

Women as embodied infrastructures

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Women as Embodied Infrastructures: Self-Led Organisations Sustaining the Lives of Female Victims of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Colombia

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Abstract

The article looks at women self-led organisations as embodied infrastructures (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016) supporting the lives of victim-survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Colombia. Focusing on three elements that form the concept of women as embodied infrastructures namely, i) the roles women play as mentors and role models for other women, ii) women's work in women's services, networks, and organisations, iii) radical care, I argue that women as embodied infrastructures provide important listening and learning safe-spaces where victim-survivors can regain self-love, a political understanding of their victimization, access peer support, gain citizenship skills, and began to heal. By enabling victims-survivors to become agents in the process of rebuilding their lives, their livelihoods, and their wider ecologies the work of these organisations promotes gender-transformative change and is central for peacebuilding and transitional justice processes.

Keywords

women-led organisations, embodied infrastructures, peacebuilding, colombia

Introduction

This article conceptualises the practices, actions and everyday activities of women and their organisations as embodied infrastructures (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016), and argues that they are a central environmental factor influencing how people deal with their experiences of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) (Clark, 2021b). The analysis is grounded in qualitative fieldwork conducted in Colombia between January and June 2019, in the framework of a five-year multi-sited and mixed-methods research project exploring resilience in victim-survivors of CRSV. During the interviews and their

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analysis, it became evident that women's bodies, material actions and practices create the infrastructures that sustain their own lives and the lives of their families and communities, and as a result they are an important scaffolding for peacebuilding and transitional justice (TJ).

The concept of women as embodied infrastructures refers to the multiple ways in which women's bodies, and their material and practical actions become the facilitators, the embodied support providing access to services and enabling change through women's networks (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016, p. 7). Looking at the material and emotional work done by women's organisations and women's bodies in conflict affected societies and transitional contexts highlights how women's day-to-day actions, enable themselves and other women victim-survivors of CRSV¹ to heal and continue with their lives alongside ongoing violence and the everyday consequences of it. More importantly, understanding women as embodied infrastructures makes visible how they use their own skills, roles, and capabilities, to mend their lives and communities, a view that is lacking in the context of TJ, disaster recovery and resilience building literature (Clark, 2018, Gilmore & Moffett, 2021; McNamara et al., 2021). Furthermore, framing analyses through the lens of embodied infrastructures challenges damage-centred approaches (Tuck, 2009) because it allows us to position women not only as victims but also as agents of change (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016, p. 182).

The activities, practices and roles played by women as embodied infrastructures are intertwined with the doings of everyday peace that enable people to 'navigate life' (Mac Ginty, 2019) in deeply divided and conflict affected societies (Mac Ginty, 2014, 2019) or in contexts of no war no peace (Marijan, 2017). They are grounded in the mundane tasks performed by women to make life liveable amid violence (economic, symbolic, visceral) and underscore the importance that practices of care play in peace and conflict transformation. An issue that as Vaittinen et al. (2019) points out has not been sufficiently explored in extant literature on everyday peace and TJ. Ultimately women's embodied infrastructures bring to the fore the different strategies victim-survivors employ to live with their pain and manage their harm through forms of self-repair and informal repair (Gilmore & Moffett, 2021). Self-repair refers to the ways in which people mend themselves after their experiences of victimisation and find how to live with their past suffering (Gilmore & Moffett, 2021, pp. 473–475). Informal repair encompasses the measures civil society organisations put in place to ameliorate victims suffering, for example, counselling, recognition of suffering, spiritual support (Gilmore & Moffett, 2021, p. 458).

Colombia's Women's Movement is diverse and informed by different feminisms, it includes organisations that are working for women's equal rights but do not consider themselves feminist (Garrido, 2020, p. 115; Fernandez-Anderson, 2020). I refer to women's self-led organisations in a generic sense to talk about formal non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and informal associations and networks, headed by women working at different levels (national, regional, and local). Formal organisations such as *Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres* (*La Ruta* thereof), are legally recognised and are interconnected with international feminist NGOs from whom they gain material and financial support. Informal local associations, such as the ones led by some of the research participants, work as women networks. They lack external funding and, in many cases, symbolic and material recognition. However, the work of all these organisations engages with the effects of the armed conflict on women's bodies and their territories (Garrido, 2020).

