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# WOVEN

## Collective Memory of the Chaparralunas Women's Network for Peace

We share this history so that the world can see how, as the Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz (Chaparralunas Women's Network for Peace), we've managed over nearly 20 years of organizing, to resist in our territory without having to leave it. We had to keep a low profile for many years. In the meanwhile, we educated ourselves and certified our elementary and high school equivalencies. Now that we are professionals, we advocate for women-centered public policy and the prevention of violence against women, and we occupy participation spaces. It is this history of highs and lows and peacebuilding amid violence that we tell in this book.

**Dagmar Lucía Hernández Peña.**



WOVEN Collective Memory of the Chaparralunas Women's Network for Peace



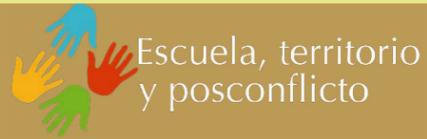
Research England





## **WOVEN**

Collective Memory  
of the Chaparralunas Women's  
Network for Peace



**WOVEN.** Collective memory of the Chaparralunas Women's Network of Peace

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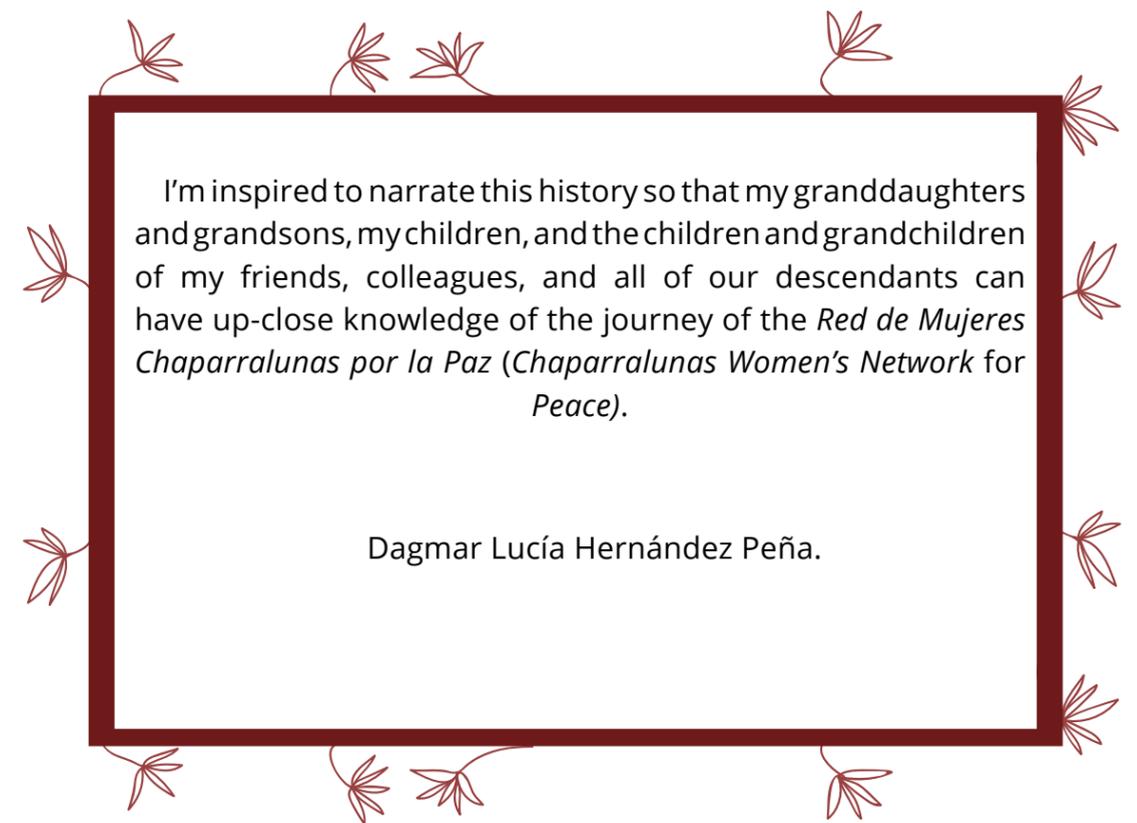
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We want to acknowledge and express our gratitude to the researchers who facilitated the process: Mónica del Pilar Álvarez of the Peace and Region Program at the Universidad de Ibagué, Nohora Isabel Barros Navarro of the Zoon Politikon research group at the Universidad de Ibagué, and Cristina Sala Valdés and Iokiñe Rodríguez of the Global Environmental Justice Research Group at the University of East Anglia; also, John Jairo Uribe Sarmiento, María del Pilar Salamanca, and Santiago Padilla who have worked hard to execute this research project; and, last, but not least, the students from the Peace and Region Program who were responsible for transcribing all the interviews, testimonies, and workshops, Andrea Palomino, Diana Sosa, and Dora Ávila.

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## Prologue

A phrase coined by the feminist movement in 1975 has in recent times become popular again: "The future is female." Originally formulated as part of the fight for gender equality, the phrase has now taken on much broader connotations. Today, "The future is female" refers to the turn that humanity is taking, and that it must continue to take, so that we can safeguard life on Earth, our only planet, which for many cultures of the world, is female: our Mother Earth. In that future, which is already part of our present, women have become the key to sustaining life.

Attacked globally by a pandemic and the increasingly certain threat of a planetary environmental crisis, humanity is finally waking up. We are realizing that we must seriously change the patterns of behaviour that govern relationships between human beings and nature: competition, force, patriarchy, and authoritarianism, to communitarianism, collaboration and solidarity, all of which may allow us to put social justice, equity and respect for nature at the centre of life. In other words, we urgently need to extend the philosophy and life principles of care, intrinsic in women, to every dimension of social life.

In many corners of the world women are mobilising to make this happen. For instance, women's role in responding to the health crisis caused by COVID-19 has been clearly demonstrated during the pandemic. It is not by chance that the countries with the best response to the pandemic have been those with women presidents: New Zealand, Taiwan, Germany, Bangladesh, and Iceland. As women we have also been acquiring an increasingly important role in the fight against our planet's environmental destruction. Throughout Latin America in particular, women are increasingly at the forefront of socio-environmental conflicts, battling for the future of our children to no longer be at stake. Similarly, in contexts of prolonged armed conflict, women's organizations and networks have recently begun to stand out in peacebuilding processes at family, community and political levels. In the form of nonviolent resistance, awareness raising, solidarity, sisterhood, commitment, and cooperation, women from different backgrounds are demonstrating their agency and transformative power to create new collective identities that can allow us to dream and put into practice a different future for ourselves, our children, families, and communities.

The book that you hold in your hands is an example of this. "Woven. The Collective Memory of The Chaparralunas Women's Network for Peace" shows the admirable, ongoing and, at times, silent work of a group of brave women from southern Tolima, Colombia. Fifteen years ago, amid an armed conflict unlike any other in the world, these women decided to focus their energy on a peacebuilding process that places the defense of women's, children's, and adolescent's rights at the center.

The Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz is a social organization formed by (adolescent and adult) indigenous, Afro-descendant, and small-scale farmer women who organized at the end of the 90s to defend women's rights in southern Tolima. A total of 20 women's organizations from the department of Tolima comprise the network. Its headquarters is in Chaparral, where the Steering committee made up by ten women meets.

The idea to write this book arose during the "School, Territory and Post-conflict: building a local peace culture in South Tolima (Colombia)" research project, carried out jointly between the Universidad de Ibagué, University of East Anglia of England, Eureka Educativa, teachers from eight rural and urban schools, and eight social organizations from the four municipalities of southern Tolima (Ataco, Chaparral, Planadas, and Rioblanco). The project's aim was to investigate how violence generated by conflict, in particular the armed conflict experienced over the last 60 years in Colombia, with southern Tolima as one of its epicenters, has impacted schools and social organizations. The Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz was one of eight organizations that participated in the process.

One of the key characteristics of project School, Territory, and Post-conflict is that its work with social organizations used a transformative-action-research methodology focused on co-creating social knowledge through research experiences "rooted" in the sensibilities of social subjects and their subjectivities. The essence of this methodology is a flexible, dialogue-based, and dynamic approach to performing research that responds to expressions of community agency and a determination to strengthen grassroots empowerment. In practice, this entails two important elements. On the one hand, that the research be constituted as a tool to serve the community, and to help it coordinate, make visible, and strengthen its knowledge, experiences, and local visions of peacebuilding. On the other hand, an acknowledgement that there are no such hierarchy between academic and community knowledge. They are rather seen as complementary forms of knowledge, that are strengthened through dialogue.

Thus, just as *The Chaparralunas Women's Network for Peace* was strengthened by its participation in School, Territory, and Post-conflict project, the rest of the team, and the research as a whole, grew through its work with the Network. From early on in the research, the Network's sensitivity and the collective knowledge of its women helped us value the importance of going beyond an understanding of peacebuilding from a perspective centered on the war and its impacts, towards one that can capture how the people that experience conflicts are able to build peace amid violence. The Network's members are experts at this, as is laid out in this book.

Participating in this project offered *The Chaparralunas Women's Network for Peace* the opportunity to reconstruct its collective institutional memory but also to share it with others, which is how the idea to write this book arose: to give greater visibility to their experiences and peacebuilding legacy. Academic literature has widely documented women's important role in peacebuilding. Nevertheless, little attention has been given to help amplify their voices on peacebuilding, or to help women tell and share their stories using their own words and narratives. This is the nature of this book. It not only compiles the results of a self-reflective and participatory research process among the Network's members but has also been collaboratively written by them. That is why this book is so unique.

The book also shows us how, amid the armed conflict, *The Chaparralunas Women's Network for Peace* was conquering political participation and local development spaces for the women of southern Tolima and the changes that these new spaces generated in terms of the roles, self-esteem, and identity of its members. It also speaks to the meaning of peace, from a female perspective, and how it can be achieved. Additionally, it is an important call to other women in different parts of the country and the world to share their own stories and lessons of peacebuilding.

Lastly, as the book shows, the work of the Network forces us to reflect about the different roles that can be adopted in peacebuilding, as peace is not simply an expression of a capricious agenda within a political process. For the women of the network, peace is constructed as an ongoing process, and is what has helped them keep their ties alive. The women from the Network have known how to work with a low-profile during moments of exacerbated violence, when to have visible participation in public spaces while promoting political processes, and how to delegate and step outside of the home's intimate space to create a second political family that seeks to serve other women.

Nohora Isabel Barros Navarro, a researcher from the Universidad de Ibagué, has placed herself at the service of the Network, accompanying and stimulating this collaborative writing process. The ties forged between them before and during the writing of this book, and the bonds created during this affective-political research process are present in the empathy, respect, admiration, and solidarity expressed in every page. We hold up our recognition and respect for Nohora as the main facilitator of this fruitful and loving research and creative-collective writing process.

As researchers who are committed to social change, we are full of pride for having been able to accompany the Network in this research and collective writing process and to now have the privilege of presenting this important piece of work that you hold in your hands. We hope that this book will sprout wings and reach other territories in Colombia, Latin America, and the entire planet. Also, that in doing so the Network will be woven with other women's networks in order to continue building peace and sisterhood and paving the way for a stronger shared "the future is female" vision for the world.

**Iokiñe Rodríguez Fernández and Cristina Sala Valdés**

Norwich, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021



## Introduction

The *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz* is a social organization made up of indigenous, Afro, and small-scale farmer women, heads-of-household, small business owners, independent workers, and youth who are victims of gender-based violence and the armed conflict. We, as women, had been seeking possibilities to build a political platform that would create the foundation for us to stand together. At the end of the nineties, we organized ourselves in the Network with the political clarity that our struggle would be to build territorial peace based on the defense of women's rights and the search for conditions, opportunities, and tools to develop an independent and dignified life, free of violence.

Currently, our Network is made up of a ten-woman Steering Committee that represent 25 organizations from six municipalities in southern Tolima (Colombia). These organizations work in agricultural sectors, provide artisanal craft, culinary, aesthetic, and care services, are leaders of micro-businesses, and also belong to women's associations from indigenous and Afro communities. **We are a group that is expert at finding the odd job, acting, stretching our resources. We are saleswomen and multitaskers who do the work that is needed and are always innovating to benefit our organization and our homes.**

As a result of our union and presence, we have been able to promote a path of cultural transformation, strengthening rural women's organizational initiatives, training women leaders, and promoting women's active participation in political spaces. **We call this "Peace from the hands and in the likeness of women" and, from this perspective the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz* focuses on collective work, equality, struggle, a desire to overcome, peace, resistance, social construction, empowerment, unity, social fabric, culture, sisterhood, respect, love, and pride.**

Given our experience, in December 2018, we were invited by the Universidad de Ibagué, Eureka Educativa, and the University of East Anglia to participate in the "School, Territory, and Post-conflict research project." This was the first time that we had taken part in such a broad research project. What excited us most about participating in it was the idea of helping to build a peace culture in southern Tolima. However, as we became immersed in the research and began to reconstruct the path that we had been walking, the idea arose of rebuilding our organizational memory so that we could share it with others. That is how this book that we are sharing with you today was born.

The School, Territory, and Post-conflict: Constructing a Peace Culture in Southern Tolima Project led us to ask how violence generated by conflicts, in particular the armed conflict in the country and also here in southern Tolima, has impacted schools and social organizations. The project used three research tools: social cartography, conflict biographies, and participatory videos. As the researchers from the community organizations, we added a new research question about our political work in the territory: How have we, the social organizations, built peace amid the conflict? This meant focusing on carrying out dialogues about knowledge at different moments: during research meetings, conversations among social organizations, and the academic interpretation among university researchers and professors. These dialogues were the foundation for understanding and appropriating the daily experiences, local resistance, and peacebuilding amid the conflict, and the organizations that participated in the project were inspired to develop/adapt research tools and methodologies.

This research project put us face to face with the need to reflect internally on what we had done over the years. For that reason, unlike the focus of many of our companions from other organizations, our research looked inward; these two years of work allowed us to open a space for a critical reading of our own political process. After looking inwards and recreating our memory, another need arose, the need to portray our experiences so that our work for peace could be recognized, made visible, and reach others. This is why we decided to create this book. To give it a narrative structure, we created an editorial committee with Universidad de Ibagué and the University of East Anglia researchers Nohora Barros, Cristina Sala, and Iokiñe Rodríguez, who helped us to transcribe testimonies, write and organize each chapter, and edit this story.

These pages lay out a collective reconstruction of our memory as an organization, which was fed by personal reflections, our experiences, and our life stories. Here, we narrate how we conquered political participation spaces and how this changed our roles, self-esteem, and identity; the paths that we have taken to combine our roles in the domestic/private sphere and the public sphere; and how we called upon others to create social organizations and political projects for women, as this has allowed us to recognize ourselves as political subjects and citizens.

This book was created with a lot of love, passion, and enthusiasm. For that reason, we dedicate it first to the new generations of young women and men who have joined the Network and grown up alongside us. To our daughters, sons, granddaughters, and grandsons, **because beyond remembering what we did, we are reaffirming all that we are, our identities, our cultural diversity, what we have achieved, harvested, all our dreams, and the challenges that we have yet to conquer so that in the future these**

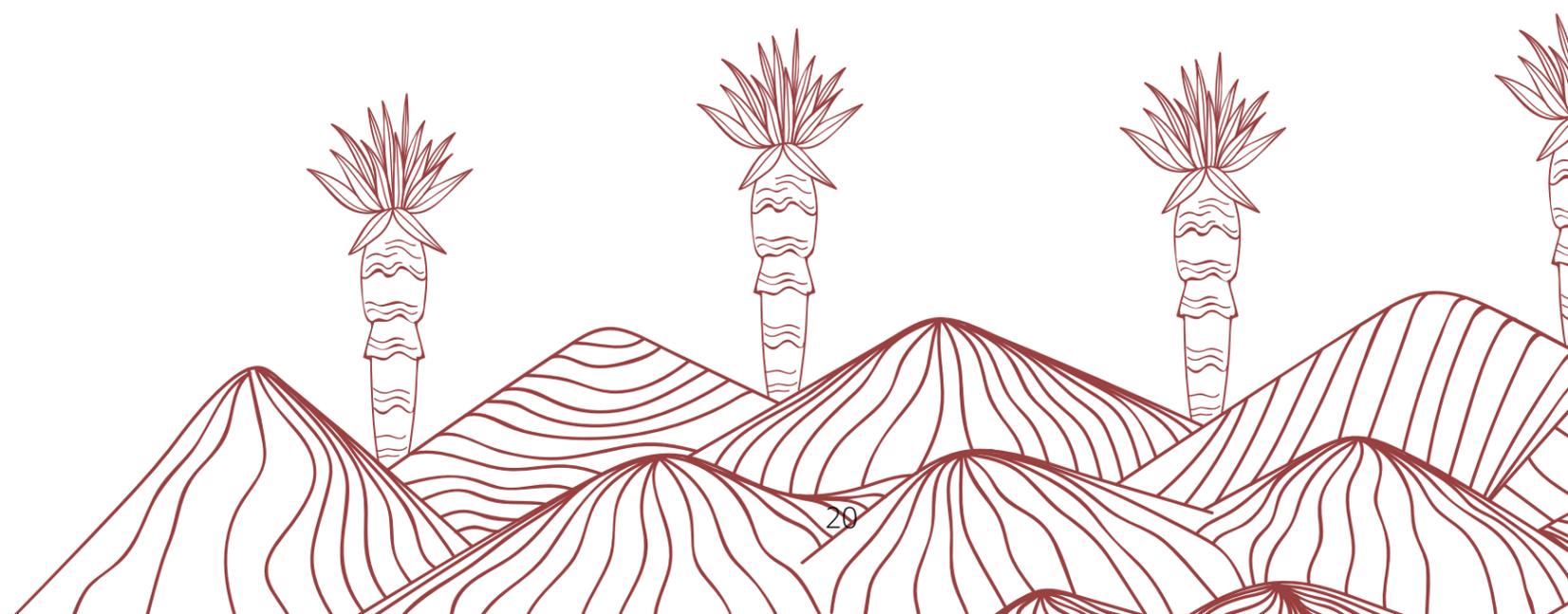
**young women and men can write the next chapter of this process.**

Secondly, as you will see later, one of our principles is to replicate everything we learn. For that reason, we hope that this story will reach many women. We want to show that peace is built, that it can be constructed from any place in the country or the world. Sometimes it may seem improbable, very difficult, and full of obstacles but it can be done when we are united and organized! That is why we hope that all women, or all people, who read this book can learn from our story, that they can replicate and adapt this knowledge on peacebuilding with the hands and in the likeness of women.

We cannot proceed without mentioning our dear colleague Dagmar Lucía Hernández Peña, who passed away before we were able to finish this research. Writing this book was one of her goals in her last months of life. She insisted on the need to create memory, a legacy, so that our voices, messages, and contributions to peace would not be lost or erased, but instead could be replicated, receive feedback, and be strengthened. For many women, Dagmar changed our lives. She taught us about tenacity, perseverance, struggle, political advocacy, spiritual wisdom, and to weave an intersection of dreams and peace where all small-scale farmer, indigenous, Afro, and urban women can have access to tools, opportunities, and options to develop a life free of violence, based on autonomy and knowledge. Dagmar knew that her departure would be full of tributes but on several occasions, she told us: "Make the videos and recognize me while I am alive." Life, however, didn't wait. For that reason, this book is also a tribute to her strength, advice, and presence which will continue to accompany us at all times, wherever we are. This is the realization of one of her dreams.

The book has seven chapters. The first is called "The Call: Time to Organize" where we narrate the moment when we met each other and the events that led us to the idea of creating a political network that would allow us to rise up and make an impact. The second chapter is "Let's Be a Network" where we explain why we decided to establish ourselves as the Network, understanding that when we say the Women's Network or just the Network (*Red* in Spanish), with a capital N, we are referring to our organization: the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz* (*Chaparralunas Women's Network for Peace*). Chapter three is a tribute to the women who have participated in this process and who wanted to tell their personal stories. Their stories are accompanied by a timeline that reflects the obstacles, milestones, people, and allied institutions that have participated in this journey that has lasted for over 20 years. In chapter four, "Transforming Fear," we talk about how together we were able to manage the threats, obstacles, and fears that arose throughout this political process.

The fifth, "How Were We Able to Persist?" describes the strategies we implemented to sustain the organizational fabric for over 20 years. Chapter six, "A Network Woven for the Benefit of the Collective: Contributions to Territorial Peace Based on Sisterhood, Collective Resistance, and Social Justice," is our conclusion chapter where we narrate how, from a place of love, union, and understanding among women, that is to say, based on sisterhood, we activated a political project to transform territory, people, and build local peace. Finally, we close with a chapter that describes the methodologies used in the research process and to create this book called "How Did We Do It?"



# 01

## The Call: Time to Organize

In the municipality of Chaparral, a land of vibrant people, women from five townships came together with the ambition of organizing and creating a women's network to reflect a common perspective held by many women leaders working for peace. We began our struggle to defend our rights, to position our productive projects, and to build peace based on small actions within our territories. That is how we have been able to promote the well-being of our communities and families.

