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En Colombia las mujeres tejen lazos amorosos en medio de la guerra

In Colombia, in the midst of war, women weave love knots¹

Martha Colorado²

La Ruta Pacifica

Spanish Version



I would like to bear witness to the ways in which the communities in Colombia and, in particular, the women are building another country mid the daily barbarism of war, violence and death. To that purpose, I will, on the one hand, describe some of the things I experienced³ during a recent trip to Colombia; and, on the other, I will give a presentation on **La Ruta Pacifica ("The Peaceful Road") for the negotiated resolution of the armed conflict in Colombia** and of the visions and ideas that accompany this movement.

In Colombia, thousands of women, organized in groups and projects, are mobilized against the war, they work and endure, routinely drafting new blueprints for living.

Contrary to the dominant rhetoric of the diverse armed groups that call for war as the only option, an option that calls for retaliation and the annihilation of the enemy, many women believe that there is no just war, that the enemy doesn't exist, and that Colombia can be a country that includes all of the men and women who inhabit it. To that purpose these women, amidst their

pain and in spite of their fear, exercise civil disobedience and non-violent resistance.

1. My return to Colombia

Between November and December of 2002, after two years of absence, I had the opportunity to return to my country. The women of **La Ruta Pacifica** gave me an invitation, a gift of life, to go back to Colombia to work with them for a few weeks. I grew to feel as though I were part of the everyday life of the community. I came to feel their energy, their courage, and also their fears. But in spite of the fear, they are accompanied daily by the persistence and perseverance that allows them to keep going, because they manage to cast out that same fear everyday in order to remain on their feet.

My first experience upon returning was to attend, as part of **La Ruta Pacifica**, a five day meeting in which more than 300 women, belonging to 22 nation-wide women's organizations, drew up their own basic agenda for the negotiation of the armed conflict.⁴ On the agenda of the Assembly were included proposals previously gathered from different sectors of women and regions, in a process that lasted more than a year.⁵

During the Assembly, I met with many feminist women whom I hadn't seen for a long time. I also met women from different regions of the country, all of them full of information and willing to work in order to move forward with their projects, with the strong belief that things have to change in Colombia for the good of all women and men, including that of our sons and daughters and their descendants.

I found it very distressing to learn of the situation of the rural populations in the Rehabilitation and Consolidation Zones,⁶ places that have been taken over by the state's armed forces. The army is marking these people with indelible ink – as was done in the Nazi concentration camps – not only to distinguish them from the guerrillas, but to restrict their movements, their purchase of food, and, in general, their total ability to survive. All of this is as painful as knowing that there are people from Commune 13⁷ in Medellin⁸ who continue to disappear and that, despite the presence of the state's military, the paramilitaries control the area and have assassinated dozens of individuals, some of them decapitated and others carved into pieces and then buried in clandestine graves. Abominable crimes that are only explained by the degradation and the human barbarism that is produced during war.⁹ Four women from Commune 13, belonging to a popular women's organization, and also members of **La Ruta Pacifica**, were detained, and their homes were raided by the police. The women were targeted because they had denounced the crimes and human rights violations that are committed in their zone.



Consequently, the women of **La Ruta Pacifica** and of **Mujeres de Negro** (Women in Black)¹⁰ carried out a huge mobilization in the locality, in which hundreds of women dressed in black showed up carrying flowers and yellow butterflies. They also gathered outside the place where the detained women were being held and, although the detainees were freed after several days, the hostilities against them continued and they had to move from the district.

I also met a native woman from the zone of Mitú¹¹, a leader of nineteen communities, who has been threatened by the guerrillas of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (Farc) because she refused – as the leader of the community – to allow the forced recruitment of the community's youth by the guerrilla party which controls that zone. As a result, she has been the victim of two attempts on her life. The perpetrators of these acts included some of the community's youth that were previously recruited by the militiamen of Farc. The diverse communities in Colombia daily endure reports like these; assassination, harassment, intimidation, and forced displacement meted out by the various groups of our country that are named left wing and right wing.