The article is organised in four sections, the first section provides an overview of the research context and methods used. The second section discusses the concept of embodied infrastructure (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016). It, thereafter, introduces the organisations that participated in the research. Fourthly, I present empirical data collected during fieldwork to show how women as embodied infrastructures use their own bodily and emotional work and skills to mend themselves and their communities. To conclude, I discuss why understanding women and their organisations as embodied infrastructures is relevant for peacebuilding and TJ, and the importance of their caring work for gender-transformative change.

Data Collection and Methods

The data informing the article was collected in the framework of a comparative study undertaken in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), Colombia, and Uganda with women and men subjected to CRSV, in which the author participated as the in-country researcher for Colombia. The aim of the project is to understand why some victims-survivors have been able to rebuild their lives while others have not. The three case studies reflect the complex and diverse contexts in which the experiences of the research participants are immersed, these include cultural differences, types of conflict, and patterns of CRSV. Official data estimates that in Colombia 34,918 people (most of them women) have been victims of CRSV (Unidad para las Víctimas, 2022). As Kerft (2020) points out, civil society organisations in the country see CRSV as a form of gendered violence rooted in patriarchal understandings of women's role and place in society and the dominance of men (p. 466).

The research fieldwork had two stages. For the quantitative phase, the research team designed a questionnaire to measure resilience and to compare the resulting scores across the three case studies. The questionnaire included the Adult Resilience Measure (ARM),² a Traumatic events checklist, the Centrality of Events Scale (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006),³ questions about the main consequences of CRSV in participants' lives, main sources of support. Between May and September 2018, a total of 171 questionnaires were applied in Colombia by the author and our two in-country partner organisations the *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres* and the non-profit organisation PROFAMILIA.⁴ Additionally, we received support from the LGBTI organisation *Colombia Diversa*, the victim's organisation *Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales*, the *Women Wish for Better Association*,⁵ and the researcher Luz Maria Londono. Based on the resulting ARM scores, we placed participants in four quartiles and selected five potential interviewees per quartile. During the qualitative stage, between January and May 2019, I conducted a total 21 semi-structured interviews in 10 cities located across five regions.⁶

Women and Their Organisations as Embodied Infrastructures

The term infrastructure refers to the built networks and 'background structures and systems that allow social, economic, cultural and political life to happen' (Latham & Layton, 2019, p. 3) and that facilitate the flow and interchange of goods, people, and ideas (Larkin, 2013). In recent years the concept has been adopted in social sciences to look at the physical spaces, buildings, and facilities, that support urban life (e.g., railway networks, drainage systems) which are mostly taken for granted thus often only becoming visible when they breakdown (Leigh, 1999). The concept has also been used to look at the connections between people and things that sustain life in the city (Latham & Layton, 2019); how individuals and communities face and deal with growing inequalities (Hall et al., 2017); and the practices and material conditions they use to navigate the city and cope with poverty (McFarlane & Silver, 2017).

In developing the concept of *women as embodied infrastructures* Clisby and Holdsworth (2016) draw from this corpus of literature, particularly from the work of Simone (2004) and Johnson (2015) whom, according to Clisby and Holdsworth (2016), looked beyond structures of 'steel and concrete' to extend the notion of infrastructure to 'flesh and bone' (p. 9). According to Johnson (2013 in Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016, p. 10), the idea of *people as infrastructure* makes visible that because of the infrastructural violence people experience in their day-to-day lives, they must fill in the cracks, and 'recycle, repair or reengineer' broken or obsolete social and material technologies which have been mostly designed for others. They perform this work by using their bodies and creative actions, becoming in this way their own 'platforms for living', 'the infrastructures of their own lives' (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016, p. 10). These infrastructures are embodied and highly gendered due to the role

that women's bodies play at 'making social life and culture possible' (Irigaray, 1977, p. 171 in Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016, p. 11).

In this article the concept of *women as embodied infrastructures* encompasses three main elements. First, the roles women play as mentors and role models for other women, these are 'the physical embodied support networks or infrastructures created by individuals and groups of women both formally and informally within schools, workplaces and communities' that have a positive influence on women and girls around them (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016, pp. 164–165). Second, women's work in women's services, networks, and organisations. In Colombia most of the informal associations have little institutional capacity, lack external funding and depend on women's bodily work. Even national NGOs rely on the embodied efforts of their mostly female staff. The third component is radical care, which refers to the unpaid caring work performed by women supporting, and protecting themselves, other women, and their communities, allowing them to live through adversity and to self-repair.