**Carmen Emilia Moreno Tique**



## “Where was the empathy?” “When will our paths cross?”

Life was far from easy for us—the women of southern Tolima—under the territorial control of the FARC’s 21st Front. Not only did we face the violence inherent to the armed confrontation that our country was experiencing, but also domestic violence. This dark monster silenced our souls and took away our options to access education, justice, and political spaces; but nobody talked about it, and as women, we didn’t talk due to our shame or because we simply saw it as “normal.”

In this context, a group of women organizing themselves to carry out nonviolent peacebuilding seemed improbable, but the strength of our souls allowed us to grow and position our struggle to defend women’s rights in the territory. How did we start on this journey? Where was the empathy? What was happening in our lives? These were the first questions we asked ourselves as we sought to look back into our hazy personal memories and dig into the past, bringing to the forefront who we were back then.

### Breaking away from the patriarchy of the Community Action Councils (JAC)

As women, we were always present in the JACs (Community Action Councils), but more often than not we were secretaries since we weren’t able to reach the positions of vice-president and president. The men didn’t want to yield their power. However, being in these spaces allowed women like Dagmar Lucía, Gloria Méndez, and María Ximena to participate in a Leadership School for Women held by the Tolima Governor’s Office, back when Guillermo Alfonso Jaramillo was governor, and that is when our paths began to cross and to be woven together. Each woman was representing a different process: María Ximena came from a place of vindication and self-determination for indigenous women (of whom we will speak more about later), whereas Dagmar and Gloria participated as representatives for ASOJUNTAS. These political capacity-building processes led to this small group of women taking on their first goal: fighting to break with patriarchy in the JAC and stimulating women’s political participation in rural communities.

To do this, Dagmar, alongside other women, began to motivate and support women’s candidacies for president, vice-president, and secretaries in several JACs. Later, after seeing Dagmar’s work and commitment to women, they voted for her for ASOJUNTAS president:

“I had been secretary for a long time but was never able to go further, the men didn’t give me a chance, but I saw the opportunity and I ran for president. Before the Board elections, I managed to meet with all the women who were the presidents of their local councils and I was able to get their support and vote, so my victory was a landslide win.” Dagmar Lucía Hernández Peña

## This moment changed Glorita’s life. She tells how:

“It was surprising to me to see so many women there, that Dagmar Lucía greeted me with such satisfaction after I won. I felt important because after having been a teacher and giving it all up for my husband and children, I was just on the farm peeling plantain, *cachaco*, and cassava. To see myself there, after Dagmar convinced me to be president, made me begin to feel like I was getting stronger.”

That was how, for the first time, we managed to break men’s political control and demand the space that we, as women, deserve in public life. And this was thanks to the support that we gave each other as women, convincing ourselves to vote for each other and convincing other women who weren’t part of the Network. We also convinced many men to vote for our candidates.

### The self-determination of indigenous women

As we already said, María Ximena was in the Leadership School for Women. We, the indigenous women, were in the process of receiving the official recognition of the Pijao indigenous communities and, with that, the creation of the Asociación de Mujeres Indígenas de Tolima (ASMIT- Indigenous Women’s Association of Tolima).

In this process with the Governor’s Office, we did not feel represented as women because the capacity-building work was very institutional; meaning it was more for mayors and did not respond to our needs. Nevertheless, the project had an entrepreneurial component which is why the women from ASMIT (even though we still didn’t have legal status) formulated a proposal for a textile project that was approved. To access the funds, we had to ask a favor of the only community that was registered with the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs: Yaguara, where the entire board was men and the only woman was the fiscal oversight officer.

The Tolima Governor’s Office gave us COP \$5,00,000, a large part of which went to cover administrative expenses. The rest was used to buy sewing machines. The Governor’s Office was going to finance an additional project, but because we weren’t registered with the Chamber of Commerce, we lost the opportunity. This helped us to see the need to strengthen our association as a way to have more economic self-determination and better results for our actions.

Moreover, we thought that this journey shouldn’t only be for indigenous women, but that it should be for women from other sectors in the municipality, which is why we decided to contribute to the actions carried out by the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz*.

## We want to be independent

The fact that we were a group of diverse women helped to generate a series of connections with national coalitions like the Iniciativa de Mujeres por la Paz (IMP-Initiative of Women for Peace) and the Red Nacional de Mujeres (National Women's Network). They helped us with training on the prevention of gender-based violence and public policy advocacy. We were delegates and actively participated in these spaces with women from other departments like Putumayo, Huila, and Caquetá but, in the context of the era when the National Government negotiated with paramilitary groups, we experienced a rupture.

Patricia Buriticá was leading the IMP alliance when she joined the negotiation team. Many of the organizations that were part of the group did not accept her participation and fissures began to appear. In fact, during a meeting in Bogotá, we were asked: "What side are you on? IMP or the Red Nacional?" They made us choose. So we saw the need to meet and analyze the situation we had experienced in the capital. We had to think about our response to this proposal.

We had to be coherent in our ideas and actions because we were talking about autonomy, how nobody could tell us what to do, and how we needed to make our own decisions. Also, in our territory we were facing a different situation, we did not have experience with paramilitaries in the conflict because we lived in a region controlled by the FARC. This is why we decided not to take the side of any organization that would tie us down. We decided to be independent and free, which put before us another huge challenge.



*Image 1. Dagmar Lucía Hernández representing the Women's Network in the Third Women's Constitutional Assembly. Images from our archive, 2006.*

## Emerging from diversity

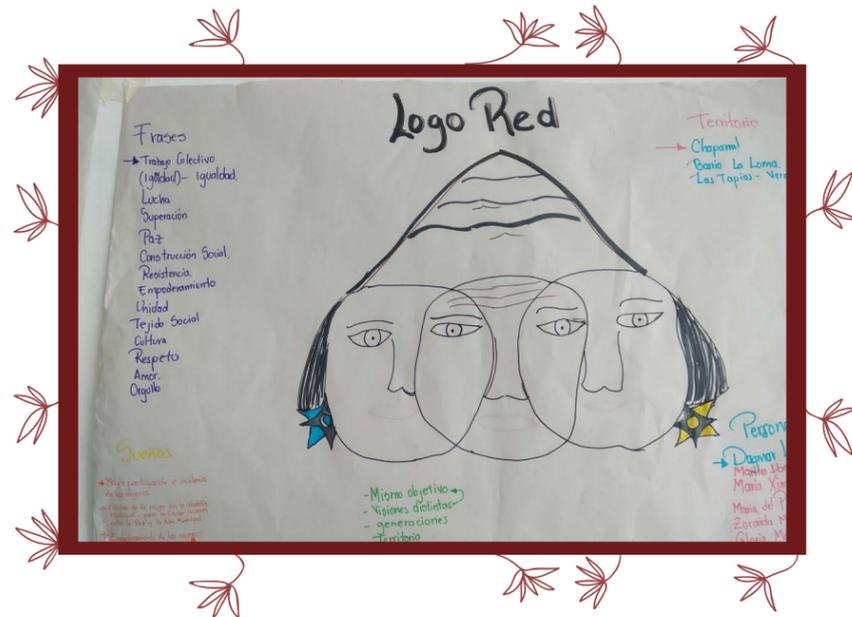


Image 2. Dreaming Our Story workshop. Illustration by Yuri Morales, June 2019.

Each of us has had a different process, which showed us a major need: to create a women's network so that the women's organizations would have a platform to represent us. Doing this was the first step to rise up and help resolve the demands and/or needs of the women in our territory, which would also give us the independence to manage, lead, influence, and administer resources.

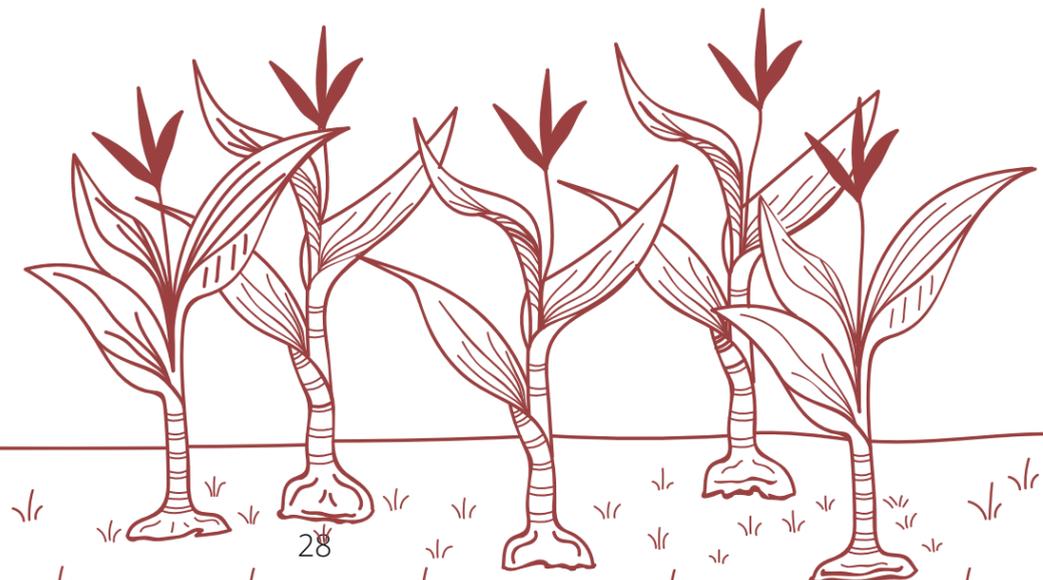
We asked all over for help, but everyone always asked us: "Are you registered at the Chamber of Commerce?" and evidently the answer was no... We needed economic resources to establish ourselves legally! And what could we do if we didn't have resources? Well, we activated Operation "Sirirí."<sup>1</sup> With this campaign, those who were able contributed what they could and the rest of us raised money selling pencils and t-shirts, holding raffles and cultural activities, and selling empanadas, lechona, tamales, and masato made by our colleague, Ana Isabel, may she rest in peace. So, through many activities and strategies, we were able to raise

the money to file our paperwork at the Chamber of Commerce and we were legally established as the Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

In 2002, we also created our institutional logo with help from the Chaparral art teacher, Orlando Alí Martínez, who volunteered his support in designing the logo based on our thoughts and ideas. We wanted to incorporate everything that identified us with our territories. That is why the Calarma Mountain is in the background, which is part of our connection to the municipality of Chaparral in both rural and urban areas. It is also related to nature because we work on its behalf with our driving force, rural women. We were always thinking about their problems and questioning gaps, how the government forgets them and hasn't addressed inequality; problems which continue to expand.

On the other hand, those of us who started the work back then were youth or adults, and now we are adults and older adults. The young women of today have joined our process or are our daughters. That is why the logo has three faces, representing our inter-generational and culturally diverse dialogues: an adult woman, a wise older woman, and a young indigenous woman are looking towards the same horizon, symbolizing our objectives and common and collective work to weave ties, and weave a future. Additionally, the earrings represent the balance between sun/day and moon/night. The braids are the path that must be walked with tenacity and patience to obtain our dreams.

With this background, and since our organization was led by us, our dream began to reach administrative and financial autonomy which is why we decided to organize as the Network. As women, we felt like we had a responsibility to other women to replicate and teach them everything we had learned, which is why we began to go to the townships and rural communities. Given that we had members in those JACs we were able to begin to weave relationships. We did not



have resources, but we had knowledge, and with it we were able to travel to these territories and, yes, to negotiate with FARC commanders, explaining to them our objectives and why it was necessary to go to those places. That is why [it was important] to be with Dagmar as the ASOJUNTAS president and other women JAC presidents, because they facilitated access to the regions controlled by guerrillas.

So we started with small projects with other allied organizations and women, like the home gardens with Mujeres Apoyando Mujeres (MAM-Women Helping Women).



Image 3. Beginning of the MAM program, Women's Network with Arelis Morales. Organizational archive, 2003.

## What is Operation Sirirí?

“Operation Sirirí” is what Fabiola Lalinde called the untiring search for her son Luis Fernando Lalinde, who was disappeared by the army on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1984. For many years, Fabiola fought persistently, for which she even ended up in jail following a raid based on trumped up charges. She brought her son’s case before national and international entities until his body was exhumed in 1992 and, in 1996, it was finally possible to verify that it was her son. The most admirable aspect of this case is that as a regular old woman—as she calls herself—she alone built an archive, which gained serious recognition from national universities and even UNESCO. She christened her battle to find her son Sirirí (Tropical Kingbird), because, though it is a very small bird, when the sparrowhawk (a much larger bird) arrives, it defends its chicks and territory with a very loud song, until she rescues her chicks or dies trying.

Fabiola Lalinde has become a symbol of the women’s movement for peace in Colombia. Her insistent struggle has inspired many women and organizations to continue defending their causes and actions for peace. Therefore, national organizations like the Iniciativa de Mujeres por la Paz (IMP) have adopted



Image 4. Operation Sirirí. Organizational archive, 2004.

“Operation Siriri” as a national strategy to use small actions in the territories to continue defending their right to live in a country free of violence.

In different moments we at the Network joined national actions within this operation, especially when we defended the “yes” campaign for the 2016 Peace Referendum; but we have also adapted it to our organizational objectives. For us, “Operation Siriri” has meant organizing marches to demand our rights and/or managing resources or support at specific times. For example, when we needed to legalize the Network at the Chamber of Commerce, when seeking support from schools and universities so we can study, when activating the Woman and Gender Consultative Council in the municipality of Chaparral, among others. Currently, it signifies continuing to persist so that our new voices, proposals, and projects have a place and are taken into account by decision-making bodies.



Images 5 and 6. Operation Siriri “yes to peace” in the 2016 peace referendum campaign, Chaparral – Tolima. Organizational archive, 2016.



Image 7. Action for November 25<sup>th</sup> in commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Chaparral, Tolima. Organizational archive, 2003.



# 02

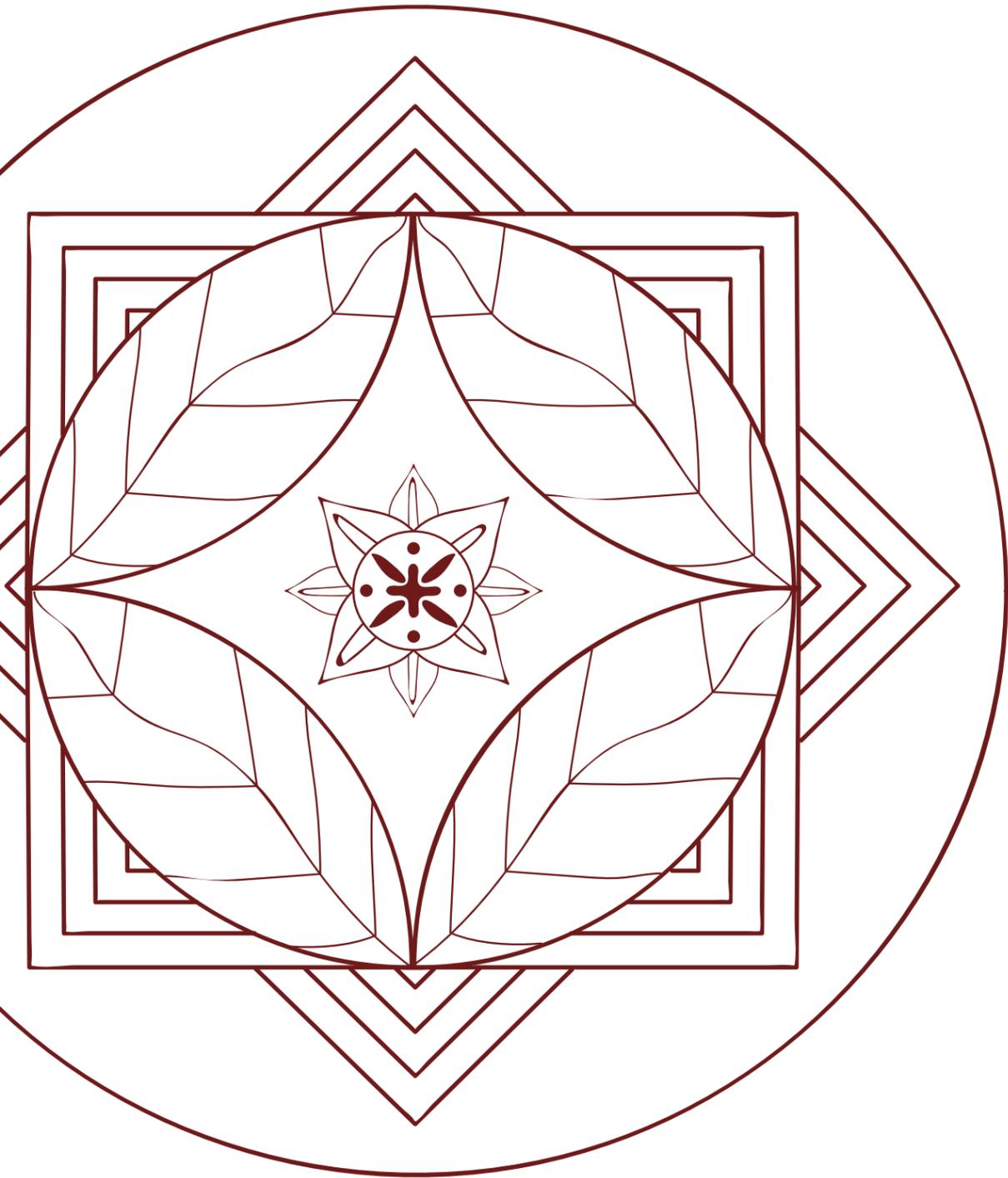
## Let's Be a Network

When I closed my eyes to think about an image that identified us, I imagined many points. We understand that a network means forming little points from several areas. So, this is a dedication to the women who are organizing ourselves in the Network. These points represent women's knowledge and what they contribute by communicating with their families, communities, associations, or JACs. All these points are convergences between women. There is also communication among all the points, allowing them to all come together, but each at their own rhythm.

When I thought about a special phrase, I offered one that I always use in my documents, notebooks, in everything. It is: "A woman with knowledge can change the world." Yes, the world, but that starts at home and in our territory. If we the women who are part of this Network have knowledge, we can change the world.

These points represent all the women who are part of the Network in southern Tolima. We work as we would with wool: we pull from one woman's yarn, we pull from another woman's yarn to help each other and weave among us all.

Dagmar Lucía Hernández Peña





Also, working in a network grants us more possibilities to occupy different participation spaces and to feel represented, because if one of us cannot be in a space, there will be another woman who will be able to be there and position our common rights, projects, and proposals. On the other hand, it allows us to be backed by other women, considering that each woman thinks and lives different situations, but from the collective we can find commonalities. For example, women who have suffered violence and have not talked about it out of fear. Thanks to the unity that we have in these social initiatives, they have been able to talk.

For reasons like these, we say that this kind of social organization becomes a source of support where women have the opportunity to talk about things in safe spaces built on trust that they cannot talk about at home. Additionally, we have a social role that paves the way for contact with trustworthy people and these encounters are a way to prevent violence, because when women have a social role they also have a community network and a support system to file a complaint or talk about their feelings. In this space you will find people who will listen without judgment and will provide guidance to help find a solution. In this space, a woman will never be alone.



*Image 9. Mural at the Casa Campesina (Women Small-scale Farmer's Center), the Women's Network prior headquarters, 2019.*

## We are all equal: organizational structure

When we decided on the structure of our organization's Steering Committee, we were not thinking of the hierarchical model that is generally used by these committees in associations with a president, vice-president, treasurer, and all the rest, where everyone follows the orders of the person who presides over them. Instead, we chose to have a horizontal Steering Committee, made up of ten women representing organizations that are members of the Network and that all of us would be coordinators, because we are equal and important. We recognize that each of us has talents that are complementary when they are combined with those of others. So, if one woman is good at making the budget, she coordinates financial issues and teaches others how to do it; if a woman is good at talking to the media, she coordinates communications efforts, but she also includes other women so that they can see that it is possible to move past their fear and speak to the media or write an opinion column. This guarantees that we can all learn about and rotate among the different positions and functions. Thus, each coordinator takes on the leadership of their corresponding area.

The Steering Committee is comprised of:

Legal Representative - General Coordinator

Vice-coordinator

Finance Coordinator

Secretary General

Alternate Secretary

Human Rights Coordinator

Planning Coordinator

Public Relations Coordinator

Education and Culture Coordinator

Environment and Natural Resources Coordinator

Oversight Officer

And the organizations that are part of the network are:

ASMIT

Comité de Grupos Religiosos Católicos (Committee of Catholic Religious Groups)

Asociación de Mujeres Organizadas de Calarma (AMOCAL - Association of the Organized Women of Calarma)

Asociación de Productores Mixtos (ASOPROMIX - Mixed Association of Producers)

Organización de Afrodescendientes (ASAMADAGUA - Afro-descendant Organization)

Independent sector

### A message of sisterhood and brotherhood: values that move us

"A word that has always been important for our organization is sisterhood: sisterhood among women, teamwork; another word is sharing, as it has always been one of the Network's principles. Another is that of being: being people and the experience of being a woman, so we can help to increase their self-esteem. That is why each of us is focused on overcoming our challenges. The Network is always a motivational space. The lessons we have learned are related to the importance of listening, of listening to ourselves, but also listening among the many women who come here, especially women victims of violence." María Ximena Figueroa Olaya

Since we started the Network, we have sought to be peacebuilders by transforming the conditions of women's lives and the environments they transit. Our vision is to build peace in the family and then extend it to the community.