All of my friends in Medellín were also shocked by the collective rape and torture of one girl who was a beneficiary and participant in a youth project of one of **La Ruta Pacifica's** organizations. The paramilitaries not only raped and tortured her but also used a sharp weapon to brand her with the initials of United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC)¹².

I was with my friends during the time this incident occurred. It held consequences for the lives of the organizations and the mental health of everyone. As I was in the midst of the women's organizations that reported this incident and supported the girl, I took part in the acts of love, healing, and reparation that these organizations performed for her and her family.

In the current year, 2003, the women of The National Movement of Women Against War are carrying out¹³ a campaign around the theme of denouncing the crimes against humanity that are directed at women. The name of the campaign is "Neither Sex Object Nor Military Objective." Information has been compiled on different crimes against humanity committed by the armed forces of the state, by the paramilitaries, and by the guerrillas. The rape and torture of women has become a recurring practice for the players in the armed conflict, especially in the city. In this context, women have become the spoils of war. They and their organizations are accused of collaborating with the guerrillas or of having something to do with the paramilitaries or the army.¹⁴

After my participation in the assembly, I travelled to Medellín and worked more than twenty days with the partners from the **La Ruta Pacifica**. I helped in the production of some documents and then in the preparation of a meeting with the national co-ordination of La Ruta in which the plan developed in 2002 was evaluated and the strategy for 2003 was planned. Women belonging to eight different regions of the country attended that meeting.

It was inspiring to listen to their stories and experiences, and to recognize the bravery of the women from the separate regions as they described their recommendations to mobilize in each zone and the projects¹⁵ that they are developing together for their work against the war and for the creation of peace. I particularly want to highlight what I heard from a woman who had arrived from Chocó¹⁶, a zone inhabited basically by blacks of African descent, a region rich in cultural expression and natural resources, but forgotten by the state's support agencies. This is a zone of dispute between the guerrillas and the paramilitaries. It was within the last year that the communities of their region sustained the massacre of Bojayá, which was perpetrated by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc). They justified themselves by saying "it was a military error" produced by the confrontation between this organization and a paramilitary group that had taken the town. In spite of the declarations and the pleas of the townspeople, the guerrillas completely destroyed the whole town and the church where many inhabitants of the municipality had taken refuge. The result was 117 dead (of those, 40% were minors) and 90 wounded.

Since this massacre, the confrontations in the zone continue. The paramilitaries control the zone, including the traffic along the Atrato River, the arterial waterway of the area, so that now the

community is prohibited from using it, which forces them to restrict their movements and to take refuge in their homes, plunged in helplessness and fear.

It was in this context that a huge group of women decided one day to take back the Atrato River. They got into their boats with their families, their music, their costumes, their games, their hand woven fabric, and their gayest and finest display. They remained there from one day to another. This was their way of saying to the community that if they were united, they could do many things, that they must defeat their fear. They were exercising an act of peaceful resistance, of civil disobedience. With their bodies, with their presence, and by their actions, they were saying No. From the bank of the river, the disconcerted paramilitaries watched them. The bravery of the women disconcerted them, without knowing how to respond.

Actions such as the one recounted above, that don't physically hurt anyone, that simply move to a different logic, that disconcert the reasoning of the soldiers, fill the mobilization and the activism of the women's groups and organizations in Colombia and especially of the **La Ruta Pacifica**.



These are some examples of the testimonies that I heard and of the events that I experienced in the more than five weeks that I spent in my country. To feel and to live in this closeness with the women, the communities, and with my family, has been a great incentive to continue my current process; to learn a new language and to find a new place in the world in which it has fallen me to live.