Radical care encompasses two elements. First, what Clisby and Holdsworth (2016), call 'community management'. This is the 'usually unpaid, informal and invisible work done mostly by women at the community level to support their families and communities' and it is usually seen as 'an extension of women's

Radical care recognises the context of systemic inequality and chronic insecurity in which women's caring work takes place.

biologically essentialised but socially constructed caring and nurturing roles' (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016, p. 11). Second, radical care recognises the context of systemic inequality and chronic insecurity in which women's caring work takes place. Radical

care, encompasses vital, yet unappreciated, caring strategies and practices used by individuals and communities for enduring precarious worlds, to deal with immediate crisis, precarious futures, and when institutions and infrastructures breakdown, fail or neglect (Hobart & Kneese, 2020, pp. 2–3).

Examples of radical care found in our data include developing women's self-led organisations, supporting vulnerable community members (e.g., collecting food and clothes in more affluent parts of the city to distribute among vulnerable members of the community), and creating and nurturing friendship networks with neighbours (e.g., offering compassionate listening and support) (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016, p. 12). Finally, radical community care includes the instances in which women shield and protect their families and communities from armed actors or the attacks of state agents with their own bodies, acting as unarmed peacekeepers (Furnari et al., 2015). Examples are women like Liliana who faced the paramilitaries to prevent her neighbours being killed, and the *Mothers on the Front Line* group during the 2021 national strike (Zulver & Stallone, 2021).⁷

I am aware that in this context the concept of care could be read as reducing women to their essentialised roles as mothers, carers, and peacebuilders (Zulver, 2019). That is not my aim, *radical community care* wants to make visible, 1) the practices of solidarity required to survive, make, and sustain life in contexts of ongoing violence. 2) The political skills gained by women through their caring roles (Robinson, 2011). 3) The agency deployed by women to self-repair, respond to the dangers of conflict and the precarity of the worlds they inhabit, and 4) women's roles in non-violent peacekeeping and civilian protection work. Framing these activities using a care framework highlights practices that have been rendered invisible, and that can help us to better understand civilian's peacekeeping and peacebuilding strategies (Furnari et al., 2015; Julian & Gasser, 2019).

Women's Self-Led Organisations in Colombia

The different roles played by women's self-led organisations in peace building, conflict transformation, and responding to humanitarian emergencies has been explored by a range of scholars and practitioners

(Cookburn, 2007; Dietrich Ortega et al., 2020; Kreft, 2020; Lizarazo, 2018; Robinson, 2011; Vaittinen et al., 2019; Zulver, 2019). This growing corpus of literature discusses issues such as women's peace and anti-war activism (Cookburn, 2007); the embodied practices used by women to negotiate everyday life in highly militarised environments (Lizarazo, 2018); the sustaining practices deployed by women's organisations to care for their communities across communal divides (Vaittinen et al., 2019); the role of women's organisations in helping their members rebuild their lives after experiences of gross human rights violations (Acan et al., 2019); and the importance of women's self-led organisations in driving gender-transformative change in contexts of humanitarian response (Dietrich Ortega et al., 2020).

A common thread in this corpus of literature is the use of notions such as relationality, embodiment, and everyday practices to understand the day-to-day actions and activities carried out by women and their organisations to sustain life, fill the gaps left by the absence of the state, and respond to the fragility of the environments they inhabit. A central tenet is that women's self-led organisations are vital for women's agency and enable their members to create the conditions to get by in contexts of conflict and insecurity; carrying a gender-transformative potential (Dietrich Ortega et al., 2020; Vaittinen et al., 2019).

Colombia is a good case in which to explore the role of women and their organisations as embodied infrastructures because of the differential impact that the armed conflict has had on them and the multiple ways in which they have responded to its affectations. Over the last twenty years feminist peace activists and women's self-led organisations have built, through their gender positioning, subaltern counter narratives resisting public discourses about the armed conflict and played an active role in peace building and conflict transformation (Garrido, 2020, p. 109). Since the early 2000s women's organisations began documenting girls and women's experiences in the armed conflict, focusing, among other issues, on sexual violence as a continuum running through girls and women lives from peace to war (Yoshida & Céspedes-Báez, 2021, p. 27). Their work was central for the inclusion of a gender perspective in the peace agreements signed between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas in 2016 (Lemaitre, 2020, p. 455). Their participation in the negotiations also led to the adoption of restorative justice in the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), and the incorporation of victim's agency and expertise in the TJ process (Lemaitre, 2020, p. 455).