So, the Network is a team where we share, we support each other, we barter, work together, and apply the principles of community fellowship. This is reflected in how we plan, administer, and execute approved resources or projects. We are always open to including the largest possible number of women as beneficiaries of our projects. The situation is the same when we go to a workshop or event. In these spaces we request additional books or educational materials to bring to the women who live in distant rural communities and who need access this information. Even though this has meant many sacrifices, we have achieved our goals because we are focused on finding collective well-being.



Image 10. Gloria Méndez and Flor Reinoso at the III General Workshop of School, Territory, and Post-conflict Project, February 2020.

In this space, we have values that unite us. The most important of which is sisterhood, because it has allowed us to build a Network, not only for our work, but also for mutual support, growth, and personal self-improvement. Whenever one of us or somebody close to the organization is facing a difficult situation, we accompany them and show our solidarity; for that reason, in our motto or when we carry out our activities, we say: "A greeting of sisterhood," because that is what we are promoting. **The Network is a family, it is our second home. That is how we all feel.**

This is all related to our search for autonomy, a key aspect that we promote through our accompaniment of organizations. This is because it is essential that as women we learn to organize, manage, and administer our resources so that we have opportunities for personal fulfillment and to increase our self-esteem. One of the anecdotes that we have recorded about this practice is:

"In the beginning-when we were invited to an event we would be given shampoo, lotions, shower caps, a brush or a comb, and other little things like that at hotels and we would bring them all back and store them in bags. When it was Love and Friendship Day or some other special date, we would have our meetings, and we would pack them up in pretty bags to give them to our colleagues with love and affection. Also, we always had in mind that if we were given two or three books, we should ask for more so that we could give them to the other women to read and, if not, well we would get some more when we felt that a specific book would be interesting and that the women deserved to have a copy...Then suddenly, our suitcases got heavy. "What do you have in there?" we would be asked. Well, books, materials, pencils, notebooks, that kind of thing. In spite of being very simple objects, they were important and necessary then." María Ximena y Dagmar Lucía



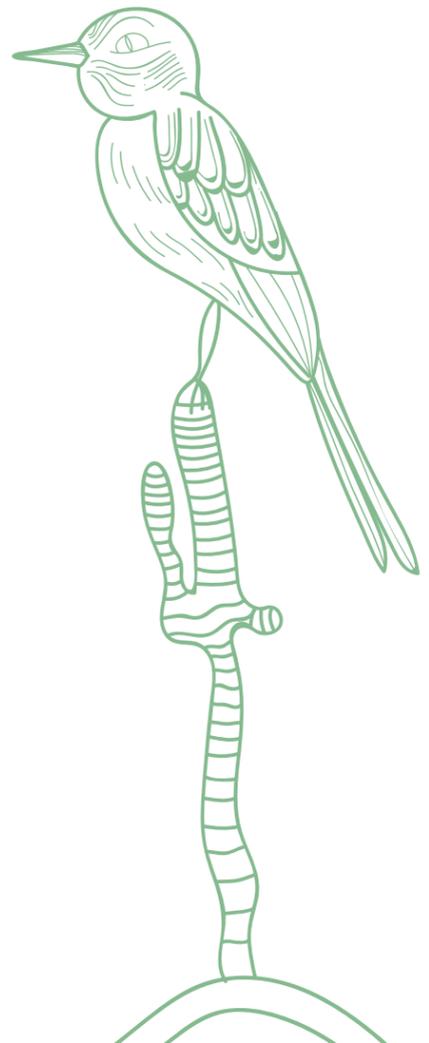
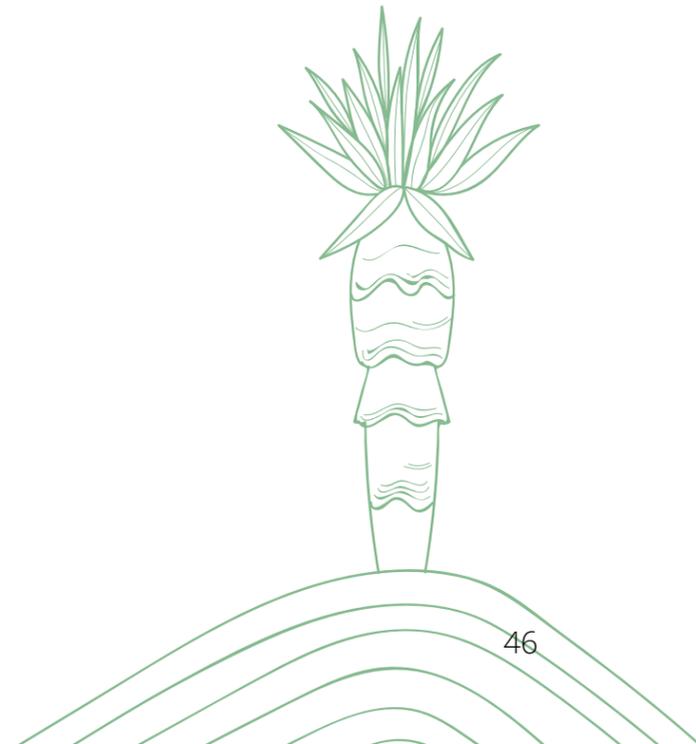
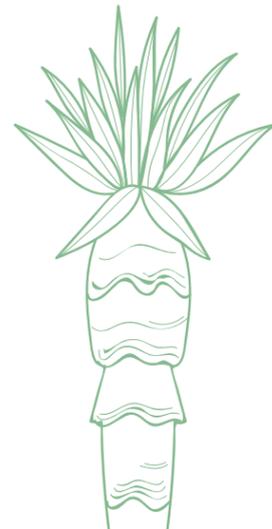
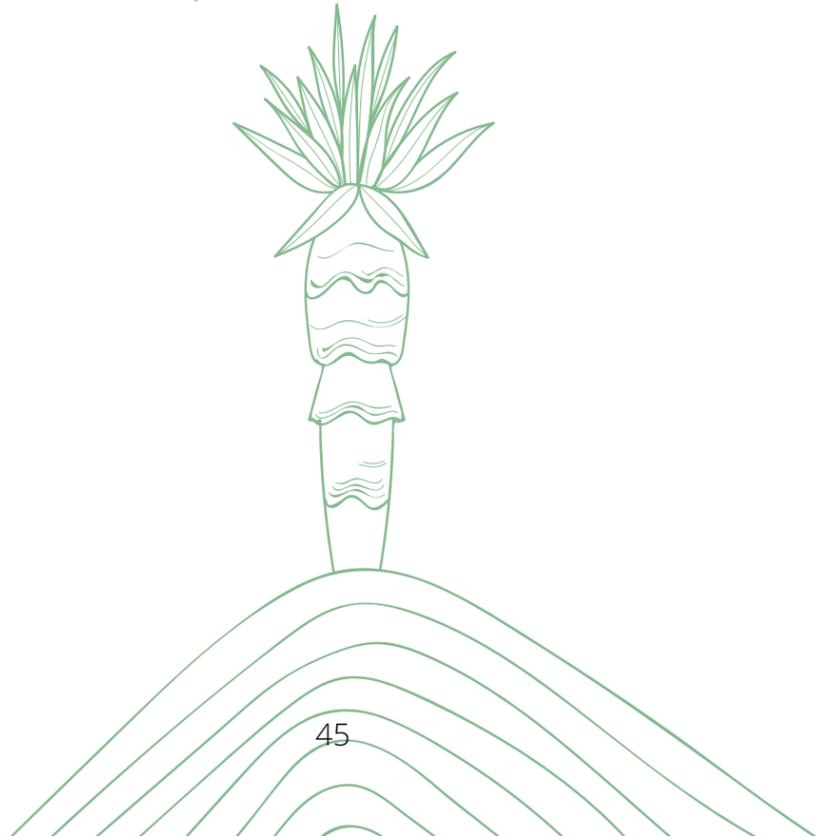


# 03

## Tributes to the Women of the Network

The Chaparral milliner  
dressed in silk, her soliloquies are for the moon...

The milliner, hands of gold  
dreaming as she works, each piece a treasure.



## Excerpt from The Milliner- Chaparral Anthem

This book is based on the personal stories that are interwoven in a collective history. In this regard, it is a tribute to the leadership of the women who have dedicated their lives, work, and love to building this organization. Each of the experiences is tied to the principles, values, and struggles they fomented, showing that it is possible and necessary for women to take part in public spaces, and not just in the home and family.

Also, each woman who tells her story is recognizing her ancestral and cultural inheritance and the legacy that courses through the veins of the women in our territory, shown in the tenacity with which we undertook this struggle for women's rights.

**We put our faces and names on the hatboxes of this collective story!**

We were inspired by an amazing woman from Chaparral, Carmenza Rocha Castilla, who also fought for the rights of and space for women in public life. She was a reference point for us to start. We hope our stories will inspire other women.

## Dagmar Lucía Hernández Peña



Image 13. Dagmar Lucía Hernández Peña. School, Territory, and Post-conflict Project archive,

I am Dagmar Lucia Hernández Peña, from the rural part of Chaparral, Tolima. I live in a community called Tapias, in Amoyá township.

I initiated my role as a leader when I was very young. I began by helping the community with catechism. I became a catechist in fifth grade with the nuns at the Medalla Milagrosa School and from then on I did literacy work in my community, helped the school in the area of religion, helped prepare the children for their first communion and confirmation on Saturdays, and each year organized the *novena de aguinaldos*, a celebration that is carried out over the nine days before Christmas, a space that we always promoted as a way to share with families in my community. That was what I most enjoyed: my social life.

While living in a rural community with my family, dedicated to raising my children, JAC election time came around and people came to propose that my husband run for council president. He responded: "No! I'd be no good at that. I don't like that kinda thing. I am busy and I don't have time," and then he told them: "Well, ask my

wife, Dagmar Lucía, she could do it," to which I responded: "Not me, I only finished the sixth grade. I can't, I'm focused on my home!" Finally they convinced me to participate because the person who was president had been in office for several periods and been reelected over and over. The community wanted a change and they had been unable to get one. So they nominated me as someone who was worth supporting for president of Tapias. During the period between 2001 and 2002 I managed to consolidate my leadership with the support of my community.

I also began to work on other causes. I started taking on a new role where I was the one who knew everything there was to know about the JAC and I went to a "JAC Training for Trainers" school held by the confederation of JAC's in Tolima. This was a new path and I learned so much. Shortly after, I was able to move up a rung: I was secretary of ASOJUNTAS during the 2002 - 2004 period. I demonstrated my commitment to community work, which is why I was delegated to this position. During this journey, I identified many problems faced by rural women. One was realizing that there were few women leading these important spaces in communities and that is why I was interested in promoting broader women's participation.

Over the next four years, the men continued to be the presidents and vice-presidents, but it was at that time that, through the Tolima Governor's Office, we joined the Women's Leadership School. That is where we began to understand a lot more about what it meant to be a woman leader, the gender approach, human rights, economic independence, among other issues; in fact, it was in this space that we provided input on Bill 1257 of 2008.

The Leadership School helped us so much because it motivated us to take everything we learned to other women and, since we were in ASOJUNTAS, we replicated these lessons in the JAC, promoting the election of women as presidents. Achieving this motivated us even more because by reaching the presidencies we also obtained an additional seat, one more vote in favor of my election as ASOJUNTAS president for the 2004 - 2008 period. We got to work and I was elected president, and that is why all the women enjoyed this win so much, because we had reached a very good level and position, with its new challenges, in assuming the municipal leadership of the JACs in a second tier organization like ASOJUNTAS. So, thanks to that position, we supported everything happening with the JACs, but also the prevention of gender-based violence, the promotion of conciliations based on equity, and committees on women's issues. This focus recognized the needs of many women, such as organizing ourselves in a network to seek a common horizon and join our struggles for education, access to justice, and healthcare.

Since we were in the middle of a very rough armed conflict, we faced many difficulties, but at the same time we began to seize our leadership and education.

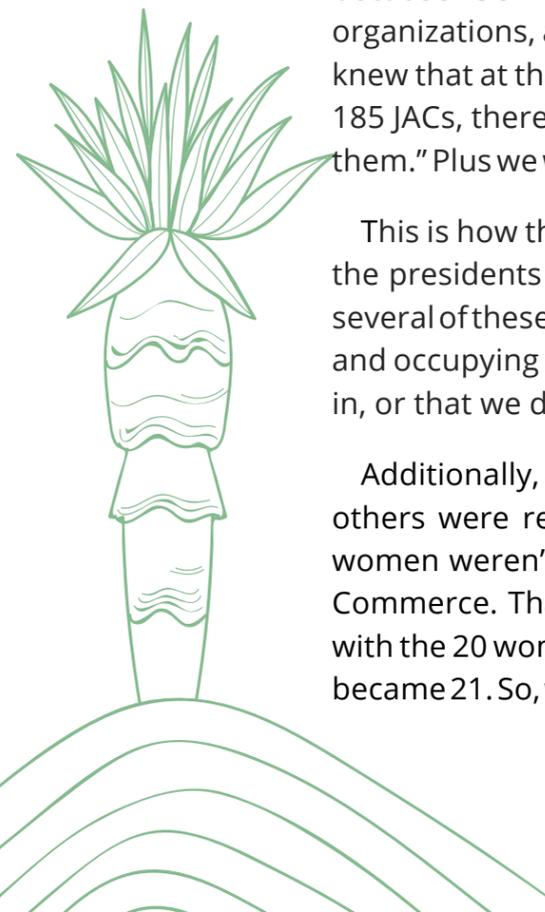
Years before I had the opportunity to study through Radio Sutatenza, and was able to get my sixth through ninth grade education by radio. This was an opportunity that we had and several women took advantage of the program. Tenth and eleven grade were harder because there were chemistry and physics, and all those harder classes that we didn't understand over the radio, but we did not want to stop there, so, organizing support, the opportunity arose with a teacher friend of ours, who was also on the team: Rosa Edith. She got the Institución Educativa por Ciclos Sendas (School for Individual Cycles) involved, and some of us were able to participate with scholarships and discounts. We were able to get our high school diploma.

After we finished our primary and secondary education, we thought about how to continue our professional training, but this was a dilemma since our priority was educating our children and they were also finishing their studies. We sacrificed our own education—myself included—to pay for theirs. All women do this. We want to study, but we cannot finish because we put our kids first. Nevertheless, we supported each other so that other colleagues could become professionals. I couldn't finish university, but I motivated many women to finish. I also got as much training as I could through certificate courses, SENA or technical courses, and workshops with different organizations. Sharing spaces with many women was, in particular, a huge education. I am not university educated, I have been educated by life.

This is when we came together. We had a meeting at the Cultural Center to think about how to move forward and that is when we said: "Let's organize a women's network" because ASOPROM, ASOCAREN, and APROVOCAL already existed, in addition to other organizations, and we—with the JACs involved in the Women's Affairs Committee—knew that at that time there were 185 JACs in Chaparral. So we thought: "If there are 185 JACs, there are 185 women who have the knowledge that we have shared with them." Plus we were already in ASOJUNTAS and with the indigenous women at ASMIT.

This is how they all became part of the Network because a network is made up by the presidents of several organizations—a single association isn't a network. With several of these presidents we formed a team with the aim of advancing our proposals and occupying participation spaces that we had not been able to actively participate in, or that we didn't know about, and this is how we began to change our situation.

Additionally, at that time we saw the need to create the Women's Network because others were receiving resources from the government and some NGOs, but we women weren't getting anything since we weren't registered with the Chamber of Commerce. That is why we decided to organize the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas* with the 20 women's associations that were ready—and, since I was in ASOJUNTAS, it became 21. So, we began coordinating the work with those 21 women's organizations.



As we began to organize and hold our first assembly, we asked ourselves, “What we are going to do? How are we going to be constituted? How will we sustain this?” And we responded that “We want to be present in participation spaces, we want the municipal administration to listen to us, we don’t want to be just one woman behind this call, because one swallow does not make a summer. At that moment, we already understood that the Government doesn’t help individuals or a single farm, we had to be organized to build and manage our projects.” So we organized ourselves so that all the women, both urban and rural women, were represented.

In the Network we have women of different religious creeds, Afro, indigenous, small-scale farmers, coffee growers, small independent business owners, teachers, and more; and after many gatherings the idea was born to create a horizontal organization in which we would all make decisions together. We would all be coordinators organized by work areas and we would all be on the same level.

On the other hand, thanks to the work that I led with women here in Chaparral, I was elected as a Commissioner at the Iniciativa de Mujeres por la Paz (IMP) for the department of Tolima and I held that position for several years. During those years, I had always sought to be a National Commissioner, but the Putumayo, Huila, and Caquetá regions always brought more women and received more votes, which is why I never stood a chance. One time I put everything into becoming a National Commissioner, and with the representative from Putumayo we established an alliance where I was the candidate. However, I didn’t manage to win and we lost by just a few votes. So Luz Aída Ibarra ended up as the commissioner for this region and I was the alternate.

But, so it goes sometimes in this life, Luz Aida got sick and could not continue in the position, so they elected me as the Commissioner. She and I became great friends and I really love her because I learned so much with her. Moreover, when problems due to the armed conflict intensified here in Tolima, I had already been left a widow, which gave me time to dedicate more of myself to the IMP’s political process and thus overcome my sadness.

From the national level, they offered us airline tickets from Ibagué to Bogota to go to the meetings, and a car and bodyguard, and I told them: “No, I don’t want a car, I don’t want any of those things, I don’t want to go on an airplane. Get me a bus ticket from Chaparral to the Bogotá terminal, and from the terminal to the hotel. I don’t want [the rest] for my safety.” I also insisted that we didn’t need those things, that we needed aid and projects instead because all those formal contributions cost a lot of money and we were looking for resources for the organization. In effect, with the money spent on just one airplane ticket, two women (and our kids) could go to the meetings.



Image 11. Election of municipal and departmental IMP Commissioners. Organizational

During this process I had the opportunity to visit Caquetá, Putumayo, Huila, and Tolima... I didn't manage the resources that were assigned to all the organizations. I only authorized the payments. I didn't have to intermediate but instead ensure that each municipality had access to resources. Many women learned to receive and administer their money. There were very responsible organizations that fulfilled their commitments, and there were others that didn't. I had to go to those municipalities to see what they had done and how they were going to be accountable, and that is how I made a different mark because I ensured that it was the women themselves who handled the resources. That is how we learned.

So, for me, being in that space was an important achievement. It was an achievement for the Women's Network because all of the national commissioners were women who were intellectuals, teachers, on a political path, lawyers. I, however, was a small-scale farmer who had only recently finished high school.

I finished this process and continued even more dedicated to the Network. Time went by and we were advancing and opportunities began to appear to create projects and generate confidence with the international community: UN Women, the USAID Governance Program, the Multi-donor Fund, and others. Thus, we were able to come together with the women of Rioblanco, Ataco, Planadas, Chaparral, and San Antonio, expanding the Women's Network to southern Tolima. We were in contact with women and were able to go to their communities; they also came here to learn and to share experiences and situations that we analyzed collectively. For example, one of the basic needs and dreams that we have is for many of the women to achieve a technological or professional education. This is because any job looks for professionals and those of us who aren't, don't have access to good positions because they are given to the people who have a professional degree. However, we have a lot of empirical knowledge and that is why we want to certify our knowledge with professional training.

When we see what we are today, what the Women's Network is, I feel a lot of satisfaction. For me or, rather, all of us—because I speak in the name of all the women, since I identify with all of them— it is a huge joy to see how we have been able to advance, take on new roles, have important leadership, economic independence, autonomy in decision making, be proactive in the formulation of public policies, and monitor their implementation. All this after living in the middle

Image 12. Participation of Dagmar Hernández in representation of the Women's Network at the National Women and Peace Summit. Organizational archive, 2013.



of the armed conflict, being victims of legal and illegal armed groups and our own family environment; having been in the midst of combat airplanes, slaughters, having buried our children and spouses, all of those frightful things that we still cannot remove from our hearts. To see ourselves now, in our journey up to today, is to recognize that we managed to advance because we built a collective and for that reason we have been given the opportunity to present projects that favor the well-being of women and their families. In relation to women from the countryside, it also gives us a lot of joy to help them formulate their projects so that they can present them to the Ministry of Agriculture. The women do not depend on us, they

are autonomous to develop their own projects and to be themselves, and they can follow their organization's objectives because each woman is independent. What satisfies us most is that they don't depend on us, but that we can support them.

I believe that the peace women dream of is what we feel and have always dreamed of for our work and in our homes and what we are building inside ourselves. This peace is built with our children, from within our family, and from there it moves out into the community when we are able to recover positive relationships, speak with municipal administrations, have a good relationship with all of our surroundings, achieve better opportunities and equity, and see ourselves represented in public policies and development plans. Peace is also produced when we are taking care of the environment. Also, this peace we dream of is something we need to experience permanently, transmitting it to our sons and daughters; this peace must be the legacy of a life where each person sees the need to contribute to its protection and to keep it alive, because it is a task for everyone. **Peace is harmony among couples, a husband, wife, and their children; it is transmitted and it is lived. Peace has to be built, it needs to be made every day.**

To maintain peace, it is also necessary to think about generational renewal. That is why as the Women's Network we are building with young people, children, and our daughters. I adore my granddaughter so much because she is in the Women's Network. She is in fifth grade and always says to me, "Grandma, what needs to be done at the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas*?" Even though she lives in Girardot, she knows what we do, she likes wearing our vest, taking pictures during the meetings, talking with the psychologists, and showing an interest in all of our work. We teach our children through our organization's daily actions.

