

[13]25

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS THE WORD



**IN THE
BEGINNING WAS
THE WORD**

C O L O M B I A

Photography and texts by Dani Lagartofernández

lagartofernandez@gmail.com 0034 605 902 177

www.lagartofernandez.info

[13]25: In the beginning was the word. Colombia.

The testimonies of these 13 women from different parts of Colombia strikingly reveal how the country's ongoing armed conflict has affected the bodies, spirits and lives of its women and girls. It is an effort to make the conditions these women cope with visible, reflecting their faces, their words and the places where they currently live, and showing the fear and pain that Colombia's ongoing armed conflict has made them endure. In these pages, 13 indigenous, urban, peasant, artisan and Afro-descendant women weave a tapestry of women's history in times of bitter confrontations.

Here are words echoing what it has meant for these 13 women to become victims of a war that is not their war, which they so often cannot even begin to understand. Here are 13 trails traced by bare feet, mapping out the emotional paths that forced displacement impels those it ravages to follow. Its victims flee for fear of those waging the war; those who lurk at every corner and turn the country's landscape into a bastion of death, pillage and desolation.

Each woman chose the place in which she wanted to be photographed, as a symbol of her connection to her surroundings, in the midst of a landscape violated by the horror that legal and illegal actors alike generate. The very existence of our Project bears witness to the fact that the Colombian State has failed to protect women from the gender violence common in conflict areas. These 13 women have had to regain and rebuild their vital space on their own.

The following testimonies also show us how courageous these 13 women have been, in their struggle to hold onto life itself. They know all about suffering and are haunted by the experiences they have had to endure, but they are also capable of being hopeful once more. Little by little, they gather together with others, seeking ways to repair the ravages inflicted on the population; seeking ways to make their voices heard and obtain justice.

We urge you to circulate these testimonies through the squares and streets of our cities and towns, so that we never forget peace cannot be possible unless we make sure women's lives are honoured and respected.

UNSCR Resolution 1325

UN Resolution 1325 urges its Member States to adopt measures supporting women's peace initiatives, and guaranteeing protection and respect for women and girls. The Resolution also calls for focussing on the special needs of women and girls during peace, post-conflict, reconstruction and resettlement processes.

The Resolution's main approaches may be grouped as follows:

Participation of women in peace processes; it calls for an increase in women's representation in institutions and processes dedicated to conflict prevention, management and resolution involving national, regional and international bodies.

Promotion of women's human rights; it advocates the promotion of women's human rights, by making sure that international human rights standards are reflected at national levels, creating control mechanisms within the law and making a determined effort to end impunity.

Protection of women and girls; it highlights the responsibility to specifically protect women and girls, who are very vulnerable to rape and other sex-related violence during wars or armed conflicts.

Prevention of armed conflicts and war; it emphasizes the need to implement a gender perspective during national and international peace negotiations, other related activities and the drafting and implementing of national and international security policy.



DELIS PALACIO

Representative
Asociación de Desplazados Dos de Mayo
(Second-of-May Association of Displaced Persons)

I chose to be photographed next to this brook on the outskirts of the City of Quibdó. I was born in a community located on a river bank, and being in contact with water is of the utmost importance to me. It signifies a way of life that has been lost. Besides representing my culture and my very life, the river symbolizes the autonomy and independence that we black women and men have managed to achieve: the river, just like the territory, has always given us everything.

I survived the massacre that took place in the Town of Bojayá on May 2 2002. I can hardly bear to talk about it, but the truth is that what happened to this particular woman then, is what continues to happen to many, many people in this country. The most painful thing to witness is that our rights are violated by the very same people who are meant to guarantee them. I feel rage against the Government, because it was supposed to protect us and it didn't do so, in spite of the many warning signals issued before the massacre actually took place.

