days to receive medical attention. In rural and poor communities, particularly Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, the risks of the disease are amplified due to limited medical and service infrastructures.

Access to technology is another challenge that has been highlighted by the pandemic. In Colombia, men are more likely than women to use the internet. Colombia's insufficient digital infrastructure contributes to a growing rural-urban digital divide and digital gender gap. GNWP partner, Red Departamental de Mujeres del Cauca, reported that in times of COVID-19, digital platforms are also playing an important role in violence against social leaders as they face increasing online harassment. This particularly affects women's mental health. Overall, there has been an increase in fake news and the government has been using "cyber patrols" to identify accounts that spread fake information. As of August 2020, it had identified 128 sources of fake news through cyber patrols and suspended 176 internet pages.

Confinement measures have also served the purpose of illegal armed groups as they are taking advantage of the health crisis generated by COVID-19. They have imposed more severe conditions than the national government through manuals of conduct and brochures that are distributed on public roads, encouraging curfews and lockdowns to prevent the spread of the virus. According to a report presented by Human Rights Watch, the groups have threatened, killed, and attacked people they perceive are failing to comply.

Another alarming factor is the increase in the recruitment of children. According to the coalition against linking girls, boys, and young people to the armed conflict in Colombia (COALICO), the number of children recruited by ELN and FARC dissidents has increased by 113%, compared to the total number of recruitment cases registered in 2019. The Office of the Attorney General of the Nation filed a complaint before the Prosecutor's Office to start a thorough investigation of this situation. Fernando Carrillo, Colombian Attorney General, identified that the closure of schools and the decrease in military actions by the state have contributed to this increase. Since the state is primarily concerned with addressing the pandemic, illegal armed groups are taking advantage and expanding their control over territories. In addition, the suspension of school classes has had a particular impact on rural populations where there is limited internet connectivity, and boys and girls may feel extra pressure to help their families financially amid the pandemic. As a result, illegal armed actors attract children by offering them the possibility of earning an income from drug or arms trafficking. It is important to note that minors are not only used as soldiers, but they are also sexually exploited. In this sense, it seems that COVID-19 has amplified the culture of impunity in the country since seven army soldiers recently admitted to the rape of a 13-year-old indigenous girl.

Additionally, confinement measures pose a multitude of challenges as they prevent the mobility of civil society organizations and support networks that work to counter-recruitment or as liaisons for collecting demands, especially among vulnerable communities. In order to allow humanitarian access, some municipalities are requesting a negative COVID-19 test and when this is not available, they might request a fee to enter the territory. The Government's Victims Unit has adopted measures to guarantee immediate humanitarian aid to the forcibly displaced population, with special emphasis on indigenous and Afro-descendant populations. As of May, at least 15 humanitarian organizations had assisted more than 339,000 people in 27 of the 32 departments.

There are a total of 411 activities, of which 114 correspond to the water, sanitation and hygiene sector, 86 to protection, 77 to health, 62 to food security and nutrition, 40 to temporary accommodation, 12 to early recovery, 4 to education in emergencies and 16 of them are multipurpose.

Summary of impact on the Colombian peace agreement:

Although the implementation of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) has experienced significant challenges and delays since 2016, the COVID-19 pandemic has further and directly affected its implementation process. Development plans at the municipal, departmental and national levels have slowed down or are being held virtually, and financial priorities are changing. In this sense, the pandemic has been used as an excuse to divert funding away from the peace agreement implementation, including the transitional justice institutions; Special Jurisdiction for Peace (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, JEP) and the Clarity and Truth Commission (Comisión de Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, CEV).

On March 30, the National Liberation Army (ELN) declared a unilateral ceasefire amidst the coronavirus outbreak. However, clashes were reported between ELN members and other military forces and justified according to the principle of "the right to defend ourselves". Despite calls for an extension, the ELN ended the unilateral ceasefire on May 1 and resumed military operations because of a lack of response to its ceasefire announcement by the conservative government of President Ivan Duque. According to GNWP partners, since the end of the ELN's unilateral ceasefire, there has been no other attempt by the government or non-state armed groups to declare a ceasefire. In fact, the levels of violence have continued to increase. Colombian sociologist, Javier Calderón, remarked that the fighting between armed forces and the ELN has increased by 22 percent in the first semester of 2020, compared to the same period last year.

Indepaz, an independent watchdog, reported that in 2020, 267 people were killed in 67 massacres. Attacks against women leaders and human rights defenders (HRDs) have increased during the pandemic. In the department of Cauca alone, there have been 41 reported murders of women leaders since the beginning of the pandemic. Due to mobility and travel restriction measures, HRDs have not been able to move freely throughout the country, allowing for easier identification and detection. Despite this, the Colombian government has reduced protective measures offered by the National Protection Unit, exposing HRDs to increasing threats. The government has failed to provide armored cars for defenders, which are required as protection measures, making it more difficult for them to get to safety in case of an attack. Afro-descendant leaders in Colombia also reported that the process of implementing protection measures has stalled, exposing communities to severe violence. As a result, the Inter American Commission on Human Rights called on States to continue to uphold international standards of human rights protection.

Responses led by women peacebuilders:

Several coalitions of national civil society organizations sent a letter to President Ivan Duque expressing concern about continued collusion between the military and armed paramilitary groups. In Cauca, Colombia, the police force has used the pandemic as an excuse to abuse power and intimidate populations. This has increased the distrust between the police forces and local communities, including local women. They have also requested immediate protection, and multilateral ceasefire and differentiated action for Afro-Colombians, indigenous people, and HRDs during the COVID-19 crisis.

GNWP's partners, Red Nacional de Mujeres (RNM) and Red Departamental de Mujeres (in Cauca and Tolima) are committed to mitigating the effects of the pandemic. They have taken the role of first responders and partnered with indigenous guards to deliver food, hygiene, and sexual and reproductive health items to remote communities. As of June 2020, they distributed 10,000 facemasks and over 1,000 condoms and dozens of pregnancy test kits.

Furthermore, RNM also organized UNSCR 1325 localization workshops with local women to monitor the implementation of the peace agreement and ensure the fulfillment of the gender provisions at the local level, while also advocating for the inclusion of the diverse needs of women in the design and implementation of COVID-19 response. In spite of this, women claim that they are not included in decision-making processes. Women's exclusion from planning for COVID-19 response and recovery is exacerbated by the overall low levels of representation. Colombian women represent 52 percent of the country's total population, but they still do not reach 30 percent for elected positions, despite the Quota Law (Law 581) approved in 2000. Currently, women occupy 12 percent of the Mayor's Offices and Councils, 16 percent of the Governorships and 19 percent of the Congress.

Another challenge faced by many women-led organizations is funding cuts and suspension of contracts. This has forced them to seek cheaper office space, reduce administrative expenses, for example by cutting the internet access in the office, and suspending some services. Despite funding shortages, women peacebuilders continue to help others through virtual platforms, by providing emotional support and legal resources to deal with domestic violence. For example, the Interchurch Organization for Development Co-operation (ICCO) and Alliance of Women Weavers of Life, launched the campaign "You're Not Alone", which aims to raise awareness and prevent gender-based violence, which has spiked to alarming levels during the mandatory lockdowns. Psychosocial support is provided through social networks and women's organizations have also launched digital campaigns with educational images to create awareness about new masculinities and gender violence.