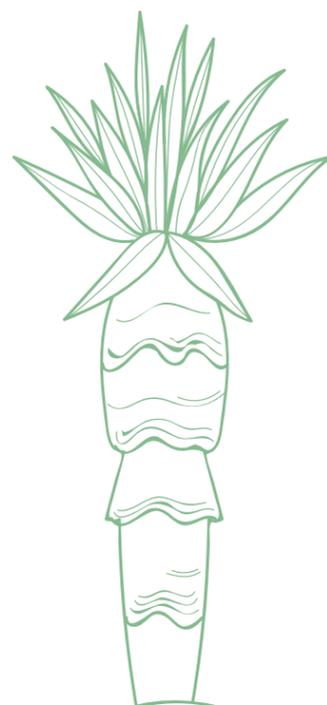
All the women have sons and daughters, and we are guiding them in this peace process, in this ongoing learning process. We motivate and support our young people to participate, to create new leadership to produce change in our communities, and thus truly create this generational transfer; not just at the Network, but for all organizational initiatives. I have always belonged to the JAC. I believe it is necessary that we do not lose this concept that was created 60 years ago and, to do this, it is necessary for the youth to become interested and get involved in its operation, as it contributes to the coordination between social leaders, the state, the government, mayor's offices, and other institutions. In effect, the JAC has been very useful and important in our communities.

I tell the women that we will always push forward, that we have a lot of resistance, perseverance, and skills. Additionally, they have the support of the Women's Network's Steering Committee to be able to continue. We are also trying to incorporate work on new masculinities, because men are part of us, we complement each other, and this work for peace includes them. This is why we think that we must have a good relationship between men and women to build the peace we want for our country.

Now I will analyze all of the changes and the happiness that I have experienced. In my life as a girl, when I was going to school at Medalla Milagrosa, they taught me to do the catechesis and my happiness was teaching kids on Saturday afternoons. Then it all changed. I got into my marriage, home, and that was my happiness for the 35 years that I was married to my husband. They were years that I dedicated to my home and creating a family because I went to school until sixth grade and then I stopped until I had the opportunity to go back to school while I was the JAC president, as I mentioned before.

My life changed again when I began to meet my friends. They helped me to get over my husband's death and they encouraged me to return to community work. I learned to recognize suffering, the needs of, and violence against, woman; we saw how men abused women, how women sacrificed themselves, and how they remained silent for their kids. So, I decided to listen to and support women, to open spaces to talk about how we feel and about the personal experiences and needs in our communities; this was a space for release, it was therapy. Helping them to get out of violent situations, not by force, but by giving them tools to analyze what they are living is the only way that this very personal decision can be made, to give their lives a new direction, through training that offers them a new horizon for their life. Seeing a smile on their faces makes me happy. I really love them all, with all their differences, because we all have our character, but we understand each other and this is what makes us strong.

I am very happy right now. I am in my 60s now. I am stronger after living through a phase when my health was a struggle. I am more aware of the gift of life. Every day I thank God for what we have lived, for this moment, and since tomorrow is uncertain, I am living today as if it were my last day. We don't know when I will go, but for now I am calm and in balance with God. I am thankful for all the beautiful things that I have lived with all the women at the Network. I am also thankful for the opportunity given to us by the Universidad de Ibagué and University of East Anglia to share, to talk about our past, and to reaffirm our path to fight for peace and women's rights.



## María Ximena Figueroa Olaya



*Image 15. María Ximena Figueroa Olaya. School, Territory, and Post-conflict Project archive, December 2020.*

I am María Ximena Figueroa Olaya, member of the Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz, co-founder of the organization and current legal representative. I am a Pijao indigenous woman and a member of the Matora de Maito indigenous community in the municipality of Chaparral, Tolima.

Since I was very young I have participated in several organizational initiatives of indigenous, small-scale farmer, and Afro-descendant women, always fighting for the recognition of our rights and leadership role. I identify with the condor and the eagle, which are very strong birds and symbols of balance, with the rivers that are so important within indigenous rituals, and with the long hair and weavings that are so valuable within the Pijao culture.

My sister María del Pilar and I have always led groups. I remember that starting at five we learned to play and lead. We visited the indigenous communities' malokas (communal lodges); whenever we went to a rural community we were in the maloka.

When I was older, during vacations, my mother sent us to visit my maternal ancestral family in Ortega, Tolima. That is where the indigenous wisdom was, with my elders, Margarita Sogamoso and Marciano Olaya Yate. It was with them that I learned Pijao rituals: for us the circle is vital, everything is circular because we are all important.

Years later, I finished high school. Since I had gone to a commercial school I had knowledge of accounting. I did four semesters of Public Accounting at the Universidad del Tolima, but I postponed my studies to dedicate myself to supporting all the indigenous processes in southern Tolima. I also studied at the Training School for Indigenous Peoples of the Association of Indigenous Governments of the Consejo Regional Indígena del Tolima (CRIT - Regional Indigenous Council of Tolima).

In 2003, the CRIT's Major Council nominated me to represent them in the east-central macro region of the Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC - National Indigenous Organization of Colombia), which brings together three indigenous peoples: the Motilón Bari from Santander and Norte de Santander; the Muisca from Cundinamarca; and the Pijaos from Tolima. I took on the role of representative on the ONIC's Executive Committee for the 2003 - 2008 period, coordinating the ONIC's administrative area. For that reason, for six years I dedicated myself to indigenous issues on a departmental, national, and international level. This was one of the most enriching experiences in my life as a leader, as I traveled and got to know many reservations. The ones I remember most were the visits I made to Chuncal, when I stayed along the Arauca and Boyacá border, to Cesquilé, Cundinamarca, and to the Catalaura reservation in Tibú, Norte de Santander. They called me because in each territory the traditional doctors would receive me in their community. They practiced their rituals, and they asked their spiritual guides if I could represent them. In each community I was well received and they all gave me their permission.

Later they offered for me to be a Councilor at the ONIC, where we carried out very important and valuable work with another Muisca woman named Victory. For me, these were years when the work of indigenous women was recognized. They were also years of a lot of growth because of relationships with international cooperation, ministries, institutions, and indigenous peoples from other countries. That was how I was able to travel abroad, learn about many cultures, and expand my vision of the world. When I was on the Council, I began to call María del Pilar and the other women in Chaparral. I motivated them and told them that we shouldn't give up maintaining and strengthening the organization, that it had to continue and persist.

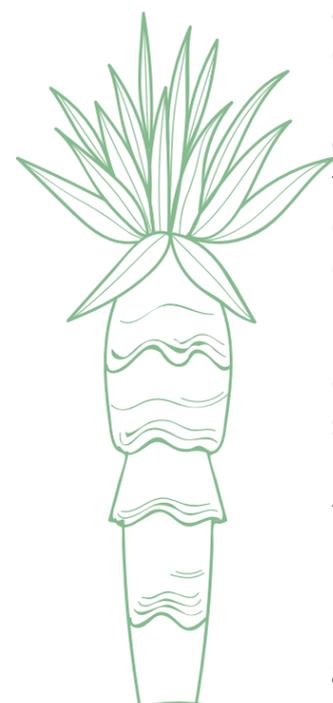
When I finished my period with the ONIC I was offered another position but I told them no, that I was heading back to the territory because my community, Matora de Maito, was in the process of its ethnological study and we had to prepare ourselves. For me, my struggle is for the rights of communities and my

territory is Chaparral. For that reason I told them that I was going back to my land. It was a leadership role that I finished as I had begun it, without resources or anything, but with a lot of knowledge and the achievement of having administered a lot of resources for the indigenous peoples of Colombia. Now, as I analyze this, I see it as a lesson learned that was replicated in organizations; all the lessons that I learned we have replicated in the Network and with the communities. We always ask, "How are you doing with accounting, financially, with the manuals?" The Network wants all organizations to know how to administer and manage a social organization because it means autonomy, transparency, and credibility.

When we began to manage the organizational process for the Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz, at that time, about 2002 - 2003, when I returned to the territory, the indigenous communities here in Chaparral were initiating a self-recognition process because the only community that was certified by the Office of Ethnic Affairs of the Ministry of the Interior was the Yaguara community. We were in that struggle. First, we self-identified as indigenous people and then we began the paperwork to be certified by the Ministry of the Interior. Seeing that the communities were still in the paperwork and administrative phase, the women who were there organized and, realizing that a lot of help didn't materialize because we weren't associated or we didn't have the legal status to back us, we decided that while the certification process advanced with the Ministry, that we should create another legal entity and from that space we were going to position women's rights and, in this case, those of indigenous women. And that is how we were able to create the first entity, the Asociación de Mujeres Indígenas de Tolima (ASMIT - Indigenous Women's Association of Tolima), an association that brings together all the women who were part of the communities from the Chaparral Plan. At that time those of us in the struggle to reaffirm the Pijao cultural identity were the communities from: Yaguara (which backed us), Matora de Maito, Ibanazca Lemayá de Calarma, Aguasclaras, and Seborucos. These communities are our social base.

When we managed to create this organization, we affiliated ourselves and were co-founders of the Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz. That is where we started our fight for respect, to be recognized by Chaparral and Tolima society as indigenous communities and indigenous women who inhabit this territory. Even though the Network already had a steering committee, it was low profile as we had faced a very difficult period of the armed conflict. This was in 2011 - 2012.

In spite of being a bit afraid, we brought fresh air to the organization. So we got back in the ring, establishing an Steering Committee with the Network's ten co-founders. I remember that at that time I was focused on communications.



Dagmar also insisted that I needed to be active in the Network. We worked together with the IMP and they gave me the opportunity to travel to many places throughout the country to talk about public policies. We were in Putumayo, Caquetá, Pasto, here in Chaparral, in Coyaima, and in Ibagué. We did not receive any payment of any kind, it was volunteer work done from the heart. IMP covered our travel costs and we acquired a lot of knowledge with the national women's movement.

I invite all women to organize. We are still working at this task, doing pedagogical work to ensure that women are organized either through legal entities close to the rural women's associations or we invite them to join associations and spaces in their rural communities; for example, the Women's Affairs Committees in the JAC, which is another legal figure that allows women to be involved in local political participation spaces.

The call that I make to women is this: we must be organized to work together with other women and men. Strengthening our participation is what allows us to maintain not only the associative social fabric, but also the social fabric of our families and homes. This is what we have done at the Network; that is why it is important that women organize.



Image 14. Participation of Dagmar and María Ximena at the national IMP event. Organizational archive, 2011 - 2012.

## Carmen Emilia Moreno Tique



Image 16. Carmen Emilia Moreno Tique. Project School, Territory, and Post-conflict archive, February 2020.

I am Carmen Emilia Moreno Tique, an Afro-descendant woman who was born in Buenaventura, Valle de Cauca. I moved to Chaparral, Tolima when I was ten years old. I grew up here with the social conviction that I have had since I was a girl, because my mother was the president of the *Sindicato de Trabajadoras Agrícolas del Tolima* (Union of Agricultural Workers of Tolima). I saw how she often wrote the minutes and often, in a notebook, she would have me look to see what it meant to write up the minutes. Since I was very small I learned to be in the middle of meetings and workshops. When you are little you go knowing they will give you a snack, and that is why I didn't complain about it to my mom and I learned along the way.

My passion for social issues started in high school. When I was in tenth grade they changed the model at the Medalla Milagrosa [school], shifting from normal to commercial education, so I finished and worked at the hospital. It was when I was there that the first cohort of nurses was formed, however

the requirement was that you had to be the daughter of a nurse from the five municipalities in southern Tolima. I was not the daughter of a nurse, but I had the opportunity because Doctor Luis Guillermo Cárdenas, who was the hospital director, sponsored me. So, I got my technical degree as a nursing assistant. Then, a lot of time went by, I got married, and I studied public administration.

As an Afro-Colombian woman, I joined the Asociación de Afrocolombianos del Sur del Tolima (Afro-Colombian Association of Southern Tolima), which had the objective of recovering the diversity of cultural values that we have as Afro people. I became president and it was then that I started studying public administration. It was during this degree program that I met Ms. Dagmar Lucía and María del Pilar Figueroa. I really liked the work that they were doing with women, and that is why Ms. Dagmar invited me to join the Women's Network as president of the Afro-Colombian Association.

For me, the Network has a beautiful social aim, which is definitively strengthening and creating capacities for women to be empowered and take on the leadership that we all should have. I know there isn't an opportunity for all women, but the women who assumed our strength dedicate ourselves to sharing what we learn in trainings and we transmit the skills that we have acquired to women in more distant rural areas. We hope they will all take part using the knowledge provided by the Network, which holds influence at the municipal, departmental, and national level, and we are even reaching the international level.

I feel that it is an organization with a lot of strength and that it focuses on stimulating new leadership among women, youth, and girls, so that they are able to open a path together with those of us at the Network. We do this with our sons and daughters, so that they will take up the knowledge and can acquire the skills and capacities that are needed to end up in a leadership role, to thus fulfill our dream that all women have an education and can (why not?) take the reins of this country. We are still lacking a lot, but that is the path forward.

## Yuri Viviana Morales Gutiérrez



Image 17. Yuri Viviana Morales Gutiérrez. Photograph by Maryori Morales Gutiérrez.

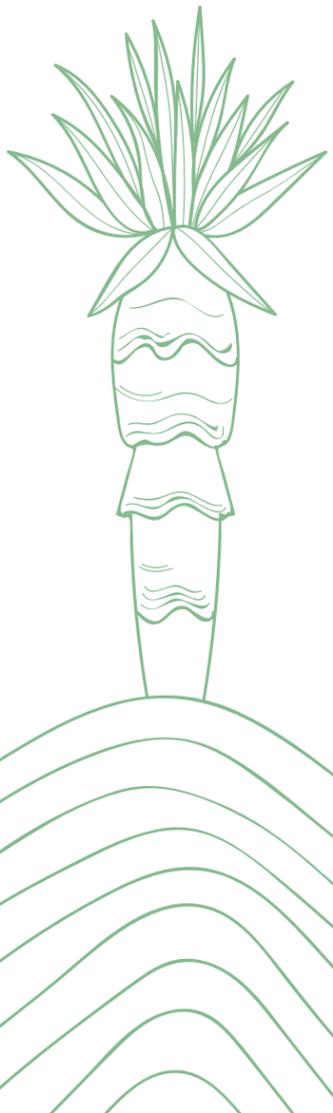
In March 2016, the Women's Network held job interviews. The person selected for that job was the person writing this text, Yuri Viviana Morales, an indigenous woman, and mother of a four-year-old boy.

That was how I started this new process, exercising women's leadership and empowerment. This experience with the Network allowed me to build a different path and projection for the future, since at that time I was focused on administrative issues as a professional, but I soon took a different course and I became interested in women's empowerment and wanted to continue accompanying social initiatives.

In this process with the Network I learned to build a family with a focus on equality and collective work, since a woman's role had previously been different. It was that of a submissive woman, focused on her husband and the family. Today, after three years of exercising and developing social initiatives from a labor, social, and academic focus, I have generated huge changes in my life; I think about

studying and focusing my professional path on social issues and human rights.

The Network has been my space to work and learn to work in a team. Additionally, the fact that I have a son has allowed me to teach distinct family roles that are more equal and loving.



## Martha Ibeth Cardona Bonilla



Image 18. Martha Ibeth Cardona Bonilla. School, Territory, and Post-conflict Project archive, February 2020.

I am Martha Ibeth Cardona Bonilla, I am a member of the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz* and I am a woman who was born in the municipality of Chaparral, Tolima.

First, I am going to tell you how I began to be part of this organization. I first came to the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz* through a training space for new leaders, where our colleague Dagmar Lucía invited me to join the Network. For me it was very interesting and also a challenge to belong to this organization, since I knew about the work that they were spearheading for women's rights in our municipality.

Being in the Network has helped me to grow as a person and a woman. It has allowed me to acquire knowledge on the peace agreement, Law 1257, and Law 1448 where we see the importance of women in these initiatives. Also, I have received a lot of training that has helped me to recognize my value as a woman, and in turn, they have inspired me to lead the fight for other women who experience situations of violence. So, besides growing as a person and a woman,

it has filled me with a lot of love and wisdom to understand other women.

Inspired and supported in this work with the Network, I had the experience of leading a political campaign by participating as a Council candidate in the 2019 elections. This is because we have seen the need for women to participate in politics, of understanding politics as a service to the communities, as a place where advocacy can be carried out to create new spaces and contribute to the creation of budgets that help to change the conditions for many women.

Also, I have been in accompaniment and social work with other women who, at some point in their lives, have had their rights violated. I was beaten, physically and psychologically abused by my partner... And at that point, I felt like I was less than a person. I felt like I wasn't worth anything, that my struggle didn't have an end or a future, because on many occasions I went to government offices and I never got a response. This has motivated me to continue working in the Women's Network, making Law 1257 of 2008 known among women, which is the law that protects us to avoid this violence that, as women, many experience daily, and that sadly comes from people who say that they love us: our partners and family.

To prevent situations of violence it is necessary to return to the love we have for ourselves and for others. When we began to build based on love, there is a change and a transformation. On the other hand, it isn't a secret for anybody that we have created a chauvinist culture, but this sexism is also created by women. That is why we need to learn and re-educate ourselves to build upon new masculinities, because we have the same rights as both men and women, so we can also do the same work. This is joint work to construct relationships and communities based on respect, honesty, and transparency regarding our actions and, in our homes, to be able to initiate a process of change.

It is important that as women we do not remain silent, that we file our complaints, and that we recreate institutions and create accompaniment processes. For that reason, it is fundamental to maintain organizations like the Women's Network that fight for our rights, accompany women who have been mistreated so that they feel like they have more strength and can file complaints with state entities, and that guarantee psychological, social, and health focused accompaniment to move beyond this violence that affects us each day.

My advice for women is that first we must recognize the value that we have as women in society. We are creators of life and peace builders because we can begin to teach our children from our homes about new leadership roles through our interpersonal relationships and by teaching respect for others and respect for our ideals without belittling the ideals of others. Also, we must move forward

with these political processes, building collectively because as women we have the ability to transform our future from our organizations and families. Even though we have doubted it in the past, we have the capacity to construct new ideals and create harmonious surroundings for ourselves, our families, and our communities.

From the depths of my heart I want to tell my organization, the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz*, that I feel extremely grateful for the women who are part of this process because they have given me so much to grow as a person, as a human, and it has filled me with so much love. They have taught me to understand them so that we can build, as a group, this society that we want for tomorrow.



## Gloria Méndez Quesada

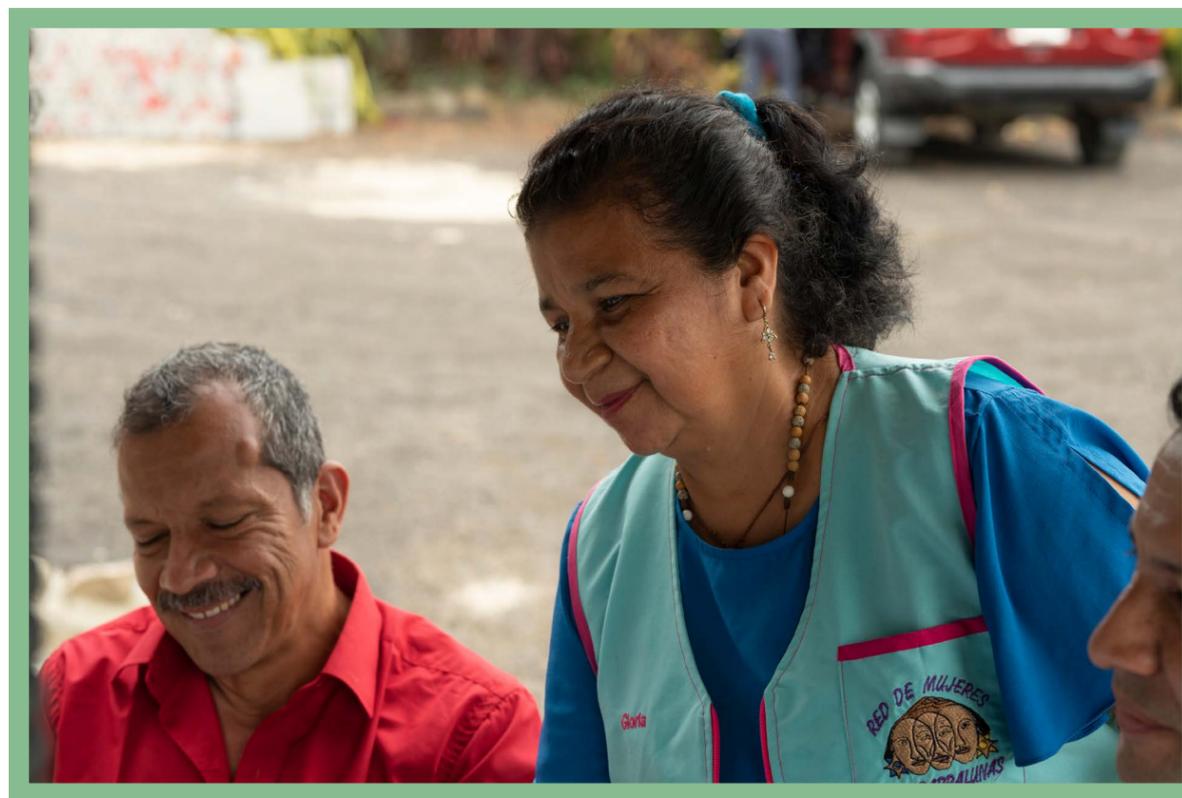


Image 19. Gloria Méndez Quesada. School, Territory, and Post-conflict Project archive, February 2020.

