VOICES FROM THE COCA FIELDS: Women Building Rural Communities

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<td>derecho de petición</td>
<td>petition sent within the framework of Colombia's right to access public information</td>
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<td>cocalero / cocalera</td>
<td>coca grower</td>
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<tr>
<td>ENUT</td>
<td>National Survey on Time Use (Encuesta Nacional de Uso del Tiempo)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FARC</td>
<td>Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PDET</td>
<td>territorially focused development plan (Programa de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial)</td>
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<td>PISDA</td>
<td>comprehensive plan for crop substitution and alternative development (Plan Integral Municipal y Comunitario de Sustitución y Desarrollo Alternativo)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIMCI</td>
<td>Integrated Illicit Crops Monitoring System (Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos)</td>
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<td>UNGASS 2016</td>
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INTRODUCTION*

In Colombia, the prohibition on drugs—better known as the “war on drugs”—has been a breeding ground for armed conflict, poverty, marginalization, and stigmatization. Coca, a sacred plant for some people and a loathsome one for others, a source of life or of death, is at the center of the debate over state building and peacebuilding in the country. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Colombia currently has 146,000 hectares of coca;\(^1\) following the peace accord signed in 2016 between the national government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country is facing enormous pressure to reduce this number to secure peace in rural areas and to increase the state’s presence in historically neglected regions. But behind every number—behind each hectare of coca cultivation and every conflict—there are people trying to survive in the face of hostile conditions and a weak state presence; what the numbers of hectares of coca crops do not show us is the extent of poverty, exclusion, and resistance experienced by those who are involved in various aspects of the coca economy in order to scrape by and overcome everyday conditions of violence and oppression.

\(^*\) The present document is a translation from the Spanish version of this document, published in 2019 by Dejusticia and Fensuagro.

\(^1\) This book relies on data from SIMCI, the official monitoring system for illicit crops that is administered by the government of Colombia and the United Nations. We do not consider data from the US government’s Office of National Drug Control Policy to be “official” data.
This book explores the experience of the human faces behind these numbers—the lives of the people from a specific region in Colombia who grow coca as a means of survival within the context of precarious living conditions and constant disputes between armed actors. We selected the Andes-Amazon region of Colombia—particularly the department of Putumayo—as the focus of our study, for it is a region where violence, colonization, poverty, and state building converge around coca cultivation and pose particular challenges to the implementation of crop substitution programs as proposed in point four of the final peace accord signed between the Colombian government and the FARC.

In addition to this particular region of study, we focus specifically on the experience of women coca growers. Those who grow coca in the southern part of the country share experiences of poverty, stigmatization, criminalization, and a historical state focus on militarization and resource extraction as opposed to human rights and well-being. And within this fragile panorama, the lives and bodies of women coca growers are marked by unique experiences of violence, oppression, and resistance, stemming from their being rural women in a stigmatized, militarized, and profoundly patriarchal region.

The perspective of women coca growers from the Andes-Amazon region thus allows us to understand how the war on drugs has shaped particular life experiences and has resulted in specific gender-based impacts. Identifying these differentiated impacts not only helps fill existing gaps in the literature but also sheds light on the challenges facing the implementation of a gender approach as outlined in point four of the peace accord and, on this basis, propose concrete recommendations for ensuring the application of such an approach in crop substitution efforts.

With this in mind, this book’s focus on the socioeconomic situation of women coca growers in the Andes-Amazon region rests on the idea that the country’s drug policy should replace its almost exclusive emphasis on the elimination of illicit crops with one that considers the differentiated impacts of the drug economy and the ways in which these impacts deepen inequality in different settings. Indeed, within the framework of the global prohibition on drugs, which stems from United Nations conventions, Colombia’s strategies to reduce the size of the drug trade have focused almost entirely on repressing coca cultivation—that is, reducing the amount of coca leaf that is harvested. Nonetheless, no solutions have been offered to address the per-
istent conditions of poverty in rural Colombia that have a differentiated impact on rural women. The policies of the war on drugs have placed an excessive emphasis on the plant’s elimination, which has meant that campesinos who derive their livelihood from coca cultivation have had to deal with a military state focused on eradicating, fumigating, and criminalizing, as opposed to a state based on the social rule of law that offers alternatives for overcoming the high rates of rural poverty.

Voices from the Coca Fields sheds light on the living conditions of women coca growers with the aim of providing recommendations, mainly in the context of the implementation of the peace accord, that offer ways to effectively incorporate a rights-based perspective into the crop substitution programs and alternative development plans that are currently being carried out throughout the country. In particular, we believe that such a perspective should incorporate a gender focus as one of its key pillars, for the construction of stable and lasting peace is achieved only by addressing the state's historical debt with women. Peace requires women—it requires their voices and experiences—and thus it is critical to listen to and take seriously their claims and demands.

WHY ANALYZE THE WAR ON DRUGS FROM A WOMEN’S PERSPECTIVE?