After the signature of the agreements and the creation of the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-repetition (SIVJRNR) women's self-led organisations have been central in building reports directed to provide information for both, the JEP and the Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition Commission (CEV) (Henao, 2019; Valiñas, 2020; Women's Link, 2019). These organisations are also overseeing the implementation of TJ mechanisms in the country and denouncing their failure to fully integrate a gender perspective in the rulings issued by the JEP so far (Alianza Cinco Claves, 2020; Humanas, 2020).

Women's Self-Led Organisations as Mothering Spaces

The women-led organisations that supported me in the field were very different in size, structure, location, and mission. They include the feminist pacifist *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres*, which brings together women from over 300 organisations across the country and has a long-standing presence in Colombia's social movement since the mid-1990s. Although *La Ruta* does not work with women as victims, the realities of the armed confrontation in the country means that many of their members have experienced some form of victimisation.

The victims-led organisation Network of Women Victims and Professionals (thereof RMVP Spanish acronym) was created with the aim to help women victims of CSRV access justice. The RMVP collaborates closely with the JEP's Investigation and Prosecution Unit (UIA) producing reports on CRSV,

conducting workshops to listen to the views of victim-survivors on issues such as reparations (JEP, 2019), and organising events directed to raise awareness on CRSV. The organisation has a national reach and works with the Global Network of Victims and Survivors to End Wartime Sexual Violence – SEMA. Although RMVP was not one of our partner organisations they connected us with women to interview. Other organisations such as the *Women Wish for Better Association* (*Women Wish* thereof) were small, with limited funding and few staff, and their work covers just a few municipalities within a regional area. Sometimes, through their work they can influence local policy on gender issues and are linked to wider national organisations such as *La Ruta* and the RMVP. In our case, *Women Wish* offered a safe space to conduct interviews and put us in contact with local women. Finally, during the interviews women participants constantly mentioned their own associations, working at neighbourhood and village levels. These associations are self-led and mostly self-funded, which means they run with very limited resources. They rely on women's own networks of solidarity, creativity, and bodily work. While formal organisations such as *La Ruta* and RMVP can apply for calls for funding and receive international support, the smaller local associations cannot, which limits their agency and capabilities.

All these organisations were a key infrastructure supporting my fieldwork. They took care of the participants (e.g., arranged refreshments and food; entertained interviewee children), granted me access to the interviewees; acted as research assistants applying questionnaires and conducting workshops, offered practical assistance (e.g., trusted taxi drivers), and provided a safe space to conduct the research. Through these everyday activities of nurturing and caring for the people involved in the project the organisation's members created what Breed (2017) calls maternal environments. These are spaces in which women and communities 'mother', build human relations and social systems 'through embodied, social and cultural practices produced through mothering' (Breed, 2017, p. 105). These caring practices are sometimes at the core of the ethos and practice of organisations such as *La Ruta*, which has a strong 'do no harm' philosophy. Finally, the informal conversations with members of the organisations gave me a deeper understanding of context and the lives of the women interviewed.⁸

Most of the women interviewed in Colombia were members of one or more organisation at the community/local level (e.g., victims, land claimants, community action boards).⁹ These women's organisations fit in the category of High-Risk Feminism (HRF) developed by Zulver (2019), which looks at local, non-profit, non-political women's groups, around which women come together because of their experiences of victimisation. According to Zulver (2019), women mobilize in HRF organisations to resist and protect themselves from victimisation and overcome victimhood, they claim a feminist stance to resist victimisation and fight for the transformation of socio-economic conditions in the country (Zulver, 2019). In some cases, these local organisations have links with national organisations or are part of national alliances such as *La Ruta*, RMVP, and the Alliance Initiative of Colombian Women for Peace (IMP).

In our interviews we did not ask questions about women's self-led organisations, however, we did ask participants about the main resources and sources of support in their lives. In Colombia, during the interviews and later during the workshops to present key findings, participants talked about the important role played by women's self-led organisations in their lives and, in some cases, about their own role as leaders of these organisations. During the analysis of the interview data, the centrality of these organisations became evident in women's processes of mending the tearing left by the different kinds of

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violence they have experienced along their life course inside and outside the armed conflict. It is based on these findings that I argue that women's self-led organisations are embodied infrastructures sustaining their members' own lives, the lives of their families and communities.

