

# Patricia Guerrero<sup>1</sup> Colombia (1956- )

Patricia Guerrero, lawyer and human rights activist, is well-named, for *guerrero* in Spanish means *fighter*. This *guerrera* is not only a fighter, she is a warrior.

She started out her career fighting for women's rights in the 1980s and 1990s, working with women in the flower industry, imprisoned women, and others. She was the first woman lawyer in Colombia to speak out about rape inside of marriage; and she worked to decriminalize abortion, especially after rape.

In 1998, she went to live in Cartagena<sup>2</sup>, a famous tourist-destination on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. There she found thousands of refugees, mostly women and children, and more arriving daily from the many areas in Colombia where armed groups were and still are fighting for control of the land. They had fled from homes with practically nothing, had no resources, and nowhere to go. Yet Colombian government officials at all levels insisted that it was not the government's responsibility to assist them.

Patricia decided to help them get their rights respected and their dignity back.



**Patricia Guerrero Acevedo**

From

<http://www.observatoriogenero.org/magazine/seccion.asp?id=27>

## City of Women (Ciudad de las Mujeres)



**Cartagena-not the tourist part**

From:

[http://www.ligademujeresdesplazadas.org/magazine/ciudad\\_mujeres.asp](http://www.ligademujeresdesplazadas.org/magazine/ciudad_mujeres.asp)

That same year she and some other women founded the Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas (League of Displaced Women). Their mission is to convince the Colombian government it is their duty to help the Displaced; and one of their foci became to support women in creating for themselves decent and safe places to live.

The conditions under which the refugees in Cartagena were living were abysmal - lacking even basic sewer and water facilities. Patricia and her friends began to form a vision: a city of their own.

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced geh-rrrreh (rolled r)-row. Her father's name, Guerrero, would be used as the "last name" in English. Acevedo, in the photo caption, is her mother's name before marriage, normally used as part of the name in Spanish.

<sup>2</sup> Pronounced car-tah-heh-nah (j in Spanish is like English h)

It took 5 years to get the funding together, including 1 ½ years negotiating with the owner for the land. They received support from many sources including governments (eg. US, Spain), the UN (United Nations) (eg. Commission on Refugees), and private foundations (eg. Global Women's Fund, Ford Foundation, World Fund Programme). It wasn't easy. At one point, Guerrero was accused of doing it all for private gain; and some people predicted the project would fail.

Construction began in 2003 in Turbaco, 11 Km south of Cartagena. Because there were insufficient funds for the construction, the women established a concrete block-making facility, and the women themselves learned to make the blocks and build with them. They learned many other construction-related skills as well, such as roof-making and plumbing; and thus many also got training and experience for a new career. Five hundred people now benefit from the 97 houses and the community center they built.



### **Women Digging Foundation Ditches**

From [http://www.ligademujeresdesplazadas.org/magazine/ciudad\\_mujeres.asp](http://www.ligademujeresdesplazadas.org/magazine/ciudad_mujeres.asp)

“Being forced to move from your home and your land has many implications. Your house and land is the base of your security, your life project, as many women called it. The main reason for fleeing is continued violations of human rights, the fear created by the presence of armed groups, continued violence and the confiscation of land.”

-- Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. 2007

Those who weren't involved in the building did support activities, such as cooking meals for everyone and taking care of the children. By the time they arrived in Turbaco, these women had lost everything, including most of their pride and dignity. They had seen family members and other villagers killed, tortured, or taken away; and many of them had been raped. Building their new city brick by brick was a kind of therapy, reviving their hope and their shattered self-esteem.

They may have started as victims, but they have become leaders and change-makers. Not only do they provide a model for other war-torn countries of a positive response to the disastrous effects of war on civilians, but they have started organizing self-help projects with people in surrounding villages as well.

## **New Violence**

Unfortunately, however, violence has visited even this new refuge. Women and men have been disappeared, or killed and their bodies dumped in nearby fields. After one particularly gruesome murder of the husband of one of the women, who was guarding

their building materials, many of the women wanted to quit. Not long ago (January, 2007) their community center, which housed part of their brick-making facility, and day care and cooking facilities, as well as their credit organization, was burned down. It was arson. But the women didn't quit.

The League of Displaced Women has been targeted too. Organizers in Turbaco and Cartagena and their family members have been murdered, and regularly receive death threats. The offices in Cartagena have also been robbed of equipment and records.

Why are women who are simply trying to rebuild their lives the targets of such violence? Here is what Patricia said in one interview (Jones, 2007): "We believe there are many reasons why we are being threatened. Firstly, we are being threatened because we are trying to restore the social fabric of the region based on the principles of equality, no discrimination, no violence, no corruption and we stand against everything else that is detrimental to the population of the region. Historically, corrupt politicians have used death threats to frighten and intimidate community leaders. Secondly, some of the League's displaced women witnessed crimes perpetrated by paramilitary members that are currently being prosecuted."