2. La Ruta Pacifica (The Peaceful Road)

La Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres (The Women's Peaceful Road) had its origins in 1995, because of the serious situation in which Colombian women found themselves in during the war, as much in the rural areas as in the metropolitan areas. Women suffer diverse outrages that have been invisible and undervalued in the face of serious events like massacres, becoming

accustomed to everyday death and the degradation produced by a war that had its origins almost 50 years ago and that is responsible for so many indescribable crimes committed by groups such as the paramilitaries, the forces of the state, and the guerrillas.

Colombia finds itself in a complex humanitarian crisis in which the principal victim is the civilian population, which has been targeted by all of the contending factions. This humanitarian crisis is reflected in its effect on the civilian population and in the high rate of forced displacement as a product of the war.¹⁷ In the last ten years almost 3,000,000 people living in Colombia have been affected by forced displacement, 70 % of which are women with sons or daughters.

In this context emerged **La Ruta Pacifica**, a feminist proposal that seeks the negotiated resolution of the armed conflict in Colombia. We women participants in “La Ruta” declare ourselves as pacifists, anti-militarists and builders of an ethic of non-violence. Against the violence, we claim the solidarity and tenderness that helps to support us as human beings and as collectives placed in the middle of the extreme situations that the war confronts us with. With our mobilization, our presence, and our bodies, we say No to the war, No to the misrepresentation that different groups want to make of us, No to indifference and to guilty forgetfulness, and Yes to a life of dignity, social justice, memory, truth, reparation, and hope.



La Ruta Pacifica articulates women with very different experiences: The intellectuals, the politicians – those we call more rational –, simple women from the communities, peasants, natives, thespians, poets, women who think and question relationships and gender systems; women who try to express the wisdom of the east and the west, all with various knowledge and experiences that come together in a proposition that has the challenge of weaving together this diversity.

The war assaults our dignity and humanity because it brings out the worst in human beings.

We women have stated that war assaults our dignity and reduces the potential of our existence, that of ourselves, our daughters and sons, our companions, our families, our friends, as well as that of the generations to come. The armed and violent ways that have been imposed upon our country have led to encourage the unleashing of war and the violation of all humanitarian boundaries.

In the logic of war all of us are either friends or enemies – in it the law of the strongest prevails, the law of the armed. For that reason **La Ruta Pacifica** represents the determination, the drive, the solidarity, and the strength of many women that has been set in operation to place boundaries on the madness of war. A present war, but at the same time a prolongation of other wars that weigh on our history, and that are reproduced as retaliation or vengeance, each time more and more deranged. The victims of yesterday may be the killers of today. This war pushes the Colombian nation to the worst, and is putting into question the very viability of our country in the future.

Each one of the people of the new generations is responsible for a history of violence, exclusion, and discrimination, and for with the repetition of public and private discourse that promotes disrespect and the exclusion of others – images and declarations that mark us and that we obviously continue repeating. It isn't news that for a very long time now, Colombia has been shaping its children in the practices of exclusion and violence. The women of La Ruta have expressed this preoccupation in one of their slogans: We won't give birth to any more sons and daughters for war and violence.

We women weave and will continue weaving peace.

We are convinced that safety and peace are not provided by the power of arms but by the ability to dialogue by justice, social and economic development, social responsibility, and the capacity for negotiation and inclusion that we will work to promote and express.

Because of that, the heart of **La Ruta Pacifica** contains the persistence, the good sense, and the recourse to weaving knots of solidarity to control and reject the war – the resort to renewing forces of femininity in order to salvage the best of our humanity. This call attracts the feelings and responses of many women, from diverse levels and conditions, who wish to do something achieve peace in Colombia.

We pick up the symbolic image of weaving: we weave in order to resist the war; we weave solidarities, we weave in order to reconstruct and repair the social ties and communities, we weave love knots; we weave hope, and memory in a country where indifference and impunity wear down increasingly our dignity as human beings and our value and respect as a society. For that reason in our management, productive, agro-ecological, handicrafts, playful, creative and symbolic projects, we support the process of accumulated mourning, real and past, for the multiple outrages experienced in Colombia, mourning without creating the wrongs that always threaten to repeat themselves.