Armed conflict, violence and pillage, provoked by those who have vested interests in our territory, megaprojects like the one stimulating palm-tree production, have killed a lot of people. Many more of us have been forcibly displaced, losing our autonomy and traditional ways of life. The Government thinks the solution is to hand out subsidies: crumbs. The only things black people and peasants have left right now are the ruin of our land, the destruction of our social fabric and the absence of our dead.

I, Delis, am a leader... and I am also a mother. Only at times I think I am more of a leader than a mother. One has to give one's all, everything, in order to find strategic support to promote productive activities, which are what help people to generate their incomes and create the conditions needed to solve their difficulties. Let them not give us fish: we need to learn how to do the fishing.

Autonomy



AIDA QUILCUÉ

Ex-Counsellor
Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca CRIC
(Cauca's Indigenous Regional Council)
and Candidate for the Senate of the Republic

I am a native Nasa from Tierradentro. For 15 years now I have been involved in grassroots leadership, enduring the State's strategy of exterminating indigenous peoples and our leaders. On December 16 2008, they murdered my husband, José Edwin Legarda, who had always been enthusiastically at my side during my Minga leadership. From that day on, I am forced to move around in blinded cars. I can't walk freely on the streets any longer, yet I haven't lost my sense of being an indigenous person, or my dignity. If anything, I have become stronger.

For the indigenous people, Minga means working, walking, thinking and seeking alternatives, together in our diversity. It has also been worth it, for us, to join forces with the Afro-Colombian population; with peasants, students, city dwellers, women, youngsters: the whole spectrum of peoples existing in Colombia. This was how the Minga de Resistencia Social y Comunitaria (Minga for Social and Community Resistance) came into being. Important struggles have taken place in Colombia, but they have mostly been isolated efforts. With our Minga we intend to direct these social struggles towards the common good: defending the lives and dignity of our people and communities, and defending the territory. It is very vulnerable because of militarization and multinationals hankering after our natural resources.

I chose to be photographed in the Páramo de Moras, because it is a sacred territory for us. For the Nasa and the other indigenous people, if we don't have land there is no life, no health, no hope, and no dignity. Dignity makes it our duty to continue defending this territory and its natural resources. We have a duty to ourselves and to the generations that will follow us.

Dignity



DERLY YINET CHÁVARRO

Community Mother

I come from the town of Sagrado, in Huila. I used to be a Community Mother there, but I was robbed, and when I filed a complaint about it I started getting threats. I sold my plot for whatever they would give me for it and we moved to Bellavista, in Cartagena. It was very hard for us... my children got sick and at times we didn't even have money for food. My husband couldn't find work and we began to quarrel. So I went to live on my own, in a cambucha (hut). But he took to coming home out of the blue and mistreating me. I was desperate, so I got some money together and go back to where my mother lived. But they threatened me there once more and I said to myself, "Well, I better go back to Cartagena then". I went back to my husband, but he didn't improve. He was terribly jealous when I started taking my training courses. But thanks to those courses I got the chance to work as a Community Mother once again: right now, we are standing at the door of my Community Home in La Mar Linda.

I used to get invited to gender workshops, in which we would talk about what violence is. One day we sat down with my husband to talk. He said, "I didn't know that to have sex with you women when you don't want to is called rape; I used to see that my father forced my mother to have sex". I answered, "You don't need a servant; you need a woman. We need each other, to love one another. You know we are not from here and if we fight, every opportunity will escape us". He said, "All right mom, let's try it. I love you and we've been together for a long time, you have a lot of qualities that I fancy". Then he began to get odd jobs as a bricklayer, and our relationship started to change. Now I'm pregnant again. But this baby is the fruit of love, not of abuse or violence.

I choose the word love because, first of all, my Home is like a shower of love. The word love has always characterized me, because what I give people, children, is love. Love has helped me to accept this road that my life has turned into.