My name is Gloria Méndez Quesada, I am the coordinator of Culture and Sports for the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz*. Before I talk about how I joined the Network, I want to talk a little bit about my story because I want you to know what I did to have a little bit of knowledge.

I remember my father who taught me to be involved in the community since I was a young girl. When I was in second grade he said to me: "You already know how to read and write, help me with the minutes for the council," so I did that for him. When I was 13 years old, I was already the council secretary and we went to the JAC meetings that were held in Chaparral. I also remember that when there were marches to celebrate the day of the small-scale farmer, my dad would bring my sister Adela and I so that we could carry a poster that said: "Potrerito de Aguayo Community JAC."

When I finished primary school in the countryside, I went to Chaparral to work and do secondary school at night. When I was finishing, my dad got me a scholarship

through the Chaparral parish priest. His name was Evaristo Núñez. The scholarship was for a boarding school with nuns in Tensa, Boyacá where I took all the basic classes: Spanish, Science, Mathematics, and English; and they also taught us sewing, animal husbandry, farming, human relations, religion (which was above all other subjects), and community work. I remember that at that time we put on a play and I was the protagonist. Everyone enjoyed my performance and they wanted to help me to study theater, but I was more interested in the agricultural sector.

I returned to my land in 1983 and I dedicated myself voluntarily to helping the neighboring communities in Potrerito de Aguayo, contributing everything that I had learned and asking for help from state entities. Seeing my abilities, these communities requested that the Chaparral District School (that is what it was called then) make me a teacher for the La Florida community. For ten years I taught the kids in different rural communities.

I got married and set up my home when I was 28 years old. I retired from teaching and stayed away for 14 years. I felt very frustrated because when I got married I went to live on a little farm that we bought in the rural community of Juntas, which belongs to the township of Marina in the municipality of Chaparral, and when I had my five children—I am a mother of five—I began to feel very bad because I suffered a lot of domestic violence and I reminisced about my beautiful past and how I had done so much for the community. At that time, I became the council secretary again. Also, as the community learned about my abilities, they elected me as the 2004 - 2008 JAC president. This was the period when the forest protectors program began and also when I met Mrs. Dagmar Lucía, and this is when we elected her as ASOJUNTAS president.

After meeting Dagmar, we joined *Manos de Mujer* (Women's Hands) with women from Natagaima, Coyaima, Ibagué, and Chaparral, where we had the experience of creating home gardens with organic fertilizer. This knowledge was very useful for all the women who were in this project.

With Mrs. Dagmar I also had the opportunity to go to many departments to learn about their experiences. It was in those years that we were starting the Network and I was a coordinator. I am very thankful to her because she always fought for our rights and I found encouragement and motivation in her words. **Dagmar shared everything she had, from knowledge to something to eat.**

They were very beautiful, hard, and valiant experiences, because the armed conflict was very intense during those years. I lived both conflicts: domestic conflict and the armed forces' conflict. But thanks to God everything was

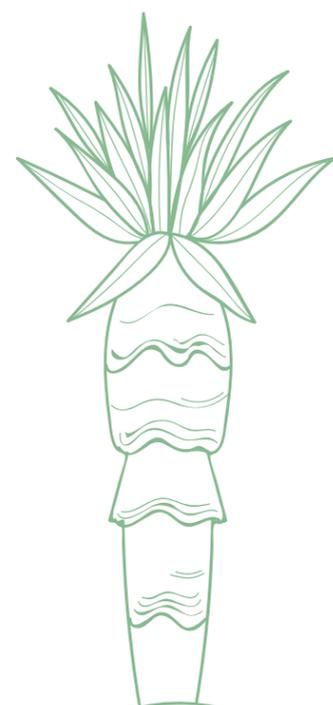
ok because I was not on one side or the other; I was neutral in that sense.

Seeing women's empowerment, I began to make friends, to work for women and myself. It was then that I wanted to study because I was a *bachiller pedagógico* (a teacher with a high school diploma). At that time there was a teachers' group made up by high school graduates who came together to request the creation of a Teacher's School<sup>2</sup> for Chaparral. I had the opportunity to attend the Teacher's School, and then was president, student, and in addition to all of that, a mother of five, always answering to the needs in my home.

And that is how I met the Network. I give thanks to the Network because it allowed me to get ahead, it made me understand that as women we have rights, and it was there that I woke up a bit. I had always thought that I had to endure my husband's beatings because I was married. **I began to be a leader thanks to these women, because they told me that women are capable.** Ten years ago my husband left me, so I gave myself to the Network even more and I started teaching again—on a contract by contract basis because I haven't passed the teacher test. I have moved forward with this knowledge thanks to the Network's trainings for women, youth, and children.

I recommend that women in rural and urban areas—wherever they are—communicate with other women who have experienced those moments of violence and that they come to the Network so that they can learn to defend themselves, because they do not have to live in that slavery of being at home. As women we can do it, we have the skills, and we must come out ahead. I really encourage women to get training because we can do what we set our minds to; when my husband left me, I cried a lot, but one day I sat up and said no more, that I was capable. And I did it.

The most important thing that we have as women is our work in a network because we learn from and teach others, as we also teach our sons and daughters to practice our values, and we build peace when we show that we can advance, that we can do more. It is wonderful to meet up with the women from the Network because we are all equals here. No one points fingers because you are poor, ugly or this and the other thing, because we, the women of this organization, each have a role. We all have a schedule, we work collectively, and wherever we need to go, we go.



<sup>2</sup> In Colombia there are Teacher Training Schools (ENS for the acronym in Spanish) which are educational institutions that offer, beyond a preschool, primary, and secondary education, a Complementary Training Program (PFC in Spanish) to train education professionals in skills to work with preschool and basic primary students.

## Arelis Morales Patiño



Image 20. Arelis Morales Patiño. School, Territory, and Post-conflict Project archive, December 2020.

My name is Arelis Morales Patiño and I have belonged to the Network since the beginning, before we were legally constituted in 2002 - 2003. Over the years we have worked a lot with women, social organizations, and a program called *Mujeres Apoyando Mujeres* (MAM) that was part of *Colombianos Apoyando Colombianos* (CAC- Colombians Supporting Colombians). Both initiatives provided us with a lot of training on gender, the importance of woman, and recognizing the value that we have within society and for its social fabric.

From there, we saw the need and also had the foundation to establish ourselves as an organization, making clear that each organization has its own expenses, because creating an organization is like having a child, there are responsibilities and that starts with beginning to pay some taxes. So that is when the decision was made to create a larger organization that would coordinate with other

initiatives, and this plan became the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz*.

The process began amid many difficulties because the women were always afraid to go out for meetings, leaving behind their kids and husbands; but we took on leadership little by little. Now we participate in many conferences and meetings and we have been a part of initiatives with other national and international organizations, allowing us to make visible and make known the importance of working from a team of women and influencing political spaces.

In 2003, I was studying public administration and later I proudly had my son as a single mom. My son is 17 years old now. He was essentially born alongside the Network, so you can calculate how old the Network is. Many beautiful things have been done over the years. Women do not just need material things, they need to have access to training, accompaniment, knowledge, and guidance on how to organize themselves to achieve their goals and dreams.

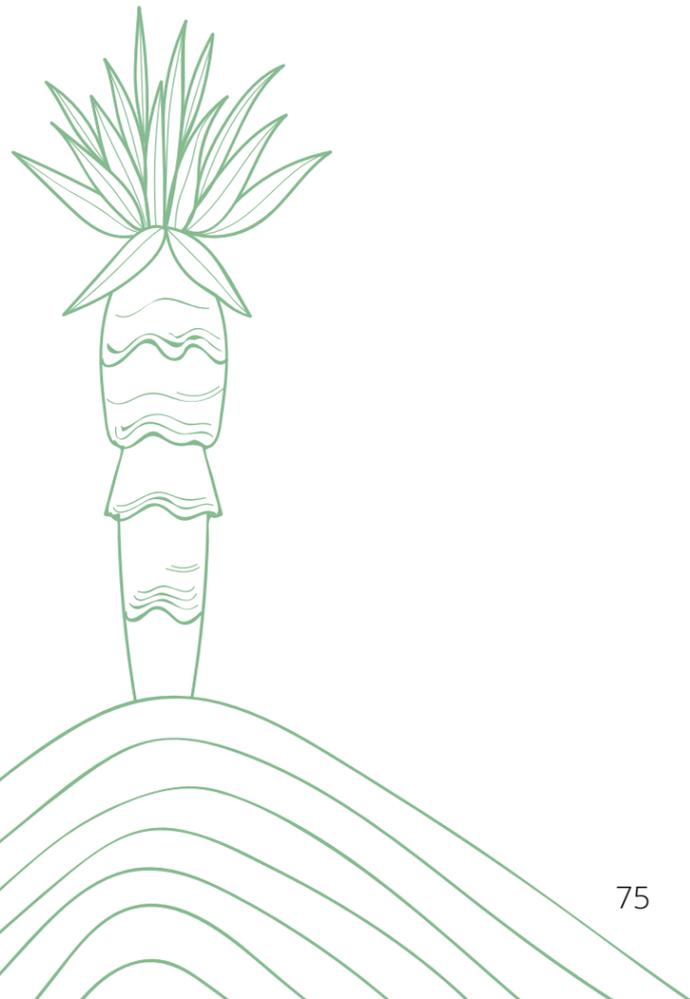
After graduating as a public administrator I began working, which was a little difficult because I was questioned about the time I dedicated to my work, my son, and my family. To some extent, more of my time went toward work and I dedicated less to my son or family. Dealing with this has been difficult but I have had the support of my nuclear family: my dad, mom, and sisters, who have been very present for my son so that I can go off to work, meetings, and be present in other arenas. So, without neglecting my son, I have organized my time for work, activism, and as a mother, daughter, and sister. That is why I believe that I can be an example for women in the same situation.

I currently work as an operator for the ICBF (Colombian Institute for Family Welfare), which has allowed me to reach many families and, children, the foundation of society. I help to orient women so that they can raise their sons and daughters in well-rounded ways so that they become individuals with values and principles that can contribute to the community. For me, the idea isn't to just monitor a mother to file a complaint because she is supposedly irresponsible or bad, but to go and understand the reality of each family and to look and see how to orient that mom, connecting her with the institutions that must provide the necessary conditions for her and her family's context.

The Network has changed me in many ways, giving me tools and security. Getting a professional degree may be easier now, even though there are other circumstances that limit a young students' access, such as not having the necessary digital tools, but for us in 2000 and before, it was more complicated because there wasn't a university here in the municipality and we didn't have the economic resources to cover costs in other cities. That is why having friends and

colleagues saying: “Let’s do it, let’s help each other, we’ll distribute the work among us,” helped to build sisterhood so we could all advance, get professional training, and be economically independent. Even though some women were not able to go to university, they helped us pay tuition and supported us spiritually and emotionally.

So, the work with the Network has given me skills to reach communities and say to the moms: “You can advance with your kids, don’t let yourselves be abused. You’re not alone, we will look for solutions!”



## Ingrid Gómez Robles



Image 21. Ingrid Gómez Robles. School, Territory, and Post-conflict Project archive, December

My name is Ingrid Gómez Robles, I am part of the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz*, and I am in the education and culture area. I have been working with the Network for three years as a professional in public administration, specialized in project management. Thanks to this organizational environment, my professional life has been strengthened, in addition to my family and personal life.

When I began working with the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas*, I had a very different vision of women because my parents taught me what women are taught in our culture, that they must respond to a specific role in society and that is the home, family, children, and others. But when I joined the Network, I began to see that the current laws were achieved by women in the past. For example, I learned that if women can vote today it was not a prize given to women, but a right that many women fought for. I remember that before (in school) in Social Studies we would hear something like: “Ok, then the women could vote and in the end it was destined to happen someday,” but no, that isn’t what happened. It was a struggle, it was the work of other women who said: “We must participate and we are not the

peons of society, we have a role that is more important than just being mothers, taking care of the elderly, or being in charge of domestic tasks.” Even though I was allowed to have other kinds of roles in my house, I had not acquired that knowledge, nor did I know the possibilities and rights that we have as women.

By joining the Network, I began to meet other small-scale farmer women. Above all, they had a big impact on me when I saw that they could respond to their role as mothers and spouses, while also fighting for the collective rights of other women. For example, the fight for women to be able to have their own hectare of land, or so that they would not have to continue selling defective coffee beans. They fought to sell high quality coffee, a coffee for which they themselves could set the price of their work. They did this so that they wouldn’t have to make do with the leftover [beans] their husbands gave them. Seeing those women fight gave more meaning to the work that I was doing because sometimes as a professional and coming from town, we say: “Ok, I am going to work in an office. I’ll work my hours, and then I’ll get paid.” But when I saw that through the Network’s work, I can contribute to the struggle and change a woman’s life, change a family and the social fabric, it gave more meaning to my profession and my work. So, even though I am not at the Mayor’s Office making budget decisions, I can influence many organizations so that they make an impact and we can achieve a budget that favors women.

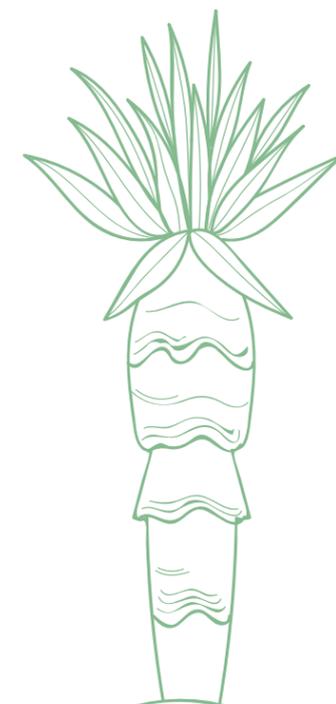
So, those apparently small things that we see in our spaces show us that what we do is very valuable for women. Many of them get up at 4:00 a.m. to make it to a 9:00 a.m. meeting. They fulfill all of their obligations before they leave. Lunch is made for the workers, their kids are at school, and the coffee cherries are processed, and, on top of all of that, they must walk an hour and a half or two hours to get to the meeting. They finally arrive excited and totally ready to learn. That is why I value what we do at the Network so much. Even though we don’t give them goods, projects, or offer them money, we bring them knowledge, which we know doesn’t resolve their immediate needs, but they can use it to fight for their goals and dreams.

Knowing the laws and regulations gives us more power, and it isn’t to overshadow men, but to feel that we are capable of undertaking productive activities and contributing to the family economy. It also allows us to be a little more independent because in rural areas women often depend on their husbands even for their personal expenses.

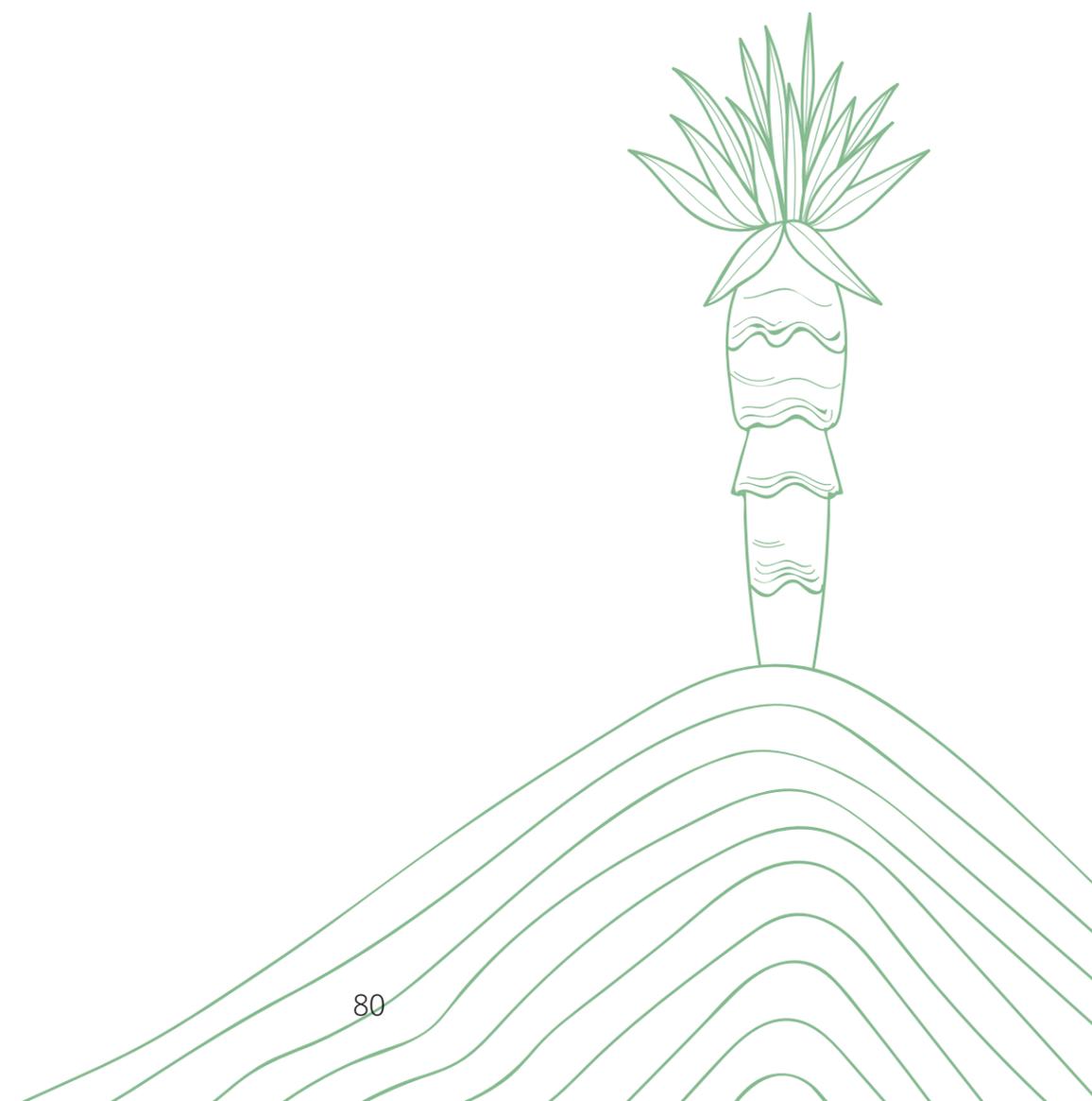
That is why collective work among women allows us to have increased opportunities within society, since an individual cannot in the end achieve our collective goals, such as obtaining more education, better healthcare, employment, business opportunities, and land. Each group of women thinks about how to achieve a better future. Some place emphasis on productive projects, or being educated, on strengthening their culture, etc., but if each of us decides to work individually, none will reach these

dreams. Also, it allows us to have backing. For example, I am here alone, but I am supported by a network of women; I know that my vision and proposals will be defended anywhere a woman from the Network participates. They are also an emotional support. I can go to the Women’s Network and they will give me guidance on how I should act and which path I should follow. It is very important that we always work together and that organizations back women, and even their families.

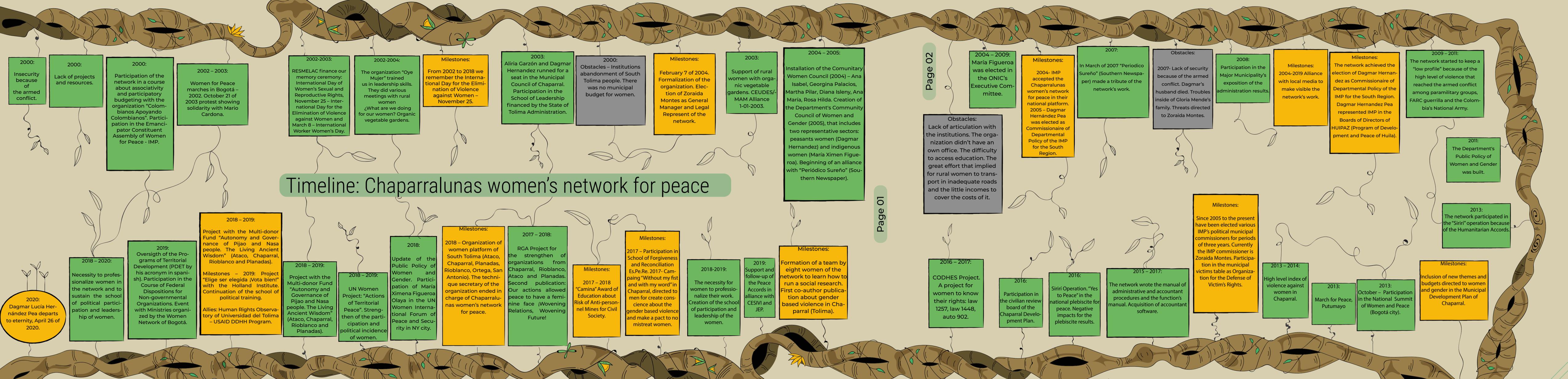
Additionally, the Network has tried to involve women’s husbands and sons in its activities. This hasn’t been easy because men resist these initiatives, but many have been able to participate and have transformed their sexist attitudes.