Ritual, exorcism, poetic discourse, creation and mobilization

In order to stop the stupidity of the war, to try to put the brakes on this madness, to bring to fruition our proposals, we are developing a strategy for the deconstruction of the symbols that reinforce war, exclusion and extermination.

Our symbolic offer is based on poetry, on exorcism, on ritual, on the construction of new symbols, languages, and social practices that build roads opposed to militarization, to the build-up of arms, to the logic of domination, and to exclusion, all those things which create a cult of violence and armament.

We also support ourselves through marching, mobilization, massive and alternative communication, in alliances with other social movements, and in our committed word, that makes efforts to unite us more strongly with ourselves and with others.

The symbolic and the recovery of the sacred

Distancing themselves from the patriarchal rhetoric that is so easy to reproduce, women creatively ritualize and symbolize our political opposition to warlike and violent solutions. This initiative that we have constructed has permitted us to weave ties between the masculine and the feminine, between the interior and the exterior, between the world of women and a world that has traditionally belonged to men.

One of the characteristics of **Ruta Pacifica's** proposal is that it manages to integrate into our political proposal, on the one hand, a rationality that we could call a masculine logic, and on the other hand, a logic of poetic reason, of the symbolic, and of the ritual that allows us to re-evaluate the sacred articulated through creative intuition and subjectivity.

Rational logic brings us to recognize the framework and the reasoning of the society in which we live. For this reason we reclaim the human rights of women, political participation and a place at the negotiating tables of the conflict. This is expressed publicly in political spaces and in the mass media of communication. As citizens we express our consternation and our rejection of the degradation of armed conflict, and we denounce the effects that war has on women's lives. In this same way violence is denounced as a vicious circle that brings nothing good to both present and future generations.

The second logic makes a valuation of the defence of the life connected to the sacred, the ritual and the importance of subjectivity. This logic articulates the poetic to the symbolic-aesthetic as creative dimensions from the feminine.

In addition, this proposal wants to rescue for humanity the symbolism and poetic reason, which permit the recovery of the sacred and mythological dimension. In this way, other languages and forms of articulating political discourse are created. A political rhetoric that, until now, is tied to the rational, that has removed the non-verbal, the signs and the signals, and that has worn itself out in a logic that only finds meaning in the rhetoric of politicians, specialized beings who have commandeered it and allowed the whole of society to delegate them an office that cannot be delegated: the individual responsibility that falls to everyone as a part of the human collective.

The sacred then is revived through ritual, symbolism, and poetry. Ritual reassesses the social and makes human existence transcendent. An existence which is daily disrespected and forgotten in our country. Because of that, from the intuition that the feminine reveals to us, with proposals like those of **La Ruta Pacifica**, we women try to recover the sacred, that dimension that helps to institute or to reintroduce the bases of our coexistence, the dimension that can help to reconstruct boundaries, to respect the sacred dimension of life.

To exorcise fear

For the women who participate in **La Ruta Pacifica**, the symbolization expressed in ritual and the symbolic dimension has cleansing and restorative effects. In addition, our experience has demonstrated to us that symbolism also disarms the armed and weaves invisible threads between beings, because it is a language to which all of us can have access even without discourse. Hundreds of women from diverse experiences and levels link themselves to the mobilizations and proposed actions articulated by that intuition. Some men also feel called.



Marches have also been held¹⁸ to places where the armed conflict is experienced daily; they have

accompanied villages affected by forced displacement, and by territorial disputes between different armed groups, where death lurks every day. It is obvious that these experiences generate anxiety and fear in the women who participate in this type of march, but the fear is controlled by the feeling of being in the company of and of being bound with so many women. It is helped by resorting to ritual, alternative and healing therapies to defeat it, because, as the women of the Organización Femenina Popular say, “It is better to exist with fear, than stop existing because of fear.”