Love





JUDITH BOTERO

Member

Red Colombiana de Mujeres por los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos
(Colombian Network for Women's Sexual and Reproductive Rights)

My mother always used to say, "Don't get married, I had to drop everything to raise my 10 children". But I met someone who really liked me, we fell in love and we got married. He was finishing Medicine and he had to do his rural year after that. We went to Puerto Berrío and I dropped out of my own career. He began to protest against human rights violations. They began to persecute us and he had to disappear for three years. I stayed back alone with the children. By then, he had gotten involved with another woman, who was also a political connection. They had two daughters. Then my husband stopped being a politician and he started to be threatened again, something that he took advantage of, by going off to Nicaragua with a new girlfriend. Again I was left back alone, now with four children.

With many difficulties I went back to school, and also found a job at the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar ICBF (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare), where we used to take care of children who mostly only had a mother. If a woman lived with a man, he would beat her up, not give her any money and force her to have sex with him: more and more children arriving and all of them off to the ICBF children's home...

I work for the defence of women's sexual and reproductive rights, with great emphasis on the right to have an abortion. If you are pregnant, you don't even exist, only your womb exists. Even when women are raped this is the case: if a woman voices her anguish over this, right away they tell her, "Madame, be careful, don't even think about doing anything!"

My home is a meeting point. There are always a plate of soup and a bed for whoever arrives. Today Alba Lucía came, a peasant woman we defended: her daughter was born dead and the doctor accused her of homicide. She was convicted to 42 years in prison. She spent six years in jail before we were able to get her released: son-of-a-bitch system, son-of-a-bitch State, son-of-a-bitch Church, son-of-a-bitch father of my children, who trashed me when I wasn't worth a cent to him anymore; for him I'm the ugliest, the poorest woman, now that he is specializing in Medicine he wants a much better family than us. He told me so himself.

Son of a bitch



YOLANDA BISBICÚS

Native Awá Member

She lost her son in the August 26 2009 massacre

She is under the protection of the Guardia Indígena (Indigenous Guard) for being a surviving witness

PRESS RELEASE TO PUBLIC NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL OPINION

With indignation and sadness, the Organización Unidad Indígena del pueblo Awá UNIPA (Indigenous Unity Organization of the Awá People) informs the national and international communities that a MASSACRE has taken place today, August 26, 2009, in which 12 Awá members of the Rosario community were killed, belonging to the Gran Rosario Native Awá Reservation, Municipality of Tumaco Jurisdiction, Department of Nariño. Today we mourn the death of four defenceless children, who together with their brothers, parents and other relatives, were massacred at five o'clock this morning in their humble dwelling, it being of serious concern that among the people massacred was to be found Mrs. Tulia García, the only surviving witness of what took place on May 23, 2009, when her husband Gonzalo Rodríguez was assassinated, a murder for which the National Army is being held responsible. (...) In spite of the complaints that have been duly filed, and the criminal investigations that the State maintains that it undertakes, the race to wipe out the Awá people has not stopped, and the impunity following the perpetration of these events has not stopped either.

I was born in a place called Barbacoa, my mother was from there. Now I have a house in Cuibí. I want to go back there. I want to make my house bigger. I have to return; my children are going to be put into studying there. I feel like I have hope, I feel like I have the energy to bring my children up, to build my house on the farm.

Hope

BLANCA ISABEL GARCIA

BLANCA ISABEL GARCIA

Artist and expert masseur,
Self-supporting woman and free-thinking feminist

My work with women stems from the body itself: my body is my territory and it belongs to me. Through art, rituals and healing, and through ideas and actions, I help women to start discovering their own territory, so that they have more self-confidence when the time comes to express their ideas and actions in public.

We are steeped in a moralist, religious culture, which tells women that their bodies are no good, that they provoke lust. At the same time, women have very little self-esteem from early childhood: "You're getting fat; you're ugly; you're a good-for-nothing..." Women are subjected to violence. They are made to feel like objects, used physically and sexually by their husbands or parents; and by the warring ones, by war itself. What is the point of having a body, if one's body is just going to be used in a violent way?