Women's Embodied Infrastructures, Enabling Life in Precarious Worlds

Women as embodied infrastructures are an important environmental factor influencing how individuals deal with their experiences of CRSV in Colombia (Clark, 2021a) and perform a reparative role that the state is in some cases failing to accomplish. . To illustrate how women's embodied infrastructures are important catalysers on women's lives and a central resource that allow them to re-weave life amid ongoing hardship and violence, I focus on three key roles played by women's embodied infrastructures: 1) as reparative communities; 2) as scaffolding, building political and citizenship skills; and 3) as radical communities of care. It is important to mention that these embodied infrastructures do not compartmentalise the different kinds of violence experienced by women in their bodies and everyday lives, they understand them as a continuum shaping women lived experiences and encompassing the private, domestic, and intimate as well as the public and their experiences of war.

Women's Embodied Infrastructures of Mentors and Role Models as Reparative Communities

The physically embodied support networks created by women's self-led organisations and their members are infrastructures of role models and mentors for women victims-survivors and have positive influence on them. They perform their work as role models and mentors in formal settings such as workshops and skills building training, and in informal caring spaces where women can come together to have a 'relaxed' time outside the difficulties that inform their everyday lives (Personal conversation, member of *Women Wish*, 09 February 2019).

I interviewed Helena in the headquarters of *Women Wish*, from her body language it was evident that there she feels at home. The main work of the association is not linked to the armed conflict but with issues affecting the lives of *campesino* women, their families, and the wider community. Their workshops

cover topics such as women's rights and citizenship, local ecology, and sustainability and livelihood projects. Although they have been documenting CRSV cases in the region for a couple of years, they only recently joined RMVP. Helena began frequenting the organisation as a '*mujer campesina*' attending workshops on permaculture and sustainability. There she learned about the inequalities that shape women's lives and the need to fight for their rights.

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In her interview she stressed the importance of the learning spaces provided by the organisation, 'it was HERE, the first meeting I went to... when I started my work defending the rights of WOMEN, was here in this house, in the Rural House' (Researcher Interview, 10 February 2019).

It was in one of these workshops, while listening to other women's stories, that Helena recognised, for the first time, that she was a victim of CRSV. In her region this kind of violence was common, but few women had spoken about it. The formal and informal spaces created by the organisations offered a safe space that enabled women to talk about experiences they had kept silenced for years and became spaces for mutual recognition where they realised that they were not the only ones. In this collective bearing witness to their own pain and the pain of others, as well as to their experiences of resistance, survival, and their strategies to live alongside the ongoing violence, women found a way to deal with their own experiences. They also found role models in their peers and the leaders of the organisations, and women who in the past fought for women's rights (Informal conversation with interviewee, 04 February 2019).

For Lina, this sharing of experiences and the contact with organisations such as RMVP was reparative; it gave her the strength to tell her story ‘before I just couldn’t. Before, I could barely say a word because I’d get so choked up. There was a knot in my throat, and I cried and cried. So, that’s what I’ve achieved, the strength to be able to tell my story’ (Researcher interview, 02 May 2019). In fact, many research participants referred to the importance of being able to talk and share their experiences with other women, underlining the relational component of recovery and the need to recognise the contexts in which people are embedded (Price-Robertson, Obradovic & Morgan, 2017). The positive effect of sharing their experiences with other women, but also in public spaces as a form of political resistance is highlighted by the National Centre of Historical Memory (CNMH) in their national report on CRSV (CNMH, 2017). They argue that, for many women, public testimony of the sexual violence experienced has become a way to fight for their right to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition, and a way of regaining a sense of dignity (CNMH, 2017, p. 454). Furthermore, it is in these reparative, secure, spaces that many women take the steps to denounce their experiences through the legal routes established to do so, and in many cases, it is the women’s self-led organizations, not the state, who support the women through this painful process (CNMH, 2017).

The organisations, and their members, also became role models shaping women’s actions and definitions of themselves. When I asked Mariana to define herself in three words, she used one of the mottos chanted by La Ruta in its demonstrations, ‘if it has to be three words then I have a little moto: *Insist, persist and never desist under any circumstances!*’ (Research interview, 30 March 2019). By assuming as her own the collective narrative of the organisation (Garrido, 2020) Mariana is connecting her own story to the stories of other women and their resistance to the armed conflict in the country and is making visible the importance that her participation as a political actor, enabled by the organisation, had in her life.