Another characteristic of this class of mobilization is that of non-violence because, when **La Ruta Pacífica** acts, they do it neither defiantly nor by inciting aggression. Resistance and civil disobedience are exercised. They are performed with a presence that is poetic, symbolic, and persistent. It also has been observed that sometimes many soldiers watch these mobilizations with amazement, or with confusion and they remain waiting because they feel curious about what they see. In some cases, there have been aggressive reactions on the part of the state’s armed forces, which the women have responded to in a peaceful manner. When the women did not respond in kind to their hostile stance, the aggressors could not make their task of intimidation work.

Planetary conscience

La Ruta Pacífica has also recaptured the pacifist discourse and proposals that are inclined towards the peaceful coexistence between humans and all beings of nature. They have absorbed the idea that there is no possible nor viable future for the generations to come if those in the present don’t gather all the types of tools and skills needed for the peaceful resolution of the conflicts whether family, social or political, if we don’t learn to respect nature by overcoming the relationship of domination that preys on nature and casts into doubt the continuation of planetary life.

One is also conscious of the fact that unless human beings find different forms of resolving conflict other than violence, there will be war and the arms build-up will continue to prevail. For that reason, weapons manufacturers stimulate wars and generate new focuses of conflict in the world. War is a lucrative business for the arms merchants and it doesn’t benefit them to promote peace nor to build regions where life can be lived peacefully.

Since the year 2000, **La Ruta Pacífica**, together with other organizations in Colombia such as the Organización Femenina Popular de Barrancabermeja – OFP, have built an alliance against war, militarism, and the build-up of arms in order to regularly express and mobilize as **Mujeres de Negro** (Women in Black). They dress in mourning clothes for all the crimes committed; for the different forms of violence that are experienced in Colombia; and in order to express a profound rejection of the war. In this proposal, the legacy of other pacifist women is recognized, such as the Israelis, the Palestinians, the North Americans, Yugoslavians, Italians, Spanish, and other peoples of the world, who in black, in silence, and publicly, oppose wars and the build-up of arms in their respective countries.

In addition, **La Ruta Pacífica** shares a sense of solidarity and feels interconnected with thousands of organizations, proposals and people in the world who are fighting against war, against neo-liberalism and for a world with social justice. It is for this reason that it seeks the world stage in order to weave the structure of an international network of women and organizations to provide support to the peace initiatives of the different women’s groups of Colombia and other sectors of its civilian society in order to work against war and for the political resolution of the armed conflict in Colombia. Additionally, **La Ruta Pacífica** pursues the creation of ties of solidarity with women and men from other countries to oppose the arms race, militarism, and war in the world.

Endnotes

¹ The vision expressed here takes into account the experience of and participation in La Ruta – as La Ruta Pacífica (The Peaceful Road) is commonly known – ever since its emergence. I want to make it clear that La Ruta is not the only women’s anti-war movement or organization that exists in Colombia, because it is important to give recognition to this fact. I particularly want to highlight the existence of the national coordination of Mujeres Contra la Guerra (Women Against the War) which forms part of La Organización Femenina Popular (The Popular

Feminine Organization), La Mesa Nacional de Concertación (The National Table of Accord), La Red Nacional de Mujeres, (The Women's National Network), La Iniciativa de Mujeres por la Paz (The Women's Initiative for Peace), and La Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres (The Women's Peaceful Road).

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³ Incidences experienced between November and December of the year 2000, when this women's movement invited me to go to Colombia, after having left my country two years earlier for the safety of my family.

⁴ For a long time the Colombian women's social movement, as part of the civilian population, has expressed the desire to participate in the negotiated settlement of the armed conflict. Until now discussions have been carried out between the government and some guerrilla sectors, and at present specifically with the paramilitary groups, but neither the one, nor the other, nor the government, who say they represent the people, have included, nor have given any place to, the social organizations that for years have worked for peace and the negotiation resolution of the armed conflict.