The Colombian government wants to send soldiers to "protect" the City of Women. Patricia continues, "We have strongly refused to be part of these 'security fronts', as we want to be identified solely as civil society actors. Women's security is not about having a police officer or a soldier at our side. We want human security that implies the restitution of our human rights, that justice is done, that the facts are investigated, that there are public policies for women, investment in the community, education for our children, health, and the possibility to live a life with dignity and without fear."

### **"Invisible" Crimes**

Patricia and the Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas repeatedly petitioned to Colombian courts and legal authorities— local, regional, and national— to investigate recent crimes as well those the women had suffered previously. They did and helped other organizations do extensive investigations documenting the events behind these petitions.

Back in 2001, an investigator/reporter from the UN concluded: "Displacement in Colombia isn't simply the consequence of the armed conflict itself. Direct contact between the different armed groups is infrequent, because these groups consolidate their territorial advances by attacking civilians that they suspect of supporting the other side. Although men are most often executed or killed, the violence against women, particularly that which is sexual in character, by armed groups is habitual....." (Coomaraswamy,



**Making the Blocks for the Houses**

From:

[http://www.ligademujeresdesplazadas.org/magazine/ciudad\\_mujeres.asp](http://www.ligademujeresdesplazadas.org/magazine/ciudad_mujeres.asp)

2001 , #60, translated from Spanish) Sexual assault is being used as a weapon of war by all sides — the paramilitaries, the various groups of rebels, and even some members of the Colombian army.

Although Colombia has laws which should help them, when women who are victims of such war crimes have tried to get some action against the soldier-criminals who did it, nothing has happened. The same goes for the murders and other crimes at City of Women—no investigation, no criminal trials, and little or no help to overcome the victim’s problems that resulted. The criminals have seemed immune from any kind of penalty, as though the crimes had never been committed.

## Colombian Court Admits Social Responsibility

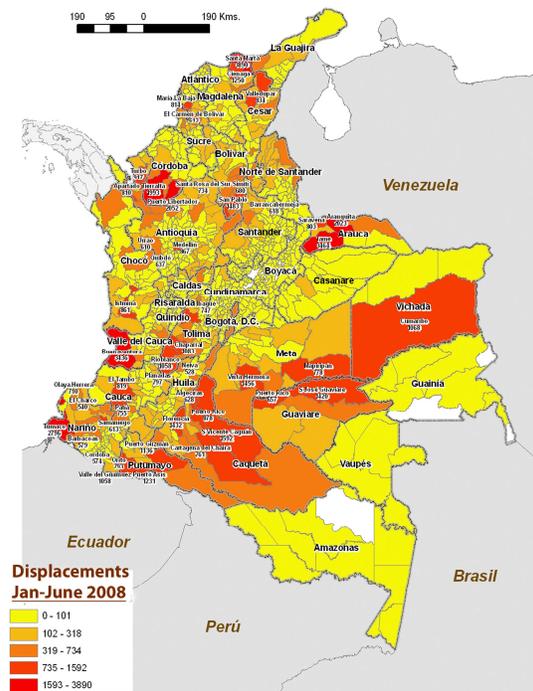
After 10 years of court battles in Colombia, in May 2008 the Constitutional Court finally recognized the special vulnerability of women in war zones to crimes such as those described above, and ordered the government legislature to create programs to protect and assist displaced women. The National Legislature also approved a new law (1190) to improve implementation of laws protecting displaced people, women in particular, and greatly increased the budget for it. (Pagonis, 2008)

It's about time, because the refugee problem in Colombia is huge. In 2006, the UN

Refugee Agency reported that Colombia had the second largest population of internally displaced people in the world, second only to Sudan. (UN Refugee Agency, 2006) And the numbers are growing faster than ever. The millions of displaced people (mostly women and children) are "invisible" because they are scattered around the country instead of being in large encampments.

You don't hear much in the news about Colombia's internal war, probably because after more than 40 years, it is no longer news. The character of the war has changed from one driven by idealism (backed in the 1960s by Russia and China), where the rebels controlled only one or two areas, to one focused on taking control of territory in many parts of Colombia, with a considerable injection of involvement in the drug trade and kidnappings as a source of funding.