Women as Embodied Infrastructures as Scaffolding for Political and Citizenship Skills

Women’s self-led organisations play a central role supporting women to further build their capabilities and skills during humanitarian emergencies, in times of peace and conflict (Dietrich Ortega et al., 2020; McNamara et al., 2021, p. 122), therefore, they can become catalysts for

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gender-transformative and socio-political changes (CNMH, 2017; Dietrich Ortega et al., 2020; Zulver, 2019). In our data, we found numerous examples of how victims-survivors found in the processes of participation and leadership a way to re-weave threads broken by their experiences of violence. The analysis of the quantitative data generated by the questionnaire, for instance, showed that in Colombia participants who were in regular contact with women’s self-led organisations had higher resilience scores in the ARM and were less likely to blame themselves for the sexual violence experienced.

During the fieldwork several women from different regions, ethnicities and generations, referred to the skills they gained through their participation in national reach organisations such as *La Ruta* and RMVP, and small local associations such as *Women Wish*. These skills empowered them to become leaders in their communities, be better parents or identify the patterns of domestic violence that shaped their relationships with their partners. In the workshops they learn, among other things, about human and women’s rights, the history of the women’s movement and their struggles, Colombia’s laws on sexual and gender-based violence (GBV), existing participation mechanisms and

how to access them. Ursula, a member of *La Ruta* and RMVP, described how the psychosocial support and training she received from RMVP empowered her to talk about CRSV in secondary schools. In the workshops she has been able to ‘identify people who’ve been raped and that’s helped to me to heal. Why? Because the more people you identify who’ve been through that thing then you say to yourself: ‘It wasn’t just me, there are lots of us,’ so that helps you heal’ (Researcher interview, 30 March 2019). As the CNMH (2017, p. 444) pointed out, the emotional support offered by the organisations and the spaces where women gained skills and developed leadership abilities, allowed some of them to make the transition from victims to leaders, a process that was central in women’s emotional recovery from CRSV. Ursula’s incarnated presence as a surviving victim is reparative for her and her community. Through her embodied presence and testimony, other women find, just like herself, that they are not the only ones. Furthermore, her training enabled Ursula to document cases of sexual violence in her community, help other victims to access the attention mechanisms stabilised by the law and put them in contact with RMVP.

In many cases the experience of victimisation moved women to organise and to mobilise to pursue wider changes linked to social, political and gender equality issues (CNMH, 2017; Zulver, 2019). At the time of the interview Helena was a recognised leader, with a deep understanding of the problems affecting her community. She was particularly interested in defending women rights and fighting GBV,

New identities as leaders and defenders of rights gave women the motivation to move on and ‘keep on fighting’, rebuilding their identities as agents rather than victims, and finding meaningful ways to deal with their pain.

‘...the mistreatment of women. For me that’s... that gets me going...’. In the workshops led by *Women Wish* she began to recognise the inequalities shaping women’s lives and acquired the legal instruments to claim her and other women’s rights. This legal knowledge allowed her to deal with civil servants and navigate the institutional barriers women face for accessing justice, ‘That’s a

resource I have and I have it because of the organisation – without the organisation I wouldn’t know what to do’ (Research interview, 10 February 2019). New identities as leaders and defenders of rights gave women the motivation to move on and ‘keep on fighting’, rebuilding their identities as agents rather than victims, and finding meaningful ways to deal with their pain.

The mentoring and skills provided by the organisations also helped women to make changes in their personal lives (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2016, p. 165). In Lina’s case the workshops gave her the tools to value herself, recognise patterns of gender subordination in her own life and the agency to transform them. She stated that the contact with organisations such as RMVP made her a stronger person with a new determination to ‘change’ her life and pursue her own happiness. When I interviewed Lina, she was resolute to study and to end the abusive marriage she had endured for fourteen years under the belief that ‘marriage is sacred’ (Researcher interview, 02 May 2019). Lina’s understanding of her personal situation is an example of the continuum of violence that women experience inside and outside the armed conflict, and that needs to be addressed in tandem and not as separate issues. This is precisely what women self-led organisations do in their work, demonstrating that strengthening women’s citizenship can carry gender-transformative potential.