⁵ In it, self-governing participation is seen as coming directly from the women in the processes of the political negotiation of the social and armed conflict, from an ethnic, cultural, and generational perspective. In addition, there are positions that are included in the Agenda concerning Human Rights and International Humanitarian Rights. These are as follows: economic and development model proposals; changes to the neo-liberal model and to the regulation of globalization; re-negotiation of foreign debt; effective public policies that promote a culture of non-violence and respect for multiethnic and pluricultural diversity; cultural policies with a gender and generational perspective; agrarian and territorial reform, and reform in the political participation of women.

⁶ The Rehabilitation and Consolidation Zones are among the areas most affected by the armed conflict. These Zones are delimited by the government and in them the armed forces of the state establish complete control and restrict the rights of the citizens "with the objective of restoring security."

⁷ Commune 13 is in the west-central zone of Medellin City. It is a zone inhabited by very poor people who have been displaced from the countryside. The district was taken over by the militias to organize a "clean-up" of the gangs of delinquents; then the paramilitaries arrived to dispute the territorial control of the militias. The community has suffered terribly from the outrages and crimes committed by both players. During the year 2000, the combined forces of the state took the zone and bombed it on two occasions causing serious human rights violations.

⁸ Medellin is the capital of the department of Antioquia located in the north-west of the country. Medellin has been categorized as the most violent city in Latin America.

⁹ And it continues to be painful to denounce this in this document, but it is evident that wars bring out the worst in human beings, we cannot cover it up, and it must be spoken of and recorded. I believe that this is not limited to Colombia.

¹⁰ It is explained later in the text who the Women in Black are.

¹¹ Mitú is the capital of the department of Vaupes, located in the south-east zone of the country. This zone borders the Colombian Amazon.

¹² This is the name of the organization that co-ordinates Colombia's paramilitary groups.

¹³ La Organización Femenina Popular (The Popular Feminine Organization), La Mesa Nacional de Concertación (The National Table of Accord), La Red Nacional de Mujeres, (The Women's National Network), La Iniciativa de Mujeres por la Paz (The Women's Initiative for Peace), and La Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres (The Women's Peaceful Road).

¹⁴ In addition to the above, the armed players enslave women in the countryside and in the city, threatening them and forcing them to loan their varied services as cooks, washerwomen, arms mules, and to mend their clothing among other things.

¹⁵ The organizations, groups, and institutions articulated in La Ruta, have worked for many years behind organizational, political participation, economics, environmental, and agroecological projects, with people displaced by the war, et cetera.

¹⁶ Chocó is a department located the north east part of the country, with beautiful coasts on the Pacific Ocean.

¹⁷ 80% of the deaths caused by the war are civilian. People are assassinated in their homes, at work, or in the streets. Only 20% of the dead are considered to be part of the contending factions. We count in addition an average of 3,000 people kidnapped per year, and 4,500 disappearances in the last two decades. Many people question who commits these human rights violations. According to the governing bodies in charge of Human Rights, 73% of the human rights violations are caused by the paramilitaries, 22% are caused by guerrilla groups and 5% by the forces of the state.

¹⁸ The marches are great mobilizations of women – generally 2,000 or more - which travel from different cities to a predetermined location. Some women travel by bus for up to three days to arrive at their destination. The meeting place is generally a zone that is highly affected by armed conflict and where the women and the community are suffering and carrying the effects of the same conflict.

About the Author

Martha Colorado is a Colombian living in Vancouver, Canada. She has participated in social movements in Colombia for many years, particularly in the women peace and against the war movement. Marta is a psychologist and educator working for The Pacifist Route (La Ruta Pacifica) and Women In Black (Mujeres De Negro). These movements are struggling with a feminist, pacifist and antimilitarist point of view.

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