That's why I choose the word sovereignty: I am the sovereign of my ideas and my deeds, I rule over my own territory-body, I am the sovereign of my being, of my feelings. We must help women recover their self-esteem and believe in themselves. Then they will have the chance to become sovereigns of their own beings.

I use different artistic techniques because that is what has helped me to express what we sometimes fear to say out in the open. A woman who has had to suffer a war gradually becomes so full of scars, that she can no longer express herself. There is so much fear and so much pain that she is rendered speechless.

There are young people flourishing in the Cauca province, in Bogotá, and here in Medellín, who come from political activism, and who gradually explore ways to express themselves in order to work towards peace, not only through discourse but also through symbolic language. We need to give more colours and more joy to peace initiatives.

Sovereignty



ALEIDA TORRES

Peasant

We got kicked out of our land, displaced by the Urrá reservoir. We moved to Tierra Alta, Córdoba, and they made some re-settlements for us. Then we had to go work at other people's farms, because we were in a place that was almost like this one we're in now, no work available, and there was also a shortage of water. That was the land in which the paracos (paramilitary) had settled, where they had set up their central command.

Everything that was meant to happen happened there, because we couldn't lead good lives there. My brother went out to work and that's where they killed him. Then the threats arrived again. They threatened my husband, because he was the one who really knew the river. We made a huge, huge raft and we even took our dogs and sailed off, running away from it all.

Then INCODER gave us this land, the Cari-Cari holding, in the Guajira region; gave it to peasant families who had been forcibly displaced. I knew that this land was nothing special, but what happens? What happens is that sometimes one just hankers after things. It's like children who get a piece of candy: they run to grab it, no matter what it may be. You say to yourself, "If I wait, I will end up empty-handed, so I better grab this piece of candy". That's the way we are.

If you don't use fertilizers and if you don't water this land constantly, it doesn't thrive. Look, the water is not good water, it is salty, many families keep being sick from it, I've just been lucky. After all we had been through, we didn't deserve this. Being on this land is like being in the war over there, but different, because here we are just dying more slowly. As human beings we deserve something better.

My granddaughter has special needs and it's that little girl who has given me the strength not to give up and let everything just go to pieces. Because I could just go on my way and leave, but my daughter... where is she going to go with that handicapped daughter of hers...?

Peasant's Dignity



MARIA TERESA ANDRADE

Leader and Artisan
Federación de Mujeres Campesinas de Nariño (Nariño Peasant Women Federation)

One night I dreamt that I was slaughtering a pig and it turned into a sheep, and while I was butchering it and cutting it into pieces, half the sheep vanished. And there was blood dripping down my hands, plain blood, running down my hands. The next morning I woke up and went to see Clarita. She said it meant there would be a death in the family, that's what she said. "What do you mean, Clarita?" I asked. "Yes, someone from your house is going to die".

I tell you, that was on a Wednesday and the Monday after that, the paramilitaries killed my son. They meant to kill another young man, someone who had been a guerrilla fighter, but they mixed them up. Because they both had moustaches, my son was handsome and so was the other man, they were both dark-skinned, they just looked the same.... they covered him with an army cloak and a ski mask, making some holes where the bullet had gone through, that's what they did. And a little bit further on they left a small rifle; in other words, to insinuate that he had been carrying it and he had never even liked to have anything to do with guns.

Ay no, no, no, my God, I was simply going nuts. And one night he came to me on a motorcycle, bringing me some plantains and corn ears: that was the last time I dreamt about him. He came to me laughing and he said to me "Take it easy, I'm thinking about you", he said. "Why don't you just keep working? You're going to be just fine; I'm going to help you." The next day I got up and said to myself: "Oh, that's right, he told me to borrow some money". I went and asked for a loan and I went down there to work making plaits. I kept on sewing little hats and I've never been short of money since. And now I walk along and meet up with others just like me, people who have lost their husbands, parents, and children. We talk; we cry... that's how we heal.