To the women who have left us, we have not forgotten them:



# Timeline: Chaparralunas women's network for peace



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**2000:**  
Insecurity because of the armed conflict.

**2000:**  
Lack of projects and resources.

**2000:**  
Participation of the network in a course about associativity and participatory budgeting with the organization "Colombianos Apoyando Colombianos". Participation in the Emancipator Constituent Assembly of Women for Peace - IMP.

**2002 - 2003:**  
Women for Peace marches in Bogotá - 2002. October 21 of 2003 protest showing solidarity with Mario Cardona.

**2002-2003:**  
RESMELAC finance our memory ceremony: International Day of Women's Sexual and Reproductive Rights, November 25 - International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and March 8 - International Worker Women's Day.

**2002-2004:**  
The organization "Oye Mujer" trained us in leadership skills. They did various meetings with rural women ¿What are we doing for our women? Organic vegetable gardens.

**Milestones:**  
From 2002 to 2018 we remember the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women - November 25.

**2003:**  
Aliria Garzón and Dagmar Hernandez runned for a seat in the Municipal Council of Chaparral. Participation in the School of Leadership financed by the State of Tolima Administration.

**2000:**  
Obstacles - Institutions abandonment of South Tolima people. There was no municipal budget for women.

**Milestones:**  
February 7 of 2004. Formalization of the organization. Election of Zoraida Montes as General Manager and Legal Represent of the network.

**2003:**  
Support of rural women with organic vegetable gardens. CEUDES/MAM Alliance 1-01-2003.

**2004 - 2005:**  
Installation of the Comunity Women Council (2004) - Ana Isabel, Georgina Palacios, Martha Pilar, Diana Isleny, Ana María, Rosa Hilda. Creation of the Department's Community Council of Women and Gender (2005), that includes two representative sectors: peasants women (Dagmar Hernandez) and indigenous women (María Ximena Figueroa). Beginning of an alliance with "Periódico Sureño" (Southern Newspaper).

**Obstacles:**  
Lack of articulation with the institutions. The organization didn't have an own office. The difficulty to access education. The great effort that implied for rural women to transport in inadequate roads and the little incomes to cover the costs of it.

**2004 - 2009:**  
María Figueroa was elected in the ONIC's Executive Committee.

**Milestones:**  
2004- IMP accepted the Chaparralunas women's network for peace in their national platform. 2005 - Dagmar Hernández Pea was elected as Commissionaire of Departmental Policy of the IMP for the South Region.

**2007:**  
In March of 2007 "Periodico Sureño" (Southern Newspaper) made a tribute of the network's work.

**Obstacles:**  
2007- Lack of security because of the armed conflict. Dagmar's husband died. Troubles inside of Gloria Mende's family. Threats directed to Zoraida Montes.

**2008:**  
Participation in the Major Municipality's exposition of the administration results.

**Milestones:**  
2004-2019 Alliance with local media to make visible the network's work.

**Milestones:**  
The network achieved the election of Dagmar Hernandez as Commissionaire of Departmental Policy of the IMP for the South Region. Dagmar Hernandez Pea represented IMP in the Boards of Directors of HUIPAZ (Program of Development and Peace of Huila).

**2009 - 2011:**  
The network started to keep a "low profile" because of the high level of violence that reached the armed conflict among paramilitary groups, FARC guerrilla and the Colombia's National Army.

**2011:**  
The Department's Public Policy of Women and Gender was built.

**2013:**  
The network participated in the "Siriri" operation because of the Humanitarian Accords.

**Milestones:**  
Inclusion of new themes and budgets directed to women and gender in the Municipal Development Plan of Chaparral.

**2020:**  
Dagmar Lucía Hernández Pea departs to eternity, April 26 of 2020.

**2018 - 2020:**  
Necessity to professionalize women in the network and to sustain the school of political participation and leadership of women.

**2019:**  
Oversight of the Programs of Territorial Development (PDET by his acronym in spanish). Participation in the Course of Federal Dispositions for Non-governmental Organizations. Event with Ministries organized by the Women Network of Bogotá.

**2018 - 2019:**  
Project with the Multi-donor Fund "Autonomy and Governance of Pijao and Nasa people. The Living Ancient Wisdom" (Ataco, Chaparral, Rioblanco and Planadas).  
**Milestones - 2019:** Project "Elige ser elegida ¡Vota bien!" with the Holland Institute. Continuation of the school of political training.  
**Allies:** Human Rights Observatory of Universidad del Tolima - USAID DDHH Program.

**2018 - 2019:**  
Project with the Multi-donor Fund "Autonomy and Governance of Pijao and Nasa people. The Living Ancient Wisdom" (Ataco, Chaparral, Rioblanco and Planadas).

**2018 - 2019:**  
UN Women Project: "Actions of Territorial Peace". Strengthen of the participation and political incidence of women.

**2018:**  
Update of the Public Policy of Women and Gender. Participation of María Ximena Figueroa Olaya in the UN Women International Forum of Peace and Security in NY city.

**Milestones:**  
2018 - Organization of women platform of South Tolima (Ataco, Chaparral, Planadas, Rioblanco, Ortega, San Antonio). The technique secretary of the organization ended in charge of Chaparralunas women's network for peace.

**2017 - 2018:**  
RGA Project for the strengthen of organizations from Chaparral, Rioblanco, Ataco and Planadas. Second publication: Our actions allowed peace to have a feminine face ¡Wovening Relations, Wovening Future!

**Milestones:**  
2017 - 2018 "Camina" Award of Education about Risk of Anti-personnel Mines for Civil Society.

**Milestones:**  
2017 - Participation in School of Forgiveness and Reconciliation Es.Pe.Re. 2017 - Campaigning "Without my fist and with my word" in Chaparral, directed to men for create conscience about the gender based violence and make a pact to no mistreat women.

**2018-2019:**  
The necessity for women to professionalize their work. Creation of the school of participation and leadership of the women.

**2019:**  
Support and follow-up of the Peace Accords in alliance with CESIVI and JEP.

**Milestones:**  
Formation of a team by eight women of the network to learn how to run a social research. First co-author publication about gender based violence in Chaparral (Tolima).

**2016 - 2017:**  
CODHES Project. A project for women to know their rights: law 1257, law 1448, auto 902.

**2016:**  
Participation in the civilian review board of the Chaparral Development Plan.

**2016:**  
Siriri Operation. "Yes to Peace" in the national plebiscite for peace. Negative impacts for the plebiscite results.

**2015 - 2017:**  
The network wrote the manual of administrative and accountant procedures and the function's manual. Acquisition of accountant software.

**Milestones:**  
Since 2005 to the present have been elected various IMP's political municipal commissioners for periods of three years. Currently the IMP commissioner is Zoraida Montes. Participation in the municipal victims table as Organization for the Defense of Victim's Rights.

**2013 - 2014:**  
High level index of violence against women in Chaparral.

**2013:**  
March for Peace, Putumayo

**2013:**  
October - Participation in the National Summit of Women and Peace (Bogotá city).



# 04

## Transforming Fear

When I had problems, it was a woman who listened to me.

**Yuri Viviana Morales Gutiérrez.**



## When fear is no longer a secret, it can be faced!

Society teaches women to live with fear and, worse still, to be silent about it. Inhabiting the street, politics, home, and work means confronting many fears, like being judged, discriminated against, or abused for having been born in a woman's body. These fears are heightened for us because we live in a rural context marked by deep-seated sexism, but also by situations of armed violence and state abandonment.

When we started the Network, we felt that living in fear was "normal." It was so embedded in our daily lives that we were prevented from seeing a lot of the violence we experienced. Breaking our silence and allowing ourselves to open up in spaces of trust to talk about the fears, tensions, and difficulties we experience, however, has been key for facing and overcoming them. These feelings ceased to be a personal matter, becoming a matter for collective work and learning.

## It is not always bad to lower one's head

When we began as the Women's Network, there were periods of high intensity in the armed conflict that led us to think about work strategies that would not put us at risk. Between 2005 and 2007, and even up to 2010, there were clashes everywhere in our region: the FARC and army had long battles in the mountains and there were paramilitaries out in the flatlands. There were "ghost" planes during that same period. The army retained the goods small-scale farmers bought at market and many other things. The situation was extremely delicate and there was not much we could do amid the chaos.



Ilustración 22. Publicación periódico el Sureño de la política pública departamental de Mujer y género. Archivo propio, 2011.

To take care of ourselves, we decided to keep a low profile, which meant reducing our public presence and the activities that we carried out as an organization. As a result, many people thought that our organization had disbanded, but in reality we were getting stronger. There were people who said, "After all their nagging, those broads have now disappeared." But they couldn't have been more wrong. During those years we dedicated ourselves to our studies. Many women got their primary and high school equivalency, and others entered university to study public administration. We also managed to influence the construction of the Departmental Public Policy on Women and Gender. Our strategy was to sneak out very carefully, at different times, and to conceal ourselves so that no one would realize that we were together. Then we would meet in Ibagué to represent the women of Chaparral.

Something that we never stopped was exercising our role as JAC leaders because, as we already told you, we had fought to participate in these spaces that were so important to our communities and municipality. In addition, it was essential for us to use organizing the JAC's Women's Affairs Committees as an excuse to move around the region because, at the same time that we taught about women's rights, we invited women to denounce the violence, organize, and engage in community politics.

The women from these committees would call the meetings. They were the ones in charge of convening the space and, thanks to their management and logistical work, we had no problems with the armed actors in those territories. Still, many times we ran into them when we got to the villages, but we did not say that we were from the Network, but that we were the president of ASOJUNTAS, a representative from an indigenous organization, or the catechist, and that we were going to hold a council meeting or talk to women about our rights. Since there were many women leaders on the councils, we were able to hold our training meetings on violence prevention, organizational capacity building, access to care, and human rights. At the same time, we got to know the women and they told us about their lives, concerns, and secrets during these gatherings. We thus established sincere trust, showing that our presence in their rural communities would benefit them. We were able to find out about their conditions, what their needs were, give them courage, tell them that they were not alone and that together we could work collectively to face fear. In addition, we used our role in the JACs to help many women formally associate and resist the armed conflict.

It also helped to open our meetings to everyone in the rural communities. Husbands went with women to the JAC workshops to listen to what we were going to teach them, because they were afraid that they would be led astray or that they were going to be unfaithful. Little by little, we earned trust in many of the conflict-ridden territories at that time.

Our resistance to armed violence has left us with large scars and memories that are very difficult to process. Women who have been part of the Network were threatened, displaced, or witnesses to the death of their spouses and children. That is why we wanted to keep a low profile, because the armed conflict demanded it of us; it is only now that we have experienced the peace process that our reality ultimately changed and we could name and recount our history. It is part of our life experience and we learned important lessons. This is why we believe that "lowering one's head" isn't always a bad thing because it allowed us to stay in the region, to empower ourselves, to study, and to do little things that helped change the lives of many women.

## Threatened for accompanying cases of violence against women

When we acquired legal status in 2004, we dedicated ourselves to supporting women victims of violence, and to advising them during the process of filing complaints and demanding their rights. At that time, our legal representative was our colleague, Zoraida. She took the lead on a very difficult case that we were asked to accompany in our municipality that had even made the national news: it was the rape of a six-year-old girl at the hands of her uncle, who thought he had murdered her and left her lying wounded in a field. It was very difficult to accompany this case because the municipality did not want to collaborate with us and the municipal ombudsperson was not quick to process her transfer to and care at a health center, which is why Zoraida saw it necessary to activate all our allied networks at the national level. Thus, our colleagues from IMP and the *Red Nacional* (National Network) applied pressure at the local level so that the institutions would fulfill their duty to protect the girl.

Fortunately, that man's actions did not go unpunished, and we were successful in having the institutions follow the measures prescribed by law. Zoraida, however, had to cease her activities at the Network and keep a low profile after she was threatened for having helped the girl's family denounce him.

This shows how difficult it has been for us to talk about violence against girls and women in our territory, a cause that motivates us to fight but has also put us at risk.

## Lack of resources

For us, starting out was not only complex due to the armed conflict and the situations of abuse and domestic violence that we were experiencing, but also because we had limited education, communication, and financial resources.

Before, we did not have the technological tools to facilitate communication, like WhatsApp, social media, or text messages, so we had to design word of mouth logistics to be able to meet with women in their rural communities or with our allies in the towns. Moreover, the condition of the roads was much worse at that time, and communication was sometimes very difficult due to the distance, poor condition of the roads, and lack of economic resources needed to get around.

Our meeting space was at women's houses, and we rotated who would host the meetings. Likewise, since we did not have an office, we dedicated a space in our homes for organizing files and correspondence. Oh, the correspondence! There was enough of it to make you sweat! Before, most invitations went through the Municipal Mayor's Office and almost always arrived late or they failed to inform us, so it was easier to use a home address for the office so that mail would arrive on time.

Moreover, our income as an organization was nil at that time. We didn't have any projects, and it was very difficult to find resources for photocopies or bus fare to go to events or meetings. But we came up with many ways to squeeze a little money from our pockets, even if we had to tighten our personal expenses a little. Those who had greater economic flexibility sometimes helped other colleagues with travel expenses. Dagmar and her motorcycle were our WhatsApp during those years because she would come to our homes to notify us about meetings. She collected mail, made copies, and paid for gasoline, all out of her pocket.

The lack of education was also a big obstacle at the beginning because there were many illiterate women who could not read or write. Since we were in the process of earning our elementary and high school equivalencies, we encouraged many of the women with whom we began to work to do the same. The women from AMOCAL in Calarma are an example of this. They convinced the schoolteachers to open a Saturday course to earn their diplomas; the teacher helped them, and they were able to advance academically.

On top of all these difficulties, the institutions didn't make an effort to work hand in hand with us. We didn't request their money or projects, only that they listen to us, that they realize how much violence was experienced by women in our municipality. But they didn't and it is only now that the mayors' offices have projects with a gender approach. At that time we were faced with deaf institutions. To give you an example, forming rural health brigades was not a priority, but thanks to our insistence and proactive attitude, we managed to make it a component of healthcare in the Mayor's Office and in the hospital administration, which is at a minimum what should be done so that women can access family planning and general medicine services.

## Mother and leader

"I believe that time is the most difficult thing for women once we decide to organize ourselves and assume new roles and leadership within our communities. Beyond our lives, women have to answer for the lives of others (children, husbands, parents, grandparents, etc.) in what is called the care economy. We have to contribute a lot of time to the tasks of supporting the home/farm. For example, rural women help their husbands with the harvest, cook for employees, and get their children ready to go to school, among other activities. So time is a barrier, just as assuming a new role is, because many women believe that they are only capable of cooking, of being at home, and they ignore their leadership skills. When they manage to overcome these limitations is when they transform their lives and the lives of their nuclear family. It represents a huge effort, because for a woman to go to a meeting, she has to leave the food ready, the house in order, she has to get up very early. Time is a barrier for women." Martha Ibeth Cardona Bonilla, 2020.

Assuming the role of mother and leader is sometimes accompanied by fear: the fear of not being the same mother as before, of being singled out in our intimate circles as a "bad mom" or "bad wife" because community work and, still more, work focused on the defense of women's rights, demands that a lot of time be devoted to it, it implies long trips away from home, the municipality, and even the country. It is work on top of all the tasks we have in our homes in our roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. Of all these roles, motherhood is the most heartfelt and is what creates the most stress once we take on the task of being leaders.

Since we know that childcare can be a barrier for women, what we do is invite women and tell them to bring their kids to the meetings. We always make alliances with early childhood students or pedagogues so that they can help guide the children while the women are being educated in our spaces. In this way we make them see that even if they have four or five children, they can lead and handle collective work. Of course it is hard, but we ourselves are examples that it is possible. Today we can attest to this. Some colleagues had very young sons and daughters when we began the Network's organizational process, young people who are currently 16 or more years old and who feel part of the Network, so we are contributing to transformation by educating this new generation to believe in community work.

"One of the questions, well the only one that I asked María Ximena was: How did you, as a woman and mother, coordinate the roles of mother, social leader, and working here at the Network? This task creates emotional conflicts for us, as is my case, even though it is a personal issue, it impacts our community work.

Then she (María Ximena) said that one of the things she did when her son was small was take him everywhere she went. Her son was always by her side. Now that he is in the pre-teen stage, she still takes him to different activities, teaches him what she knows, takes him to accompany her at community meetings, teaches him to weave and to grow crops. All these exercises make the boy, in one way or another, grow into the same leadership role as his mother, but with another perspective, because by having grown up in this dynamic of women organizers, he already sees women differently. It is not the normal teaching that any boy gets that she is the help, that she is the one who drops him off, and picks him up. Instead, they become helpers." Yuri Viviana, 2019.

Within the Network we have found a space for dialogue and to heal the guilt we carry as mothers. We develop tools to merge both roles, always with the idea or goal of having what we do transform the lives of our families. As Maryi Lorena says: "If we participate and advocate as women leaders, there will be a change for our community and a more stable future for new generations." This has been one of the greatest lessons we have had, because when we make the effort to study, prepare ourselves, and work for the community, we become knowledgeable women and we already have something to offer our children. That is why we did and continue to do "Operation Sirirí," so that women can study at the high school level and continue their academic preparation, whether formally or informally.

Motherhood, however, never fails to influence our lives; that tension between being a mother and a leader is ever-present. Fortunately, the youngest women who have joined the Network have found support in the older women, who are an example, as well as advice to reaffirm the possibility of being both.

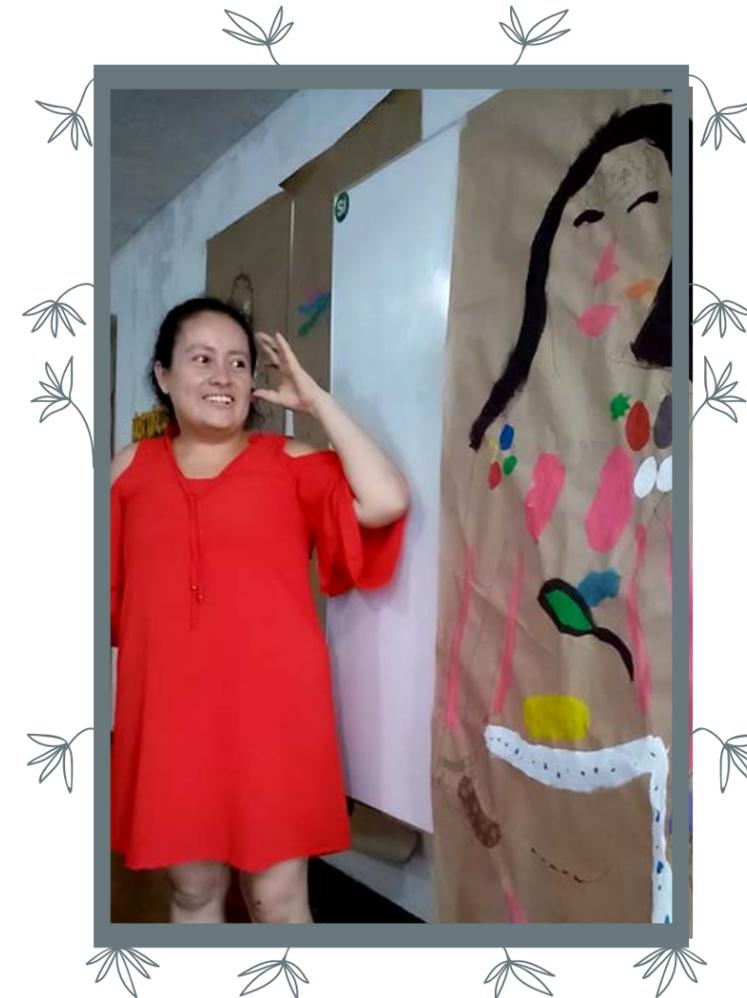


Image 23. Ingrid Gómez Robles. Body Cartographies workshop, September 2019.

My children are represented here by the cesarean section scar. They are very important to me... Though being a mother is challenging, even today, I learn something new every day. The women at the Network have been my teachers, have been my professors. When I started at the Network, there were classes where they told us: "Experience is more powerful than concepts," and they were right, although I did not accept it at the time. But experience does make these concepts materialize into projects and real things.

When they ask us where we feel empowerment and autonomy in our body, for me autonomy is in the waist (that is why I drew this white belt). Just as men wear a belt, we women can, too, and that autonomy represents for us the power to participate in other spheres we could not have before. Sometimes my family makes me feel that I should abandon my role in social issues, but we express these things to each other with a lot of work and love. My family's needs always go before mine, which is not easy, but their help, their strength, has sustained me to this day.

