

Opinion - Covid-19 in Colombia: Migration, Armed Conflict and Gendered Violence

Written by Priscyll Anctil Avoine

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PRISCYLL ANCTIL AVOINE, JUN 10 2020

In Colombia, 2019 ended with massive demonstrations throughout the country, gathering together several groups, such as students, unions, retirees, feminist organizations, indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians and environmental defenders. Latin America people raised their voices against neoliberal policies and, in Colombia, against President Duque's leadership. It was at this very important historical moment – when social protests were staggering in early 2020 – that the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. The pandemic shed light on the drastic impacts of neoliberal policies implemented since the 1980s, affecting disproportionately the Global South and revealing deep flaws in the dominant economic system that have created serious social inequalities, privatizing and weakening the healthcare systems now facing the COVID-19.

Despite the agreement signed with the Farc-ep in 2016, Colombia remains a country marked by armed violence, aggressive extractivism, drug trafficking and the perpetuation of social inequalities. Levels of violence overly affects women and girls, LGBTIQ+, indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations. Thus, understanding the COVID-19 crisis implies taking these dynamics into account, particularly in relation to the measures adopted given their gendered and racialized consequences. →

As of June 9, 2020, 42,078 cases of COVID-19 and 1,372 deaths have been confirmed by the National Institute of Health showing a constant increase in cases since March. Indigenous people of the small municipality of Leticia (Amazonas) have been harshly affected, with 1,962 cases and 71 deaths. Institutionally, some departments have no capacity in terms of infrastructure – including intensive care beds – and border regions are of particular concern. Duque's government was criticized for its slowness in taking political measures and its difficulty in responding to the economic challenges of the pandemic, particularly affecting women, migrants and informal workers. In addition, militarization was prioritized in some departments of the country in order to control populations and 'guarantee compliance with the compulsory preventive isolation decreed by the national government'. In this way, confinement has not meant a relief from violence, on the contrary. And this violence is classist, gendered, racialized.

Feminist scholars in International Relations and Development have pointed out to the importance of studying pandemics from multiple inequalities frames and have warned about the violent consequences of militarizing the everyday life of women. They have shown the necessity of intersectional public policies to respond to the intertwined forms of oppressions. In this text, I wish to propose an initial reflection on the effects of the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in the context of the armed conflict on marginalized groups in Colombia, especially women and migrants.

Impacts on Women: Violence and Informal Work

During the lockdown, 19 women were murdered in Colombia, most of them by their male partner. Confinement has exposed women to their aggressors: a triple femicide took place in Cartagena and a human rights activist of the *Organización Femenina Popular* was murdered on March 25. The organization Kairos confirmed that armed groups were taking advantage of 'the institutional and governmental fissures exacerbated by the global pandemic' to attack women's rights and LGBTIQ+ groups.

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Feminist scholars as V. Spike Peterson have proven that home is not a place of protection for women: the lockdown as an orienting principle of the fight against COVID-19 shows that public health policies often overlook gender-specific experience of pandemic. In Colombia, 77% of sexual violence against women is perpetrated in their homes. During the lockdown, the reports of gender-based violence have increased of 50%.

Women also experience higher levels of economic precarity: it is a central issue to be analyzed regarding the measures taken by Colombia which are modelled on countries with different employment patterns. Colombian women are over-represented in informal work: their survival depends directly on a daily inflow of money and their lockdown represents an attack on their ability to meet their basic needs. Women working in domestic jobs are particularly affected: in Colombia, it is estimated that 96% of domestic workers in Colombia are women and 61% of them are not earning the minimum wage. Lockdown has aggravated their already precarious financial situation and lack of access to social security system. Besides, women make up 74% of those working in the health and social sectors. The COVID-19 crisis thus sheds light on unsalaried work and care work as central points of global capital accumulation.

Migration and Armed Conflict in Time of Pandemic Outbreak

In COVID-19 context, the definition of “dignified” life takes on a whole new dimension, leading us to question systems of exclusion. Bauman and Donskis (2013) challenged political modernity and its epistemic presuppositions, particularly the notion of progress. In the case of Colombia, this allows us to see the ‘pariahs’ of modernity, consecrated by systemic sexism and racism, among others towards migrant and indigenous populations.

Since 2016, Colombia has been one of the receiving countries for Venezuelan migrants fleeing precarious conditions. However, the country was not institutionally ready to receive such a large number of people at the same time as it is itself facing several challenges, including millions of victims of the internal armed conflict.