Here is where we will have my picture taken, where my son planted these plantain trees, they're so beautiful. I don't know how to write, so I don't know about that word you want me to choose. Better you have his portrait, as a souvenir, as a tribute to José Gregorio Andrade, 21 years old, assassinated on January 12, 1998; as a tribute to all the innocent victims of the war.

My son José



MARIBEL DE LA ROSA LARA

President

Asociación de Mujeres Campesinas del Guáimaro “Echadas p’alante”
(Guáimaro Peasant Women Association “Echadas p’alante”)

He used to be a farmer, used to sow an enormous harvest. One day violence came and took him away. That was on February 16, 1998. There were a lot of people in the shop, because we could hear their voices laughing and they were just fooling around there and enjoying themselves. They took him at ten. After a year and a half, it was my brother’s turn. Since he was a town counsellor, they came looking for him, and a bunch of them said they needed him for something or other, and they sailed them right out and killed them over there... he and one of his workers. To those who did it, thanks be to God that I have already forgiven them, the only one who can justify them is God, nobody else...

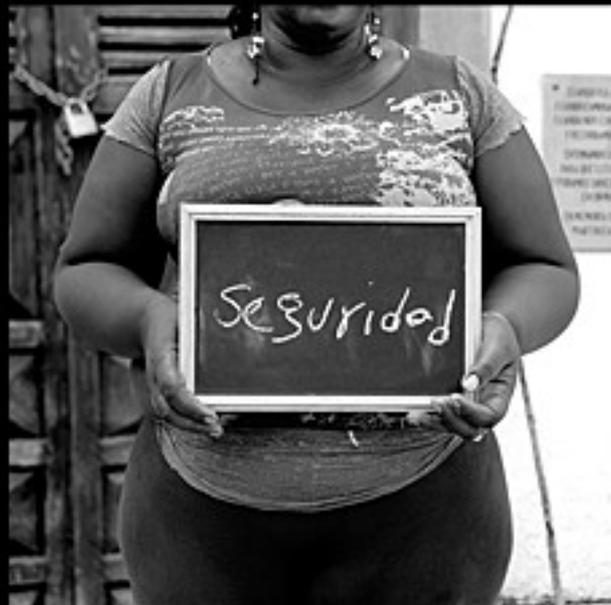
I say that this has helped give me the strength to continue. My partner used to love fighting for this village, just like my brother did. I also have to fight for my people; I’m going to do it in memory of the two of them.

It was on April 15 this year that we settled in these lands: Tierra Prometida (The Promised Land), in Guáimaro, Magdalena. Now there is more hope than fear, yes, people have become braver, we’re trying to get rid of all that weight we carry inside. The land gives us the energy to keep on going, because progress is going to come to these lands: hope will come.

We’re going to do such a lot of things! ¡Ay! There are so many, many things I want to do... First of all I want to get out of all this ignorance in which society keeps us, and, well, plant and plant and plant so many things, because it’s not just crops, we have to plant dreams, love, and peace, before anything else. Our hearts have to be disarmed because they are so armed with hate, resentment and pain. Also, we have to slash impunity open, because we can’t take all this resentment down with us to our graves.

Yes, we are going to manage to keep going forward.