**Ingrid Gómez Robles**



# 05

How Were We Able to Persist?



## Facing challenges, overcoming obstacles, and growing collectively

We have been working for women for many years, striving to create and sustain this organization. So, when we began to dust off the memories and talk among ourselves, we realized that we have done a lot, sometimes without being aware of it. When we looked at this great journey of more than twenty years of political work, we asked ourselves: How have we managed to persist? How have we bettered ourselves? What have been our strategies to overcome obstacles and face our challenges? What have been our political struggles and proposals? It is these proposals to persevere, resist, and improve that we will tell you about in this chapter.

"In the Network, we have facilitated processes with women from Ataco, Rioblanco, Chaparral, and San Antonio. We have the Network, we are connected, and that helps us to identify what a network is.

For us, this Network began as a study, as a process for improving our self-esteem. Everything we do with women is to have them improve their esteem and that gives us life. We exchange wisdom because our experiences are different, our problems here in Chaparral are different from those experienced by our friends from Ataco, though we believe they are nearly the same. But then we seek to learn from and exchange all the wisdom that we possess. There is a diversity of religions, of identities, there are all kinds of exchanges. Our communication has improved because now we have WhatsApp, and all these technological tools, so we stay in perfect communication. Sometimes a phone breaks, that happens, and the communication gets lost, but we are like our logo, we all make an effort to speak the same language."

**Dagmar Lucía Hernández Peña**

## "Together and organized is the only way we grow stronger"

In the first chapters we told you that when we started the organization, the women experienced scarcity and many difficulties. Despite this, we resisted the armed conflict and the constant anguish we experienced in rural Colombia. We have achieved all this because we have been together, united in sisterhood, seeking peace, fighting to study, to actively occupy participation spaces, and claiming our rights. It is from this union and organization that our strength is born.

"For me, the most beautiful thing about being organized is that it allows us to make an impact through knowledge. When we started this process, for a small-scale farmer woman to say that she was going to talk to the mayor was like a dream. Only the mayors and councilors spoke and so going to talk to the mayor felt impossible or unimportant. Being organized allows us to say that we represent the voices of various women and that the institutions must pay attention to us, to legal entities like women's associations or the Women's Network. Our proposals, decisions, and points of view are going to be heard by the regional entities. Because when we go to the meetings, it is not María Ximena going alone to introduce proposals. These are the proposals of the women inhabitants of southern Tolima, for example." María Ximena Figueroa Olaya, 2020.

That is why we promote and strengthen women-led political processes or those processes where women have their own space. This is because it is not enough for women to know our rights, we must also organize ourselves. That is why we invite them to become involved in these processes, either through the legal institutions close to the women's associations in rural areas or by approaching the Network, or the Women's Affairs committees in the JACs, which is another legal figure we must participate in because of their historical importance in our regions. As our colleague Dagmar Lucía said: "Together and organized is the only way we grow stronger."

On the other hand, we have recognized that our political process has achieved a very strong level of organizational maturity. We believe that this has been the case because we have managed to establish respect and uphold agreements, to recognize the importance of the coordinators' roles, and to accompany each other in all functions so we can "speak a single language." This balance of power has given us the tools to walk together toward a common purpose, in spite of stress, fear, and obstacles. It has also greatly helped us to put respect above all else. Therefore, we respect each other a lot, in addition to the fact that between us there is great affection and admiration, so if there is a point of view with which we do not agree or that sparks a discussion, we open the space to talk about and clarify it.

## “Educating ourselves to improve ourselves”

“We must constantly replicate knowledge about our rights with other women in order to move past situations that have made us marginalized, unhappy, violated, and even dead on many occasions. Through daily comprehensive training, women must recognize ourselves as valuable and empowered in order to change our realities and those of many others who have not had the same opportunities.” Martha Ibeth Cardona, 2019.

As we mentioned before, when we started on this path in defense of women's rights, we encountered a huge obstacle: a lack of education. Many adult women, whether indigenous, small-scale farmer, or from urban areas, did not know how to read or write, so for us it was essential to facilitate the certification of primary, high school, and adult professional or technological education, recognizing that:

**“When a woman is educated, she can have better possibilities in life.”**

**Ingrid Gómez**

Accessing formal and informal education has allowed us to gain political presence because, as we constantly say, “knowledge is power” and “a woman with knowledge can change the world.” Our lives changed when we managed to fortify ourselves keeping a low profile, studying, and learning about our rights. We became strong and powerful when we were able to educate ourselves, certify our elementary and high school equivalency and, for some of us, go to university and attend workshops, courses, and certificate courses at SENA. Knowing and educating ourselves is the main tool women have for recognizing ourselves as citizens with rights and as subjects with power.

At the same time, we identified that, while it is important for women to study, organizing ourselves also brings with it a lot of learning that is not reflected in a high school or university diploma. The organization allows us to grow in knowledge, emotional ties, and friendships with other women, and to strengthen the social fabric. All this provides us with tools and capacities to be autonomous in our decision-making, because when we meet in these spaces we recognize the experiences of other women who have survived difficult situations and, from this, we learn from

each other and provide support to others who are experiencing similar situations.

“For this reason, it has become important for women to begin to learn about the different rights that we have, since many of us have been abused in our day to day lives. But the violence is so constant that we have naturalized it. For many women it is normal that her husband scolds her, yells at her, or hits her, which means we continue to be abused by our partners who say they ‘love’ us. In addition, when we are victims of violence, we do not want to expose the problems that we experience in our family environments because often we cannot find a way out and we do not have psychological support from the state entities that should be available to accompany us and help assert our rights. For this reason, it is necessary to know what laws protect us when facing these situations, and which government entities can help us with dignified services to resolve and reduce all the different types of violence that we experience.” Martha Ibeth Cardona Bonilla, 2019.

## “Everything that has been learned has been replicated with other women”

“Experience allows us to know much more, which gives us the empirical knowledge to be facilitators of change with other women.” María Ximena Figueroa Olaya

Knowledge should be for everyone, it does not matter if we live in the country or in the city, or whether we have money or not. For this reason, it is vital for us to fight for access to education for all women in our territories, especially for those who live in rural areas. Thus, one of our peacebuilding proposals is to replicate what we have learned and reach out to other women to motivate the organization and management of their own projects.

In this sense, one of the Network's most important activities is ongoing training, which has contributed to us women empowering ourselves and learning to make decisions, grow as people, as women, as subjects of the law, and to gain autonomy. This is something we have been doing and we have demonstrated how many of us are already occupying different positions in multiple settings (productive organizations, JACs, human rights defense organizations, among others). This has been very important for us because it means that this work, silent but permanent, has generated changes at a personal, family, and community level. It is nice when the women who come to our workshops tell us: “Before I never got out, I had never been invited to a meeting, I was always on the farm cooking for the workers.” In this way, we have been able to show that opening space and giving importance to women being in these social initiatives makes us feel valued, powerful, and capable, because we

learn for ourselves that we are much more, that we are not only here to work in our homes on the domestic and family front, but that we have a lot to contribute to society.

Likewise, it has been important to us that women learn how the state works, how public policies, departmental and local development plans are drawn up, and the mechanisms that exist so that we can participate in their formulation and monitoring. On the other hand, we try to ensure that women's knowledge and proposals are not only relegated to oral rhetoric, but that they also get translated into writing. That is why we teach about record keeping, requests, and other documents. So, what we have done is pedagogy on women's participation, political advocacy, and leadership training. We have strengthened social initiatives from the grassroots, collectively researching and building agendas with proposals based on the needs we ourselves identify because we have learned to turn these needs into proposals to influence political spaces and achieve decisions that help solve and transform the conditions and quality of life for many women.

### Generating our own knowledge

To us, knowledge is a very valuable resource that must be redistributed so that women have possibilities and opportunities to occupy public spaces. But we also link it closely to the analyses that we have carried out through social research about women's realities and challenges.

The first project we had as an organization was an investigation with CODHES - USAID on gender-based violence in the municipality of Chaparral, the results of which are in the book: "Un acercamiento a la Violencia Basada en Género en el municipio de Chaparral."<sup>3</sup>

To implement this project we created a research group composed of us. Consequently, we did not hire a researcher, but managed to have some members of the Network trained to develop research capacities and abilities. For this we had to study to acquire and reinforce knowledge about what violence is and how it manifests, what gender is, and what are the laws that support and protect women. As explained by our colleague Martha Cardona:

<sup>3</sup> Red de mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz. (2016). "Un acercamiento a la Violencia Basada en Género (VBG) en el municipio de Chaparral, Tolima" (A Look at Gender-based Violence (GBV) in the Municipality of Chaparral, Tolima), Chaparral. Publisher: Red de mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz. Consult at: [https://issuu.com/codhes/docs/un\\_acercamiento\\_a\\_la\\_violencia\\_basa](https://issuu.com/codhes/docs/un_acercamiento_a_la_violencia_basa)

"We had the opportunity to gather statistics on violence from government entities and institutions, to see what statistics they had, what services they provided; and with women, to share basic knowledge about what violence is and how it manifests and inquire if they had been victims of violence and domestic abuse, since for some it was a normalized practice in their relationships and family settings. This is how we collected a lot of information and chose three emblematic cases of women who had been victims of violence to visualize in the investigation process and presentation of results. It was collaborative work among the women who were assigned to this task: the challenge of learning what cartography is, what a timeline is, how to conduct interviews, surveys, field activities to collect the necessary information."

Another investigation that has marked us and taught us a lot was the one we carried out in Planadas, Tolima. There we understood that it is not enough to give a woman a survey. It is necessary to build a context and establish relationships with the women with whom these initiatives are carried out; that is, to make them an active participant in the research.

We wanted to do this project differently and for it to have more elements, so we collaborated with the *Comisaria de Familia de Planadas* (Planadas Police and Family Services). We provided the economic resources for the logistics of bringing the institution's services closer to rural areas and we worked together to bring the institutions closer to women. This contributed to women's understanding of how violence manifests and which municipal entities provide support in these cases. So their presence helped generate a discussion about situations that hadn't been mentioned before, since the absence of state entities in rural areas makes many women remain silent. This undoubtedly changed women's perspectives and showed that they are (we are) not alone and that there are entities that should orient, accompany, and protect them (us).

We used several strategies to gather this information at different levels: workshops in different rural communities, in-depth interviews with some of the women we noticed did not participate very much in the collective spaces, characterization surveys, and the design of a lobbying strategy to obtain information from local institutions, such as hospitals, the Public Prosecutor's Office, Mayor's Office, Police, and ICBF.<sup>4</sup> Not only do we talk about violence and its manifestations in the lives of women, but we also included new topics such as access to justice and the care economy, and we presented proposals and public policy initiatives to regional entities as a result of this process.

<sup>4</sup> Colombian Institute for Family Welfare

Later, we made a pedagogical book published under the name: “Nuestras acciones permitirán que la paz tenga rostro femenino. Tejiendo lazos, Tejiendo future,”<sup>5</sup> in which we designed five modules on public institutions and mapped service providers, planners, and decision-makers at the regional level, and forums for citizen participation and social oversight. This little booklet is a tool to promote and strengthen the leadership and advocacy capacities of women’s organizations in southern Tolima.

We tell you this because the type of research carried out by the Network is social and qualitative. It is our tool to understand the contexts in which we rural women live and to expose the needs and proposals we have for transforming realities of exclusion, poverty, and a lack of education, access to health and justice services, among others, in order to develop citizen agendas and political advocacy processes. This is unlike the state which, in our experience in the region, we have found to only carry out quantitative research and nothing more, without offering support or carrying out social research that would be more relevant for public policy decisions.

Consequently, we consider it important to emphasize that more support and funding are still needed for further research and to understand the violence faced by and needs of women in our territories, as well as to accompany and create strategies that transform these situations at the root. We still have many challenges and a long way to go to document these problems.

### Influencing political and decision-making spaces

One of our motivations for associating and organizing in the Network was not having felt represented or listened to by local government entities because there were no public policies for women, and because the people who were in these positions did not pay attention to our needs and demands. The existing institutions and powers did not represent women, so we formed the Network to influence these spaces and to vindicate and position the causes of grassroots women.

All our efforts to train and educate ourselves have been reflected in local agendas and the advocacy processes that we have carried out based on research and projects. These agendas, built collectively among women, have a territorial perspective because they cover broad issues related to health, the care economy, cultural sustainability, the preservation of ancestral knowledge, food sovereignty, justice, prevention, training, and support in addressing gender-based violence (GBV) and domestic violence. So we have taken on the challenge of mobilizing these agendas with local, departmental, and national governments so that they are reflected in decision-making. We do this

<sup>5</sup> Red de mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz. (2019). “Nuestras acciones permitirán que la paz tenga rostro femenino. Tejiendo lazos, Tejiendo future” (Lending a Women’s Likeness to Peace Through our Actions: Weaving Ties, Weaving the Future) Publisher: Red de mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz.

by presenting clear proposals to those who run for elected office, so that the winner includes them in the Municipal Development Plan (PDM for its acronym in Spanish).

As a result of these years of advocacy and Operation Sirirí, we have learned to strengthen our capacity for dialogue with hegemonic powers and with those formal instances of power that—with all their defects and the not-so-good things we have to say about them—are in charge of making important decisions about our territories. Therefore, it is of them that we must demand the inclusion of our voices and rights.

In fact, before there was no budget item for women in the PDM, which was an obstacle, but now it is a landmark because, since 2012, as the Women’s Network we were able to secure a budget line item with resources called: “Women and Gender.” Since then, we have been monitoring and practicing oversight on the PDMs, and we take an active role in updating the municipal and departmental Public Policy on Women and Gender.

From the Network, we have also created a space in the Social Policy Council, where we have a voice and vote. We are part of the Rural Development Council. We are included in the women and culture councils at the municipal level, and we have been in the departmental spaces for the formulation of public policies. Now, with the implementation of the peace agreement, we have also influenced and participated in the formulation of the Development Plans with a Territorial Approach (PDET for its acronym in Spanish), positioning our proposals and our territorial vision. We have and will continue to have the task of influencing, implementing Operation Sirirí, and **persisting**.

We have always monitored and occupied these participation spaces, positioning women’s proposals, and opening possibilities and paths so that the regional entities can articulate themselves to our work (because it is their duty to do so). We do this on a daily basis, in constant communication with the entire women’s base and the organizations that are part of the Network. Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has created the challenge of maintaining that communication. We have achieved it virtually through emails and have taught many women how to use WhatsApp and social media. Contrary to what might be expected, the pandemic has not been a negative factor in terms of communication but has strengthened it through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). We have also maintained contact with the local and departmental radio stations, channels that have allowed many women to listen to us even if they don’t have internet, a cell phone, or a cell phone signal. The radio is once again a useful tool for continuing to weave ties.

"Women today are involved in many initiatives, fighting to have the same opportunities that men have. From our conditions as women, we transform our territories, participating in political spaces—as we say at the Network— "in the likeness of a woman" because [such spaces] used to be more closed and women did not have a place in them. We have reached places where we did not have participation before. Today, we have managed to participate in political campaigns, in oversight, in the JACs, and in community women's councils. We are a voice of protest against violence against women." Martha Ibeth Cardona Bonilla, 2020.

In all the political initiatives in which we participate, the Network has not sought to position a party but women's rights, even though we of course come across women who vote for the candidate who will supposedly give them a productive project or for the one who promises public works in the community. That is why we have been training and working on positioning women in popularly elected and decision-making public policy positions. In addition, we encourage them to vote for a political agenda that includes our demands (those of women) and not for personal interest. We insist that the way to achieve our goals is collectively. Even if we build very successful organizational initiatives, if there are people in power who do not defend our rights, we will always come up against an obstacle.

**Even though the work we have done has not been through political power, we do envision ourselves there, not to position a specific party, but women, women's role in politics, defending women's rights and projects.**

Hence the importance of our political training schools, since they have the purpose of teaching how Colombian democracy works, its party system, electoral system and code, and the quota law (today the law on gender parity), because many women do not know how the country's political system works and don't participate because they don't recognize the importance of voting by conscience, of running as candidates, of advocating, or of monitoring leaders and their governance plans. So, through these spaces, we try to transform the political culture, to have women change how they think about voting, because many are influenced by what their husband says, by physical appearances, family traditions or the usual party, without reviewing whether a candidate has proposals with a gender perspective in their government platform.

In this sense, political training schools have allowed women to recognize ourselves as citizens capable of having and exercising power; power that also manifests itself in the new perceptions we acquire about politics, in the need to be informed about the political happenings in the country and to generate reflexive analyses about our reality.

This is why our advocacy and the initiatives we lead have contributed to many women transforming the imaginaries they had about politics. Politics

has ceased to be a male-only, external, corrupt, and immoral affair. Instead, politics has become a daily struggle to combat sexism and the conditions of exclusion that limit us. At the same time, it is a path to build more prosperous, inclusive, and equal families, communities, and associations. Therefore, for us it is important to bring visibility to the cultural transformations that occur, which are reflected in changes to mentality, perception, and action, in the power we have as voters with informed opinions, in proposals and empirical knowledge of the community's needs, and in the political training that we promote constantly.

### Seeking autonomy

We are autonomous and builders of an organization and tapestry of collective work. We make decisions based on our criteria of sisterhood, as woman, with respect for rights, well-being, and ethical and moral values. This is because we are the ones who face these situations in our territories and that is why we always seek autonomy in decision making.

One of the reasons we had for creating the Network—and it is a motivation shared by other women's organizations—was related to having the resources we raise come to, and be administered and distributed, by us through a legal entity and according to our lived reality. Even though we work with associations that supported us when we did not have a legal status such as IMP, RESMELAC, Oye Mujer, and others who helped us implement activities and projects with small donations, these experiences led us to see the need for economic independence. For that, we had to have a strong organization that would allow us to have self-determination in our personal and collective projects in order to access more economic, employment, management, and growth opportunities.

"Over the years, as a woman leader, it has been possible to have the Network pay me a fee for providing services. Previously, we had never thought about earning a salary or anything, we worked in the Network because we liked to. Now with this organization we have sustained ourselves by presenting proposals, and we can generate a little employment for women so one can dedicate one hundred percent to the organization. That wasn't the case before, we were part time, Dagmar [working] at her farm, at the dairy, and meeting with us in the afternoons. I had a job and on the days I had time I was with the organization, always juggling other things. Now, I can say that we are one hundred percent with the organization, working on what we enjoy." María Ximena Figueroa Olaya

Today we see that there are many women who no longer depend economically on anyone. Through collective work, they managed to earn their own income and leave

the partners who abused them; others are no longer subject to their husbands' will economically speaking, they complement each other between the two of them. That is what the Network wants, that there be a balance in families and that women, like men, have the same opportunities and possibilities to get educated, learn, and take action.

This search for autonomy has allowed us to transform traditional economic relationships, access to paid work, land, productive projects, and leadership in our own organizations, and it has been fundamental to the empowerment of the women who are part of the Network. We have achieved all this thanks to the organizational fabric and the sisterhood we have built. Together we have improved our economic situation, designed successful companies and associations, and many women have received our advice and today have very prosperous productive projects. These experiences show that women, when united, can change our income and have more freedom to decide and contribute to our families and communities.

### “Coffee or not, we'll continue meeting”

The main resources we have are the knowledge and time that we dedicate to improving social life and the organizational fabric. In fact, economic resources will arrive as long as we are empowered, united, and clear on the association's objectives, as María Ximena reminds us:

“We always say, coffee or not, we'll continue meeting, because that isn't what interests us. Whether or not there is coffee, the meeting must go on. When we understood the importance of supporting the fabric regardless of resources, we said to women when they formed associations and created organizations: ‘Associations must be maintained and sustained. If there is no money, don't worry, because you will have the resource you represent as women. The rest, and the financing, is extra. You will get there by learning, organizing, and with patience. Those things cannot be limited by a lack of resources.’”

This statement that “coffee or not, the organization goes on” is a metaphor that speaks to our interest in working for the collective's well-being, regardless of the economic resources available. This does not mean that we believe that it is not necessary to have resources to execute projects; what we want to make clear is that the organization should not fall apart because it has no funding. It is also important to us to tell women that we are not interested in enriching ourselves personally. Indeed, many of them invite us to their rural communities and tell us, “Come and give us a training. We don't have a way to pay you, but we make *masato*<sup>6</sup>

6

A traditional fermented drink from Tolima, prepared with rice and other ingredients.

and *empanadas* here. We can sell them, and we'll give you the profit for your return fare.” And we will be there, contributing as much as we can to women's initiatives in rural areas because we know how hard it is.

That is what we did in the Network. We spent almost fifteen years scraping by, organizing, knocking on many doors. We slept in very elegant hotels because of the invitations we received, but also in hammocks in many rural communities and wherever we were invited. All this effort was rewarded five years ago when we managed to get a (rented) office and develop our objectives as an organization through projects, which has constantly challenged us to formulate and manage them.

In this way, what has created the Network's foundation has been the conviction to work to transform women's realities through the redistribution and generation of knowledge, strengthening of associative initiatives, rights trainings, and political advocacy. We reiterate that the most important resource in all of this has been women in our wisdom and the hours we dedicate to the organizations.