The words “war” and “drugs” are usually associated with masculinity. Moreover, statistics show that the effects of drug policies are concentrated more among men than women; the vast literature on the topic confirms that those who consume, traffic, and sell drugs worldwide tend to be men (Malinowska-Sempruch and Rychkova 2015, 2). However, this emphasis on the masculine experience has concealed the range of ways in which women are linked to the drug trade and the inequalities and gender-based violations that are reproduced there. For example, Kasia Malinowska-Sempruch and Olga Rychkova maintain that compared to men, women are more vilified for using drugs, have a lesser chance of seeking treatment for drug dependence, and face more severe punishments for drug-related crimes.

2 According to the National Planning Department, during the fifteen years of Plan Colombia, “9.6 billion dollars [were invested] by the US government and 131 billion dollars by the government of Colombia” (2016, 1), of which 72% was destined for military and police support. The National Planning Department also reported that Colombia’s antidrug strategy dedicated 64% of its resources to reducing the drug supply and a mere 5.5% to alternative development (DNP and Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho 2012, 12). Lastly, in the 2015 SIMCI report, UNODC notes that just 32% of regions with illicit crops have received alternative development interventions (UNODC and Government of Colombia 2016, 14).
The drug literature’s concealment of women’s experiences tends to be even more pronounced with regard to those who cultivate “prohibited plants.” The research that explores the differentiated impact of drug policy on women usually ignores women farmers; additionally, the international drug conventions of 1961, 1971, and 1988 overlook the conditions faced by women farmers (ibid., 3). In Colombia, part of the problem stems from the way that information is collected on illicit crops: for this research project, we undertook an exhaustive analysis of all official data on coca production in the country. In its eighteen years of existence, the Integrated Illicit Crops Monitoring System (SIMCI by its Spanish initials)3 has not included gender-based information in its annual reports. Despite the important data that are gathered and analyzed via this tool—especially through visits to the field—there are no sex-disaggregated data that permit an analysis of women’s involvement in coca cultivation, harvesting, and production.

Some of the few official data that exist in this regard are from 2009, including a report on coca-growing families, the average number of people per household, and the number of hectares of coca crops; and in 2017, SIMCI recorded data disaggregated by educational attainment and sex. Meanwhile, even though socioeconomic research studies on coca-producing families claim to have collected sex-disaggregated data, they do not report this data, which means that we do not know how many women have been involved in agricultural activities related to coca leaf (UNODC and Ministerio de Justicia 2010, 30). In light of this, we can conclude that the existing data do not allow us to fully grasp the complex panorama in which women coca growers in Colombia find themselves.

Recently, numerous entities and organizations have called attention to the importance of studying the war on drugs from a perspective that highlights women’s involvement in the various facets of the illicit drug trade. Since 2005, the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs4 has acknowledged the differentiated impact of

3 SIMCI uses a systematic and uniform methodology for collecting data on the presence and evolution of illicit crops in the country. Operated by UNODC since 1999, it publishes an annual report, usually around mid-year, which includes data for the prior year. The data collection methodology is based on satellite monitoring and field visits. Over the years, SIMCI reports have transformed, incorporating various facets of the illicit drug problem and embracing a vision that goes beyond the mere measurement of hectares. Today, the reports include detailed data on the density of coca crops, presence at the municipal level, coca leaf yields, historical and geographical evolution, eradication efforts, and the number of families who rely on coca cultivation, among other indices.

4 The Commission on Narcotic Drugs, based in Vienna, is a policymaking body of the United Nations that monitors states’ compliance with the three international drug control treaties.
drug policy and has even requested that UNODC record sex-disaggregated information in its reports on drugs. Similarly, in the preparatory process for the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly on the World Drug Problem (UNGASS) in 2016,\(^5\) UN Women prepared a policy brief on the impact of drug policy on women. Moreover, the drug policy reform movement, at both the activist and academic level, has recently begun to take note of the gender-based impacts of prohibition as a policy for controlling drugs. Finally, scholars have increasingly begun to pay attention to the situation of women who are incarcerated for drug-related crimes and related policy reforms in Latin America (Pérez Correa 2015; Uprimny et al. 2016; WOLA 2017).

Nonetheless, the emphasis of these studies on women’s involvement in the drug trade is on incarceration and micro-trafficking. Aspects concerning cultivation and production remain absent from research studies. And even though UN Women has called attention to the need for deeper study of women’s participation in the coca economy and the violence-related impacts of this involvement, this gap in the literature has yet to be filled (UN Women 2014, 2).