Land



MARÍA EUGENIA PANESIO

MARÍA EUGENIA PANESIO

Survivor of the Bojayá massacre

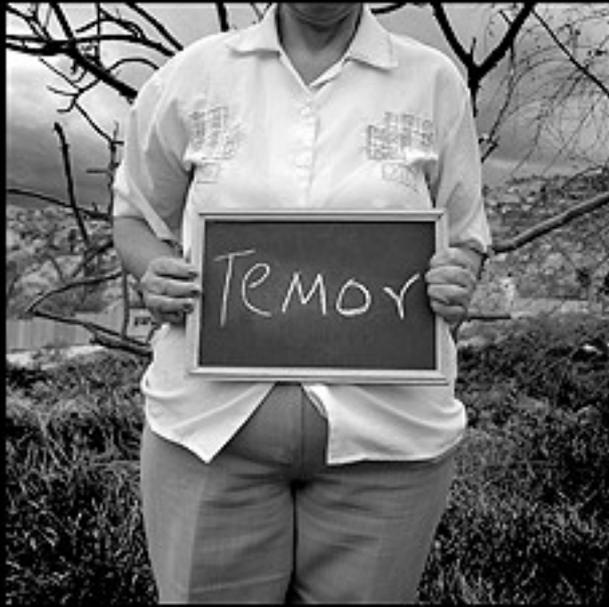
I chose to be photographed in front of the door of the Bojayá Church, in order to get rid of some of all the things I carry inside me, seeing that this is where the terrorist attack of 2002 took place, and I was inside the Church with my children and that's where I was wounded. Each time one of us comes to this place, we get rid of some of all the things we carry bottled up inside. You never, ever forget what happened, but you learn to step aside from it, little by little. You start to understand things in a different way, feeling more serene.

When the massacre took place, it was three days before they could get us out of here, it was terrible. After that we went to Quibdó, where we had to start from scratch, from zero, plus feeling the disdain of the people around us. This was because we were displaced people, and the people in Quibdó think those of us who are displaced come to invade their space. They really hate us, institutions, and schools, everywhere. If there's a thief, they say he is a displaced person; if a prostitute appears, she is also a displaced person. We have to be the ones who do the cleaning, sweep the streets, throw out the garbage; they want displaced women to do all their dirty work for them and they pay us very badly. Everything is about money here in Quibdó. Some days you get up and have breakfast, but you can't eat lunch or dinner. The people from Bojayá have really had a hard time, because at first they wouldn't even admit we'd been displaced.

I don't live here in the village I was born in anymore because I am always very scared, there may be a lot of police forces here but there's no security. Then how can anyone who has lived through that tragedy stay here, you're always fretting about what can happen.

You get tired of all these international institutions and all these NGOs who come and extract their information and then forget about you. I know that participating in this project is tricky... tomorrow this can mean trouble for me and my children. But I like to look on the bright side. I may be taking a risk, but on the other hand, I can also benefit from this, so that I can be able to bring up my children properly and, in general, support my family.

Security



AURA DERLY CHECA

Member

Mesa de Organización de las Mujeres de Soacha (Soacha Women's Organization Table)

I was born in Cumbita, Nariño, my grandmother left me a farm there. It was all so beautiful, so peaceful, until, ay! they began to introduce coca. Before then there was no violence in Cumbita, till that little plant arrived. One of my brothers planted a plot, and then I launched right in and planted some coca too. My eldest brother, who was killed later, used to say that those little plants were going to be our damnation. "Let's pull them out", he used to say to me. In less than two months, cars started driving into the village, we got electricity and there was lots of money going around. Then some people got killed and other people took over their lands, and from then on it was kill, kill, kill, the paracos, the guerrillas, the Black Eagles, they all killed...

The paramilitaries came and told me I had to work in partnership with them. I refused, but ay! That's when they had me kidnapped. They forced my husband to sell everything we had, everything, and when he sent them the ransom I ran away. Then they went and killed the person who had been kidnapped with me, a male cousin of mine. Rumour has it that they mean to stamp out my entire family. Two of my brothers and six of my male cousins have already been murdered. See here, sometimes their wives call me and say, "It's your fault our husbands are dead". I have to live with that burden.

In a rush I got a hundred thousand pesos and with that I came to Soacha on my own. I went from having everything, to not even being able to buy myself sugar water. One day I was sitting in the park, crying, and Clara Stella came up to me and said, "Do you want to talk to me, look, I belong to the Table". I think my little God put her in my path, and the doors opened for me, I woke up. Now I am a leader here, in the Altos de Casucá.