Women’s Embodied Infrastructures as Radical Communities of Care

In transitional and conflict affected societies such as Colombia care is revolutionary because it takes place in the context of ongoing structural systems of harm. The activities and practices of radical care performed by women embodied infrastructures, are a form of resistance and defence from such harms. Some of these practices of radical community care are rooted in Latin America’s long-standing

traditions of community organisation, which include different forms of solidarity and support networks, not based on kin and family ties, that rural migrants and in particular women began to form in marginal *barrios* (neighbourhoods) of capital cities in the 1970s (Moser, 2009, p. 71). Fernandez-Anderson

In transitional and conflict affected societies such as Colombia care is revolutionary because it takes place in the context of ongoing structural systems of harm.

(2020, p. 344) notes also how during the prolonged debt crisis of the 1980s women in *barrios* across Latin America began to self-organise communal kitchens, health, and housing initiatives to address their survival needs. These activities and practices directed to make life liveable were deployed by the women interviewed in the framework of the research. Many of them had been displaced by the armed conflict from their rural and semi-rural lands into the marginal *barrios* of capital cities and had created small self-led networks and associations in their communities.

These small associations lack external funding; hence women's bodies and bodily actions became the infrastructure that sustains the organisations, giving them cohesion and material support. This embodied work is described by referring to the myriad ways in which women walk their cities 'knocking' on the doors of institutions, local businesses, and wealthier neighbourhoods, to find the resources needed. They also encompass the creative ways they devise to find resources when these doors remain closed. Clara, an indigenous woman living in the Andean region explains, that 'with all this knocking on doors, opportunities open up' and whatever she gets (e.g., bread, toilet paper), she distributes it among the women of the association, making sure 'nobody goes away empty handed' (Research interview, 6 March 2019). The help Clara gathers is not only for running the association but provides concrete material support for their members. A similar practice is described by Sol, an afro-Colombian woman from the Caribbean coast, and leader of a local association. To sustain their networks, women organise raffles, care for each other's children to allow other

Small associations lack external funding; hence women's bodies and bodily actions became the infrastructure that sustains the organisations, giving them cohesion and material support.

members of the organisation to work, collect food and distribute it among members of the group in greatest need. When everyone is in need, they establish a rota system. These actions taken by women to enable and sustain life, are a way of caring not only for themselves and their families but for the whole community. As Robinson (2011, p. 10) points out, the strategies devised by women for coping with poverty and care deficits show their active resistance in the face of economic and social difficulties. These infrastructures of care created by women are not grounded exclusively on their shared experiences of victimhood, but in neighbourly networks of support, reciprocity, debt, circulation of objects and favours and services at play in poor neighbourhoods (Mc Farlane & Silver, 2017, p. 8; Moser, 2009).

The radical care provided by women embodied infrastructures is not only material, it includes women's emotional work in supporting, counselling, listening, and offering companionship to other women.

The emotional ties and support provided by the organisations enabled alternative communities of choice, which in some cases supplement the role of lost kin networks for women displaced by conflict.

Marina recalls that Ana, the local representative of RMVP in her city, was the first person she talked to about the violence she had experienced, 'I confided in her. I'd never talked to anyone, and I confided in her right there: "Listen, this has happened to me and I feel like this. I've come from Urabá and I had to go through some dreadful things"' (Research interview, 12 March 2019). Ana, who had lived longer in the city as a displaced woman, offered Marina advice on how to navigate the urban world, its institutions, and where to get help. As

the local leader of RMVP, she invited Marina to join the group, a space which according to Marina ‘enabled’ her ‘to get out of that state of fear. ‘Right? To speak, not to stay silent about things, but to talk about it. That’s what I’ve learned with the network: talk, express yourself – share what you’re feeling’ (Research interview, 12 March 2019). The emotional ties and support provided by the organisations enabled alternative communities of choice, which in some cases supplement the role of lost kin networks for women displaced by conflict. As such they made up an important web of connectivity in which the daily lives of the women interviewed are interwoven (Clark, 2021b, p. 1068).