These socio-economic conditions have worsened with COVID-19 following Parkin Daniels: many migrants work in the informal sector, they have no home to confine themselves and their economic survival depends on the resources they manage to mobilize on their migration path, often by transiting several countries. Of the almost 2 million people from Venezuela who have migrated to Colombia since 2016, half have no regularized status, which automatically deprive them from accessing healthcare system. This is preoccupying since many of them are women with their children or pregnant women. Profamilia and USAID report that ‘184,455 Venezuelan migrant and refugee girls are particularly exposed to age and gender inequalities’, directly impacting on their security and exposing them to ‘physical and psychological violence such as malnutrition, abandonment, trafficking for sexual exploitation and different forms of sexual violence’.

For example, in Bucaramanga (Santander) Venezuelan migrant women face glaring problems as shown by Esteban: the most striking are gender-based violence, the lack of specific measures for their sexual and reproductive health and the drastic increase in femicide. This unequal access to healthcare system is further aggravated with the COVID-19 crisis: the slow responses of the Colombian government to migrations issues was already largely criticized before the pandemic outbreak. According to Profamilia & USAID, the implementation of measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 might ‘jeopardize the achievements of the response in the right to health of migrants and refugees’ and accentuate ‘social exclusion and ethical dilemmas of who should or should receive hospital care’, usually based on their status for healthcare system access.

Migrants also face growing stigmatization and xenophobia. This amplified with COVID-19, considering the emphasis put on ‘social contagion’ and its association with ‘others’ / ‘foreigners’. As a result, more than 25 000 of them have returned to Venezuela because of the pandemic, creating a ‘new category of migrants’.

In addition to migratory issues, the pandemic has not curbed socio-political violence in Colombia. On the contrary, it has reaffirmed the power of some armed groups. On the one hand, groups like the National Liberation Army (ELN), have entered a ceasefire. As of April 30, 2020, ELN and the Colombian security forces had completed 47 days without attacks, when ELN put an end to their ceasefire. On the other hand, massive population displacements due

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to violence continue to be perpetrated in the midst of the pandemic: on April 5, 2020, 393 indigenous people had to flee the clashes. According to Cantillo, this is the paradox of the COVID-19 in Colombia: criminal groups and politically organized armed groups are entering a ceasefire and, at the same time, death threatening the populations if they do not respect the quarantine.

In several regions of the country, the State is not fulfilling its institutional, political and administrative roles. Besides, COVID-19 undermines State capacity, which is specifically critical in a country marked by armed violence since decades as is the case with Colombia. Armed groups find themselves supplanting the Colombian State and administering 'justice' in many territories. Force is used to 'confine' populations: by distributing pamphlets, threatening to kill anyone who might come out, or even taking advantage of the pandemic to reorganize the territorialities and dynamics of the armed conflict.

Since 2016 peace agreement, paramilitarism has resurged, particularly through the systematic assassination of human rights activists, among which many women, indigenous and environmental activists. Since March 1 to June 4, 2020, 68 human rights activists as well as 11 ex-combatants from the Farc-ep were killed. In the rural areas of Colombia, the pandemic also means 'thousands of peasants have to face a double concern: the pandemic and armed organizations'.

Policy Recommendations and Future Research

Drawing upon the Colombian case, four preliminary lines of research can be stated. First, as Hankivsky and Kapilashrami argue, reflecting on intersectional public policy analysis to improve responses to global pandemics, measures and leadership both need to be diversified and de-universalized to find solutions regarding COVID-19. Second, a race and gender-based analysis of inequalities is needed. Public policies should take into account multiple oppressions and their intertwinement in times of crisis. It is essential to link the study of economic and public health measures to issues related to informal work and gender, as shown by the Colombian case. Third, data analysis and methodologies should be decolonized to inform public policies. In Colombia, armed violence and the gendered and racialized impacts of counter-pandemic measures are central to issuing policy recommendations. Otherwise, the lack of data generates negative effects on populations. Fourth, as violence is part of daily reality in several countries, the pandemic and political and economic measures should be approached differently. Many of these accounts of violence are directly linked to neoliberal capitalism, which has further exposed certain populations to violence and precarity, as exposed by Butler. Research is needed to understand the consequences of these neoliberal policies and contemporary wars on populations, and how these realities are intertwined with other emergencies – such as COVID-19 – that overlap with them.

About the author:

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