What I fear the most is that they displace us again. Fear is always there, ay! Uribe says that there are no more paracos since 2005, no more "false positives", men killed and then disguised as guerrillas shot in combat, but the whole thing is a lie. I am writing him a letter, asking for an audience with him, so that he can explain to me personally how it is that, if there are no more paracos, they killed my brother just one month ago. And I have proof.

Fear





MARIA EUGENIA GONZALEZ

Coordinator
Colectivo de Mujeres Desplazadas en Cali COLMUDESCALI
(Group of Displaced Women in Cali)

I went to live in Tolima from Cali, when I was 28. We really took to the countryside. It was as if we had been always been there. It's a very grateful land, only it got heavy later: the place where we lived was called the hallway or corridor. We are treated badly because we happened to be living there: when the Army comes, for them we are in cahoots with the guerrilla, and when the guerrilla comes, for them we are in cahoots with the paramilitaries.

To become displaced means to arrive at a city without any prospects for the man, the children or the woman... The family disintegrates, because each person has to go out and make some sort of living on his or her own. The pain of having had to abandon your land turns into illnesses. My mother and father are both sick since they were forced to flee. I don't want to go on living here. There are better opportunities in the countryside, like harvesting without needing to buy anything. But so many crops cannot be planted any longer...

We, the women, are leading the resistance process, and it's not only about having had to abandon our lands, but also about the way in which reparation and protection are allegedly taking place: they claim that the war is over here, and that we are going through a post-conflict stage, but the Army continues to harass and murder the people. I am in active resistance against more and more deaths taking place, against our children disappearing, against so-called false positives and against our children being forcibly recruited, or maybe going to swell the ranks of delinquency. In order to hold onto my dignity and the dignity of my family I resist, and I won't shut up. I don't mean to say I am not scared, but I would just be betraying myself if I didn't defend the family and our human rights.

Here, at Km.18 in Cali, sometimes it gets cloudy, also, like back home in Tolima... I really want my bad foot to show in this photograph. Yes, let them see that we women won't stop struggling in spite of our illnesses and our handicaps.

Resistance

GLORIA STELLA OVALLE

Member

Liga Internacional de Mujeres por la Paz y la Libertad LIMPAL
(International Women's League for Peace and Liberty)

I am from Vista Hermosa, Meta. Four years ago, I was displaced and ended up here. There you had coca leaves, the Army, the paramilitaries, the guerrilla and the police, all fighting over who was going to take control of the coca crops. Due to the threats we received, we had to get out of there fast, and we virtually lost everything we owned. So we decided to come to Porfía, in Villavicencio. Here we came up against the lack of work and being discriminated by the local people and the civil servants; discriminated because we were displaced and because we were black.

I chose my own home to be photographed, because I want all of you to see how we live. The thing is to try to adjust. I have canvas material and little bits and pieces like that, because sometimes it rains and then everything gets flooded. I am also speaking for all the other women around me. Everybody has needs and everybody wants to get ahead and be successful.

At LIMPAL, I've taken part in an empowerment process, in which we have learned about our rights as women. We have discovered something beautiful: what we are like on the inside. I was in a lot of pain when I came here, only I didn't know how to express it. They taught us meditation and then everything inside began flowing, we began to get rid of all of that stuff we had repressed. I grew a lot, spiritually. I also began to sing, so I want to learn to express myself, I want to create: I want to learn more so I can become a good singer.

Why did I choose the word peace? Look. Corporal peace: that means if you are abused, if they hit you, you will never know peace inside your body, and your body is the most beautiful thing you can have; spiritual peace, because if you are at peace with yourself, you are at peace with your surroundings; peace at the level of the community, trying to understand our common problems and calm them down; peace at the level of the country, starting by communicating with each other at home and beginning to carry peace inside ourselves, all of us.

Peace