This dearth of information is a serious problem in the case of Colombia, for the peace accord includes commitments by both parties (the government and the FARC) to incorporate a gender perspective in all processes aimed at tackling the illicit drug problem, particularly crop substitution programs. Similarly, the UNGASS 2016 outcome document reflects transformations in language and actions that open the door for drug policy based on human rights (Pereira and Cruz 2017).\(^6\) A gender perspective can be seen in the document’s operational recommendations on cross-cutting issues, which call on governments to “mainstream a gender perspective into and ensure the involvement of women in all stages of the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of drug policies and programmes, develop and disseminate gender-sensitive and age-appropriate measures that take into account the

\(^5\) Held in April 2016 in New York, UNGASS 2016 was the culmination of a multilateral political process, begun in 2012, that sought to engage governments in frank debate on strategies to address the world’s drug problem; the idea was that strategies should be based on evidence instead of moral prejudices and that governments should acknowledge the failure of prohibition as a strategy for drug control. The outcome document is titled *Our Joint Commitment to Effectively Addressing and Countering the World Drug Problem*. UNGASS 2016 was the result of a joint call by the governments of Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico.

\(^6\) It is worth highlighting that UNGASS 2016 departed from the traditional three-pillar structure of international drug policy—demand reduction, supply reduction, and international cooperation—by embracing seven key thematic areas that address cross-cutting human rights concerns for certain populations (children, youth, and women), as well as questions related to socioeconomic development for campesinos who eradicate their illicit crops.
specific needs and circumstances faced by women and girls with regard to the world drug problem” (UNODC 2016, 15).

Both the peace accord and the UNGASS outcome document require that crop substitution processes incorporate a gender perspective that addresses the claims and interests of women involved in the cultivation and production of coca. But how can this be achieved without understanding or listening firsthand to women? This book documents the experiences of women coca growers—for hearing their voices is the first step in grasping their complex realities and beginning the process of constructing a drug and crop substitution policy committed to the elimination of gender-based violence and inequality.

PUTUMAYO AND THE ANDES-AMAZON REGION

According to the 2035 Andes-Amazon Comprehensive Development Plan, geographically speaking, the Andes-Amazon region comprises several municipalities from the departments of Putumayo and Nariño and is divided into six subregions: Valle de Sibundoy, Centro, Río Caquetá, Leguízamo, Río Putumayo, and Valle del Guamuez. The composition of this region—unlike the traditional political-administrative and departmental divisions—is due to specific environmental, agricultural, sociocultural, and political traits of these municipalities, as well as the riverways that facilitate communication and exchanges among the communities who inhabit them (Mesa Regional 2017).

Although the Andes-Amazon region includes municipalities that belong to a number of departments—Cauca, Caquetá, Nariño, and Putumayo—this book is focused on the department of Putumayo. Most of the municipalities of the Andes-Amazon region are located in this department and share similar social, demographic, and economic traits. In general, the information we have gathered for Putumayo also reflects the situation of neighboring municipalities and villages that, because of their location, are economically and socially closer to Putumayo than to Cauca, Nariño, or Caquetá.7

7 Our fieldwork with women coca growers from the Andes-Amazon region also includes testimonies from women from the municipality of Piamonte (Cauca) and the town of Jardines de Sucumbios (Nariño). Although these two areas are not part of the Andes-Amazon region, we decided to include these women’s stories in our research because they share commonalities with those from the Andes-Amazon region; in addition, the fact that these towns are located on the border with Putumayo means that residents have frequent economic, cultural, and social interactions with communities from Putumayo.
While we are aware that the municipalities and departments of the Andes-Amazon region possess unique features that belie generalizations, in this book we focus on the shared experiences and the crosscutting regional dynamics in the Andes-Amazon region, particularly Putumayo. As suggested by María Clara Torres, Putumayo’s history is marked by, on the one hand, a national government that has made its presence in the area known through the promotion of extractive activities and the deployment of military force aimed at bringing down armed actors and other threats and, on the other, the efforts of local communities to build a state “from the ground up”—that is, to provide themselves with the well-being and basic services needed to live with dignity (Torres Bustamante 2011).

Cutting across both of these processes are the dynamics of the coca trade. First, this economy attracted various illegal armed actors to the region, which triggered an increase in the state’s military presence, in turn affecting the civilian population and campesino coca growers in many ways. Second, as a response to the state’s militarized presence, the civilian population—particularly those inhabitants involved in the coca trade—began to take part in social movements aimed at supplying the basic goods and services that the state was failing to provide.

This context of state building, social mobilization, and cultural dynamics spurred by the coca economy in Putumayo has been widely documented. Nevertheless, the experience of women coca growers in these processes has not. This book seeks to fill that gap. Moreover, ignoring women’s perspectives in these processes means overlooking key experiences that help us understand how social inequality and poverty operate and are exacerbated through policies such as the “war on drugs” and the militarization of regions stigmatized as coca havens. In this regard, this book constitutes a first step in analyzing these complex processes from a gender perspective, with an eye toward highlighting the barriers to designing a rights-based drug policy that takes women’s experiences into account and making recommendations for overcoming them.
Aparte de dedicar tiempo a mi familia, asisto a reuniones con mi comunidad que se realizan cada mes. Pertenecía al comité de directivos de mi comunidad por lo tanto asisto a reuniones a la inspección cuando me sientan y a la Fundación.