Conclusion

Women’s organisations embodied infrastructures have been pivotal in building women’s leadership roles, citizenship skills and practices in the middle of the conflict. They enabled spaces and communities of choice where women can darn the harms left in the fabrics of their lives, families, and communities by the armed conflict (CNMH, 2017; Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres, 2013). They carry the potential for gender-transformative change because, as Dietrich Ortega et al. (2020, p. 28) point out, women’s self-led organisations create spaces for meaningful participation in which women have experiences of self-esteem, raising gendered consciousness, agency, participation, and solidarity. As this article has shown, the training and skills provided by women’s self-led organisations supported their members in developing their political subjectivity. A process which, as Weber (2018) points out, is central for gender-just transformative reparations (p. 106). Clark (2019) argues that to be transformative, TJ needs an ‘ecological reframing’ that gives more attention to victim-survivors’ wider environments and social ecologies (families, communities, local institutions, believe systems). In this article I demonstrated that women’s self-led organisations play a central role in women’s ecologies, the informal spaces of repair that they enable form a reparative tissue and provide hope even in the darkest times.

The different roles and work performed by these organisations, however, is not sufficiently recognised by official TJ mechanisms and programs. During her research in two communities in Colombia, Weber (2018) found that the Victims Unit (VU) did not pay enough attention to calls made by community

The women as embodied infrastructures framework foregrounds the material and emotional doings that enable women to sustain life in contexts of ongoing violence.

members to strengthen local women’s associations destroyed during their forced displacement, and little consideration was paid to enhancing women’s participation and transforming gender relations in the community. This was despite evidence about the important role played by organisa-

tions in helping women in other regions to find the solidarity needed to overcome the consequences of conflict, identify their rights as women and to claim those rights to improve their living conditions (Weber, 2018, p. 100–105).

The work of women as embodied infrastructures continues to be seen as an extension of their unpaid caring and nurturing roles (Dietrich Ortega et al., 2020). In the questionnaire most of the Colombian participants stated that they had an occupation, as leaders, human rights defenders, and victims’ leaders. However, most of them were unemployed and struggling economically. As De Waardt & Weber (2019) point out, although the participation of victims in the leadership process has been welcomed in the country, this comes at a high economic cost for the victims. A similar point is made by Dietrich Ortega et al. (2020), according to whom humanitarian agencies rely on the unpaid labour of local women to implement their pre-formed strategies and programmes (p. 11). Feminist literature has already pointed at how care work and emotional labour has been devalued, taken for granted and rendered invisible (Robinson, 2011, p. 92). The women as embodied infrastructures framework foregrounds the material and emotional doings that enable women to sustain life in contexts of

ongoing violence. Recognising and valuing this caring and nurturing work is not only a matter of economic justice. It entails listening to women, considering their views and needs, and giving them a voice when developing programmes that will affect their lives, their families, and communities. Crucially, it involves the recognition of women's agency and the strategies they devise to re-make their worlds.

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Notes

1. I refer to women victim-survivors of CRSV because their experiences were the focus of our research project. However, all the interviewees experienced more than one human rights abuse (e.g., forced displacement, disappearance of loved ones).
2. The ARM is a 28-Item scale measuring the protective resources that a person has in their life to help them deal with adversity (among them family, friends, and faith).
3. The Centrality of events Scale measures to which extent a traumatic/stressful event becomes 'a personal reference point for the attribution of meaning to other events, a salient turning point in the life story and a central component of a person's identity and self-understanding' (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006, p. 223).
4. The project has partner organisations in each country. They provided technical support and facilitated contact with participants.
5. I do not use the name of the organisation to protect their location and potentially their members.
6. In total we conducted 63 interviews, 21 per country.
7. *Madres Primera Linea*, is a group of women who 'came together as neighbours and friends' after witnessing the brutality of the police response against the protesters. They put themselves between the protestors and the police to prevent the escalation of violence (Zulver & Stallone 2021).
8. There is an important corpus of feminist scholarship looking at the benefits and limitations of mothering practices and care ethics for peacebuilding and conflict resolution (Thayer-Bacon, 2021). Authors such as Sara Rudrick, Carroll Gilligan, and Nel Noddings, sustain that women's experiences of mothering give them a privileged standpoint on peace. However, other scholars have criticised this perspective. According to them, it essentialises women, ignores racial, cultural, and contextual differences, and overlooks the use of maternal imagery to support violence by nationalistic and militaristic organizations (see also, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Nira Yuval-Davis, Dubravka Zarkov, Elissa Helms).
9. Of the 21 interviewees two women and one man were not members nor had contact with an organisation. The two women had some of the lowest resilience scores in the sample.

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