In 2009, the Colombian Congress unfortunately passed, as part of a disarmament campaign, a law excluding thousands of paramilitaries from prosecution for war crimes. (Amnesty International, 2009)



**Displacements recorded from various parts of Colombia Jan-June 2008.**  
 From: <http://www.colombiassh.org/site/spip.php?article343>



### Ongoing major conflicts in the world

From: Wikipedia

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_ongoing\\_conflicts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ongoing_conflicts)

## International Dimensions

The story of the Displaced happening in Colombia is being repeated in conflict zones in many other countries (see map). The U.N. High Commission for Refugees has announced that the number of world Displaced has reached the highest level ever. At the end of 2007 by one estimate the total number of people forcibly uprooted by conflict and persecution around the world stood at 42 million, including 16

million refugees and asylum seekers and 26 million internally displaced (uprooted within their own countries (UN Refugee Agency, 2006).

All women in this world are, I believe, well aware of the fact the wherever there is war, women suffer in a very special way. It is not going to stop until women organize themselves and insist on being included in peace talks, governments, and legal systems.

The good news is that this is actually happening. The first big success was Resolution 1325, passed in 2000 by the UN Security Council. Here for the first time UN Member States (numbering 192 in 2009) were “called upon” to require parties in a conflict to respect women’s rights and to help assure that impunity of those responsible is ended by having women participate in peace negotiations. (You can read it at [United Nations Security Council Resolution S-RES-1325\(2000\)](http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2000/000620001325.html))

In June 2009 the Security Council (whose 15 members are largely men) passed Resolution 1820 reaffirming 1325 and amplifying its basic provisions ([http://www.undemocracy.com/S-RES-1820\(2008\).pdf](http://www.undemocracy.com/S-RES-1820(2008).pdf)). This time, however, the language was much more forceful, the actions required by Member States were described in more detail; and provisions were made for regular progress reports.

We women are compelled to redefine everything,  
And we claim our space in this world to which we belong.  
We women are an irrefutable force, a living and deep river of blood, carriers of utopia.  
Our strength is our stubbornness, our invincible resistance.  
Our utopia is intimately intertwined with the irreversibility of time. We cannot go backward!  
Don't fool yourselves, you who still believe you can dictate our destiny.  
We women have been secretly knitting, casting a taboo against war.  
Like all taboos, its invisible threads stick to the skin, and then to the conscience,  
And in the end, they bind us inescapably.

--Patricia Guerrero (translated by the author from Spanish)

--Guerrero, 2005, p. 97

A problem cannot be solved without admission that there is a problem, and the widening of international acceptance of the need to address sexual violence as a war crime is encouraging.

Success in implementation has on the other hand been spotty, to say the least; but there has been some. The UN Development Fund for Women reported to the Security Council in October 2008 that since 2000, women averaged 7% of negotiators in five major UN peace processes. A few (less than 3%) of the signatories in 14 peace talks have been women. Obviously this is not enough, but it is a beginning. Activists are now calling for the UN to create more high-level offices with sufficient staff and resources to effectively “drive, monitor, and evaluate” women’s participation in decision-making at all levels where there are conflicts. (NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, 2008)

Patricia Guerrero has from the beginning had a large vision, as you can tell from her poem (box above). She has worked on other projects and approaches to surviving forced displacement (for example, see Guerrero, 2005 and other references at the Liga de Mujeres website), and she has become well known in international circles as an authority on forced displacement, especially of women. She has spoken at the UN many times on the necessity of recognizing the fundamental human rights of women in conflict zones and displaced women. She would modestly say that the successes the Liga has had owe themselves to the work of many. That is no doubt true. However, without her much also would not have happened.

## References and Further Reading

*I took some idea or fact or quote from each of these articles. Unfortunately for the purposes of learning English, some of them are in Spanish, which I am able to read. However, there is enough in English to give you both reading and listening practice.*

Amnesty International, 2009. Colombia: *New law strengthens impunity for human rights abusers*

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?id=ENGAMR230172009&lang=e>.

Brice, A. 2009 *Guerrilla war displaces millions of Colombians*. CNN website:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/05/22/colombia.displaced/index.html>

BBC, 2009. *Colombia's displaced 'rises 25%'*. From their website:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8014085.stm>

Coomaraswamy, R. 2001 *Informe de la Misión a Colombia de la Relatora Especial sobre la Violencia contra la Mujer, Sus Causas y Consecuencias*. Mission to Colombia, November, 2001 from the UN Commission on Human Rights regarding violations of Resolution 1325 in the year 2000.

[http://www.observatoriogenero.org/magazine/resolucion\\_1325\\_informe.asp](http://www.observatoriogenero.org/magazine/resolucion_1325_informe.asp)  
Downloaded 8/3/2009.

Global Fund for Women 2008 *Patricia Guerrero*. Twentieth anniversary gala:

attending grantees. From: <http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/cms/events/20th-anniversary/attending-grantees.html> Downloaded 8/1/2009

Global Fund for Women, 2008. *Celebrating 20 Years of Grantmaking*. Video describing their grant program and featuring three projects they have supported. The last third is about the City of Women. Slow and clear - great listening practice!

[http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/cms/images/stories/downloads/gala\\_granteevideo.mov](http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/cms/images/stories/downloads/gala_granteevideo.mov)

Guerrero, P. 2005 *La Tradición, La Semilla, y La Construcción*. Sistematización de tres experiencias de resistencia de organizaciones de mujeres frente al conflicto armado en Colombia. (UNIFEM, Mesa de Conflicto Armada). 115p. Found at:

[http://www.observatoriogenero.org/DDV/publicaciones/tradicion\\_semilla\\_construccion\\_2005.pdf](http://www.observatoriogenero.org/DDV/publicaciones/tradicion_semilla_construccion_2005.pdf)

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH), OAS (Organization of American States) 2006. *Violence and Discrimination Against Women in the Armed Conflict in Colombia*. (In English) This is from a visit to Colombia made in 2005. It is long and detailed. Gives a lot of background info, summarizes and gives examples of the testimony the investigator/reporter got from displaced people in Colombia, about their experiences with criminal-soldiers and their experiences after they fled from their homes, the special problems of certain groups due to cultural differences, measures taken by the Colombian government to address the situation (including a detailed analysis of the legal framework), and recommendations. At the CIDH website (La Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos) (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights):

<http://www.cidh.org/women/Colombia06eng/part1co.htm>

Jones, Rochelle, WURN, 2007 (Interview transcript, in English) *Displaced Women and Girls in Colombia*.

[http://www.wurn.com/news/2007/03\\_07/03\\_12\\_07/031707\\_columbia.htm](http://www.wurn.com/news/2007/03_07/03_12_07/031707_columbia.htm)

Downloaded Aug 1, 2009

*La Ciudad de Las Mujeres* (with English subtitles and voiceover) A video about how the idea came about, and about how they are beginning to organize other women in their area so they can also help themselves. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RE-7xnui2g>

Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas website:

<http://www.ligademujeresdesplazadas.org/magazine/default.asp>

NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security 2008. *Peace and Security Update*. UN Commission on the Status of Women, 53rd session. At the PeaceWomen website (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom):

<http://www.peacewomen.org/news/1325News/Issue106.html>

Observatorio Género, Democracia y Derechos Humanos, 2008. *Reconocen el trabajo de una activista y abogada colombiana de mujeres desplazadas*. At the OGDDHH website (Observatorio Género, Democracia y Derechos Humanos):

<http://www.observatoriogenero.org/magazine/seccion.asp?id=27>

Pagonis, J. 2008. *Colombian Constitutional Court orders protection of displaced women*. From the Stop Violence Against Women website:

[http://www.stopvaw.org/Colombia\\_s\\_Constitutional\\_Court\\_Orders\\_Protection\\_of\\_Displaced\\_Women.html](http://www.stopvaw.org/Colombia_s_Constitutional_Court_Orders_Protection_of_Displaced_Women.html)

Rey, Gloria Helena 2006. *Displaced Women Build New Lives, Brick by Brick*. From the PeaceWomen Site:

[http://www.peacewomen.org/news/Colombia/Aug06/IDP\\_women.html](http://www.peacewomen.org/news/Colombia/Aug06/IDP_women.html)

Rosas, Erika Guevara 2008 *Colombia and Ecuador Global Fund Outreach Trip Report* (Global Fund for Women). At the Peace Women site: :

<http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Colombia/ColobiasGlobalFund.pdf> . Gives a very comprehensive summary of the Colombian situation (in English).

UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 2006. *The State of the World's Refugees 2006 - Chapter 7 Internally displaced persons: Box 7.4 Internal displacement in Colombia* At the UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency) web site:

<http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/4444d3ce20.html> Downloaded 8/1/2009.

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. 2007. *Women Building Peace in the World - The case of Colombia*. At their website:

<http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Colombia/womenbuildingpeace.html>

## Discussion or Essay Questions

*When you talk or write, please try to use some of the new words you have learned in this reading. If you have noticed new grammatical structures, try to use them, too.*

1. Do you believe it is possible to ever have a world without war? Explain.
2. Do you find this story inspiring or depressing, or both? Explain.
3. Read more about the international refugee problem and report to your class or partner. Who helps refugees find a place to go? Are many of them returning home? Include a list of sources in your report.
4. Have you ever experienced violence? What happened and what did you do? How did you feel?
5. Have you, or any family members or friends, experienced war? Describe what you or they went through, and tell what lessons you take from the story.

## Notice to Reader

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