### Inter-generational connections

“When I started at the Network, I was a young woman. I represented the new generation. Now I am the adult, Yuri, Ingrid, and Maryi are the young women.” María Ximena Figueroa Olaya

At the Network we know that social initiatives need continuity, refreshing, new blood, to stay up to date with changes, new tools and realities. For this reason, it has been very important for us to connect with young women who are interested in our political activism. We get them involved by giving them a place in the organization where they can express their new ideas and contribute from their professions, talents, and interests wherever they want to participate.

The organizing work we have done has helped young men and women understand that women's rights are extremely important, that they don't get invented

overnight, and that women have rights that we inherit from other women, but that have been violated because of the existing patriarchal culture. This is why members now recognize that we are part of a women's movement that for years has been in a constant struggle, from many parts of the world, to have those rights recognized.

The young people who have participated in our meetings have also come to view their mothers differently. They no longer see their moms as the people who take care of everything at home but have understood that they must contribute to these projects and undertakings, in the organizational efforts led by their mothers, and that routine household activities is work that is the responsibility of all family members. In addition, one of the ways to articulate our roles as mothers and leaders has been to include our daughters and sons in all the training and advocacy activities that we do, but now we do it with an extra aim: so that they can learn and replicate all this knowledge.

Currently, we are working toward the recovery of the identities that are in our Afro-descendant, indigenous, and small-scale farmer territories. We do it with the purpose of handing this knowledge down to young people and as a strategy that strengthens the cultures of Tolima, while also strengthening what we call "the parts of our being," our roots, which all people should have but that has been lost in schools. Educating young people for the future is not only about instilling knowledge of mathematics, physics, and biology, but is also about giving them tools to be people who can transform society. Very rarely is that taught in schools. For this reason, the Women's Network is working to appreciate our indigenous and Afro peoples' uses and customs. While we teach how to make handicrafts, weave *mochila* or *chile* bags or hats, we also talk about women's human rights, political participation, teamwork, sense of belonging, entrepreneurship, peacebuilding, and recovery of the social fabric in which we live.

### Maintaining faith and hope

"We always had hope, we did not lose it at any time. Even though it was sometimes very difficult to have, we found it, with great faith, always. That is why we always sing the song of prayer for peace by Francis of Assisi, because it says, 'where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is discord, let me sow union.' Our children and grandchildren know it and sing it at home. That faith and hope is what motivates our desire to study, to be aware of reflexive analyses on current events so we know how we should advocate and work." Dagmar Lucía Hernández Peña

The Network is the result of a lot of work. Seeing in one place everything that has been achieved over the years is proof that teamwork produces positive results. It is also a recognition that it is far from easy because in between are misfortunes, disappointments, fatigue, and the thought that

we are not going to make it when the difficulties feel too great. For example, what is happening to us at the moment with respect to the country's political situation sometimes dampens our spirits but remembering that we have always survived and that we have grown strong despite the conflict helps us reaffirm ourselves and the tools we possess to continue sustaining this legacy.

Our faith and hope are currently sustained by the lessons we have from all these twenty years of work, but especially by what we have inherited from women who have fought for our rights, to whom we owe this organizational culture. Their teachings motivate, excite, and strengthen us and remind us that we must continue to nurture the hope of having a territory free of violence and with opportunities for all women; as well as faith in ourselves and in our abilities to manage projects that can transform the lives of women in southern Tolima.

### Resisting in the streets

#### Candlelit marches

In the era of the democratic security policies, former President Álvaro Uribe and the military forces began to say that "merchants were helping the guerrilla." They made a list of merchants in our municipality who were all arrested. There were three women on that list. That is why we joined with Conrado Jiménez and Aida Robles to organize the candlelit marches, in which we mobilized every Friday for the prisoners' release because we knew it had been an unfair and arbitrary action. Our colleague Zoraida Montes always reminded us that the Bible says that we must visit prisoners, so she invited us to show solidarity with these women. We arranged a bus with Cointrasur that would take us to the Picaleña prison in Ibagué to go visit the prisoners. We went with Aida Robles and several others whose relatives were there. We went in sandals and dresses, and we brought them *tamales*. They searched everything. The *tamales* reached them in bad shape.

We managed to get in and they let us give them the food we had brought. We visited them, brought them letters from their family and friends, asked them about their health, talked about what was happening to them, and gave them our messages of encouragement. We returned to Chaparral very worried, however, because the experience of getting searched and seeing all the things that go on in prisons left us very scared because our companions sadly remained there. Fortunately,

they managed to get them out in a short time because they were innocent and nothing that the government said was proven, so we never went back to the prison.

### Marches against the assassinations of local leaders

An event that had a huge impact on us was the murder of Mr. Mario de Jesús Cardona, who was the Equipo Colombia candidate for Mayor of Chaparral. A solidarity march was organized for October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2003, in which we participated.



Images 24, 25, and 26. March in solidarity after the murder of Mr. Mario de Jesús Cardona. Organizational archive, 2003.

## Marches for women's rights

At the beginning of the first decade of the 2000s, we ran Operation Sirirí campaigns, especially on November 25<sup>th</sup>, which marks the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women; September 28<sup>th</sup>, Sexual and Reproductive Rights Day; March 8<sup>th</sup>, International Women's Day; and December 10<sup>th</sup>, International Human Rights Day.

Our first activities on these dates were financed by the *Red de Mujeres Latinoamericanas y del Caribe* (RESMELAC - Network of Latin American and Caribbean Women). They gave us a small donation to mobilize and conduct workshops and meetings. At that time, we were not a legal entity, but they agreed to transfer the resources to one of us and, although it was not much—perhaps 200 or 300 dollars—those contributions were very significant because they allowed us to organize our events. And we always responded by sending them the receipts for our expenses.

Since then, in what is for us a milestone, we have commemorated the most important dates for the women's movement every year: March 8<sup>th</sup> and November 25<sup>th</sup>. In addition, we always try to mobilize our own resources and those of any institution that is interested in supporting these political causes.



Images 27 and 28. March on November 25<sup>th</sup>, International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Organizational archive, 2003.

# 06

## A Network Woven for the Benefit of the Collective: Contributions to Territorial Peace Based on Sisterhood, Collective Resistance, and Social Justice

Image 29. Dreaming Our History workshop, illustration by Zoraida Montes, June 2019.



These eyes: this eye is happy and this is the other side, the other eye, which cries the tears shed by women over the years. They are tears of blood and struggle... The dream is that this eye here will no longer have tears, only joy...So we dream that these tears cease to exist, that we women be recognized in everything, that we can say we are free!

Zoraida Montes

The Women's Network has been working for women's empowerment through trainings on rights and their enforcement. The results of this exercise are not measurable in statistics, in numbers, but are reflected in our testimonies, in how we transform ourselves over time, and in the changes we have seen over time in the women who have persisted and who are today very active leaders within the Network, in their families, communities, villages, and/or neighborhoods.

"These achievements are the Network's, but they are also personal achievements that tell us that women can accomplish things. These experiences change the lives of the individual and of others... A woman's fulfillment is not only professional, but also personal, familial, and social. The individual achievements of the women of the Network are collective achievements because they happen thanks to its organizational process and its continued strengthening of the social fabric." Dagmar Lucía Hernández Peña

When the women who participated in this exercise of reconstructing memory told each other our personal stories, we did it with a lot of emotion, healing a past that is very painful for us to name, and also to remember the actions of other women who have left an unforgettable mark on us. Doing so also helped us address the vacuums, fears, and guilt left in us from our political leadership in relation to our private roles as mothers and wives. Talking about it has the objective of combating its silencing, because it is something that happens to many women and we need to talk about it publicly, to externalize it to release the weight that has been with us for many years.

This whole narrative has been told through personal stories that intersect, but that, in a special way, speak to a political project led by women that differs from many other political initiatives because it is permeated by **LOVE, RESISTANCE, COLLECTIVITY, AND FORGIVENESS.**

All the love that sustains this political project is reflected in the doors that open when we tell the Network's story. Doors that lead us to talk about the need for

education to denaturalize violence; the ways in which personal and political projects combine; organizing and collaborating; the conviction of being able to build together and recognize the valuable contributions that each woman makes to the organization to achieve collective pursuits; autonomy to make decisions; participation and political advocacy. These conversations provide a feeling of sisterhood, support, and commitment to many women. Hence, this political project is based on horizontal power and on the construction of bonds of trust between women to work together toward the same aim as always: to replicate all our learnings, from how we can recover our self-esteem and manage projects, to how we can have political influence and sustain an organization (with all the legal and accounting requirements this implies).

"When I reevaluate how I see myself, I feel like I love myself, but that I also love others." Martha Ibeth Cardona Bonilla

A key point in this story is that since we started this fight for our rights, we have never lost autonomy, even though it took a lot of personal work to feel independent (because we were taught that women should be at home taking care of the children and their husbands, even when it hurts us). We cling to that feeling, to that intuition, and we have never abandoned it; despite the obstacles we have had and the scarcity we have faced, like not having a meeting space, the communications challenges, not having enough money even for photocopies, among others, we never stopped exercising our autonomy because we always had in mind our hope of having a territory in peace and a dignified life free of violence. The road there was through our quest for autonomy.

The Network has been supported by the women who have been there and by many others who have made contributions at different times in their lives; by those who worked with a lot of love during the windows of time that their daily activities allowed; and by those who have had the conviction of supporting the organization for the well-being of the collective, rather than to enrich ourselves on a personal level because the struggle continues whether or not we have economic resources.

The networks of love and accompaniment that we have created allowed us to resist the onslaught of the armed conflict without leaving our territory. That is why all the knowledge and wisdom emanating from this political project have territorial roots and make us stronger and more powerful here in our rural communities, in our municipality:

"We must recognize that we have a lot of valuable knowledge and wisdom to have had our life projects in the countryside and not in the city, which is the model



they want to sell us. No, we will not go to the city. Our knowledge and wisdom are about becoming powerful here, in the countryside.” Martha Ibeth Cardona Bonilla

Our slogan says, “weaving ties, weaving a future.” To make those ties several threads are required and these symbolize thought, knowledge, and the many women and organizations of which they are made. It becomes a common thread that makes us stronger as the Chaparral Women’s Peace Network. This Network was born of the efforts of women from different territories, ethnicities, creeds, and ages. It is women’s teamwork that created a collective purpose: territorial peacebuilding. Ours is a peace that we have been building, not since the peace process began in Havana, but since we decided to come together to improve the living conditions of our communities. We have done it and we continue to do it, day by day, step by step, because peace is a challenge that cannot be achieved overnight, especially when there is still much to heal in the hearts of the region’s leaders.

What we have made is a network of fabrics for the benefit of the collective, that is, of women, their families, their rural communities, and their neighborhoods. That is why the Network is an organization that has built peace “from the hands and in the likeness of a woman,” because when we improve women’s living conditions, it reverberates in the family and later in society. So the organizational and political initiatives we lead end up transforming local dynamics. That is why our methods are a contribution to territorial peace because when we think about a project, we do not think about solving the problem of a specific person, but of a group, of women and of entire communities.

For the Network, peacebuilding begins on the inside, with our behaviors, our way of relating to others. We can build peace in our homes and families, but we do not stop there, we bring it into public life. In this sense, peacebuilding is strengthening and accompanying social organizations, recognizing that an organization moves because of its people. That is why we work to strengthen self-esteem and the personal capacities that each woman has so that she can regain her confidence and establish new relationships with herself and with others. When we have the capacity to relate to one another in harmony, we understand and accept differences. We can work together to build peace. It is also the quest for structural transformations that guarantee the conditions to sustain these relationships with social justice, equal opportunities for men and women, and new possibilities for women to undertake productive projects, to have better health, better education—for women to have everything they need to lead a decent life.

For this reason, we have strengthened the ties between the organization, families, and the community, working on projects with broad themes that include issues of productivity, human rights, prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) and domestic violence, and access to sexual and reproductive

health rights, with participatory approaches, and by applying methodologies and dynamics that motivate teamwork through learning-by-doing.

Similarly, since the early 2000s, we have been working on transforming the roles of women in relation to peace. This is because we understand that when women are organized, share an association, and contribute in their territories, they are strengthened as individuals while they build and/or rebuild a community social fabric. This is how we build peace in our rural communities, on our farms, in our neighborhoods, and at home with our children, through the principles of sisterhood, respect, responsibility, and territorial rootedness. Consequently, we began our journey as peacebuilders long before the Havana accords, when we decided, despite many deficits, to come together to improve the quality of life of women in our territories.

It is in this way that we want to achieve our macro purpose: to transform existing and exclusionary stereotypes<sup>7</sup> about southern Tolima. How do we do it? By focusing on the revitalization of the southern Tolima identity, encouraging pride in who we are and what we have built to survive the armed conflict. That is why indigenous, small-scale farmer, and Afro-descendant women are coming together in our cultural diversity, in the knowledge and wisdom forgotten with the war, discrimination, and state abandonment, to recover and transform first and foremost those visions that we ourselves have about the territory; then, by bringing that new knowledge to young people and to our organizations, so that they also reaffirm their individual and collective identity. In this way, we are committed to fighting against the stigmatization of the people who live in this region, demonstrating that here in southern Tolima we have our own identity as hard-working and resilient people from diverse communities.

<sup>7</sup> For many years, especially during the height of the armed conflict, people from southern Tolima were stigmatized as “guerrillas” since this territory, up to the beginning of the peace process in Havana, was considered a “red zone” by the national government and the armed forces. There was a large presence of illegal armed groups here, especially the FARC-EP guerrilla. In addition, it was the territory where this group began its armed activities, which is why it is unfortunately called the “FARC’s cradle.”

We reiterate that we do this collective memory exercise to lay a strong foundation for the generations who are coming behind us. We want you to know that the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz* is born from our resistance, from not losing hope that we will see our struggles and dreams come true. That is why we desire continuity for the processes that we have historically carried out for more than twenty years, to build upon what has already been built without forgetting “where we come from” and the “why,” and “what” of our peacebuilding work carried out with “the hands and in the likeness of women.” We also do it to inspire many women to organize and collectively fight for their dreams: always remember that together we are stronger!

We want to take this opportunity to tell everyone who reads this that the peace process in Colombia has given us a political place, a space to speak, and tools to defend our right to live in peace and strengthen our territorial initiatives. That is why waging peace is always worthwhile. And, even though we have felt uncertainty due to threats, obstacles, and the lack of implementation of the agreements by the current government, our strength and hope have not dwindled.

So we invite you to be allies in our story, and to tell your own. We have shared our experiences, our collective memory so that you feel encouraged to be an active part of peacebuilding in your territories, that you begin and never stop supporting the social fabric in your towns, neighborhoods, schools, universities, and any other space you inhabit. You can always count on our counsel, help, and advice that, as you can see, are the fruit of labor carried out empirically and with great effort, which we offer with great love at the service of peace, our communities, and people everywhere in the world.

## Dreams and challenges

“Our dreams at the Network, and we have many, are most focused on eradicating violence against women. We dream of leading violence-free lives, preparing and educating ourselves, being professionals in the community in psychology, pedagogy, law, and anything we desire. We want to have more representation in political participation spaces, to see how we can get women into the Municipal Council, have a woman mayor, and women councilors and representatives in the chambers who come from our organizations or who represent our agendas as women.” Dagmar Lucía Hernández Peña

Peacebuilding with the hands and in the likeness of women has meant constant labor, which has required us to continue holding together the bonds of sisterly love that have helped us persist, resist, and grow over time. In addition, although we have more than twenty years of experience in activism, there remain challenges and paths not yet traveled, so continuing to build this tapestry of emotions, dreams, life experiences, and political projects is a future-oriented project for which we hope to incorporate contributions and work from the new generations of young people in the Network, as well as from any person and/or social, political, and educational organization that wants to be part of this journey.

## Self-sustaining farm “El Rubí”



Image 30. The Women's Network team at El Rubí, December 2020.

This farm, or this land, rather, is called El Rubí. This property was the dream of our sister Dagmar Lucía Hernández Peña, who has been accompanying and enlightening us from eternity. She donated to us this land, which was previously her property, because she wanted the Network to have its own meeting space here.

The future project is to build a space to offer a Temazcal (sweat lodge) and ancestral medicine as a community social service for women. We also want to build a hostel to receive, help, and serve the women who come here to the South. Furthermore, it would be self-sustaining, so we hope to build a small farm to generate activities that could represent economic income for more women in our territory.

This is our great dream, and we are taking on the challenge of achieving it so that Dagmar, from wherever she is, can see it come true.

### School of permanent political training

We dream of creating and maintaining a permanent and itinerant training school for women, men, youth, girls, and boys on human rights, citizenship, and women's rights.

### House of equality for women

We want to build a House of Equal Opportunities for Women, which would be a place to constantly interact and share in the municipality of Chaparral, where local women can make use of their talents in weaving, dance, and crafts and that would also be a space for learning, training, and transformation.

### Job, care, arts and crafts training

In the Network we instill the importance of working collectively and seeking economic autonomy. For this reason, in the (hopefully near) future we dream of offering workshops on care and arts and crafts in these spaces we have imagined, the El Rubí farm or the House of Equal Opportunities. This would strengthen women's skills beyond the typical work that women have always done, like manicures, hairdressing, and others, which are not bad options, but so that other areas can also be taken into account, like wood carving, making fabric, quilts, small species husbandry, among others. We want to open job and business training processes.

### Political participation

In the future, we dream of seeing more women's participation and activism in our territory. We dream of women's organizations having many more skills for administrative matters, drafting documents, preparing projects, accounting, operating manuals, among others.

For this reason, we think it is necessary that our municipality have a Women's Affairs Office at the Mayor's Office, one that directly coordinates with grassroots organizations; and that this office and its team have training on gender issues, human rights, and violence against women so that they can be allies in this journey in defense of women's rights.

### New masculinities

We want women to have greater participation, to stop being seen as objects, and for men to recognize their role in society, while also learning to recognize and respect women's rights. Although we have already advanced in this regard, there is still a great deal of training to be done with adult and young men. That is why we are assuming the challenge of training ourselves in the concept of new masculinities so that, through education, our colleagues, husbands, children, grandchildren, nephews, and even local public servants will become more aware of the violence they exercise over us and agree to distribute the work of domestic care and upbringing, making them allies in this fight that also concerns them.

# 07

How Did We Do It? Methods for Reconstructing Our Collective Memory



In “School, Territory, and Post-conflict Project” we had two kinds of meetings over two years of work: in-situ workshops, which were held in our municipality at the network’s headquarters to ensure that our interests were taken into account and to build tools and research proposals; and the general workshops, which we carried out with teachers, co-researchers from the social organizations, and researchers from the universities of Ibagué, East Anglia, and Eureka Educativa to share information on our research processes.

Throughout this process we used collective writing workshops—conducted in different phases and in which we elaborated a timeline, made emblematic drawings and body cartographies, and held group interviews, among others—to identify key points and important moments in our organizational history that transformed our personal and collective experiences, the transformations we experienced over all these years, and our collective achievements, etc. These exercises, which we will describe below, gave rise to the chapters that make up this book.

## Phase 1: Research and memory: collaborative writing

In the first meeting we held with researchers from the Universidad de Ibagué and the University of East Anglia, we talked about how, from the Network, we understand and conduct research. We did not expect that we would start this research process by reflecting on our personal lives, but we decided to situate our emotions, experiences, and life trajectories as the first inputs to investigate, starting with the elaboration of our life paths. In this exercise, all the women of the Network asked ourselves: Who am I? Who have I been? Where am I? How did I get here? Where am I going? The answers were captured in drawings, symbols, or phrases to represent the places, people, images, and memories that were coming to our minds, to later share them together.

When we presented our paths, we realized that all the stories about personal memories and life projects were directly related to the birth of the organization, to the possibilities it gave us, and the collective proposals and dreams that we have within the Network. In fact, some women said they did not want to talk about the past because it meant reliving memories that caused a lot of pain and that now they have new lives, thanks, precisely, to collective work and union with other women. As a result of this exercise, we had a series of reflections that marked from the beginning the direction this project would take.

The life paths connected us to our important experiences, lessons, emotions, and memories, which helped us to understand that it was possible to make our life trajectory a valid starting point for doing research, though we had never done it that way. We had not given ourselves the space, the time to understand ourselves, to know what we have done over these years, how we have resisted amid the conflict, and in what ways we contribute to peacebuilding from our territories. So, from the beginning, we set out our research goal: to recreate the memory of the Women’s Network from the personal experiences of those of us who are part of this organization.



## Phase 2: Dreaming our history

Though each of us has many stories and personal experiences, we decided that the place from which we wanted to narrate ourselves would be from our role in the Women's Network. That is why we continued to ask ourselves, who am I in the Network? What have we done in the Network? What does the Network mean? With what images can I represent it? Who are the people who marked my path in this process? Again, we used drawings to capture our answers.

After talking among ourselves, we did an initial writing exercise during which each of us narrated how they imagined the beginning of the Network's history. As one might expect, different ways and timelines emerged to narrate the process. We explored different writing styles through metaphors, life stories, reflections, memories, and contextual history. This allowed us to imagine what our history would be like, how many chapters it would have, what topics needed to be addressed, what addenda it would have, in what verb tense, and which people would narrate the book.



Images 31 and 32.  
Transformative Research  
workshop. Project



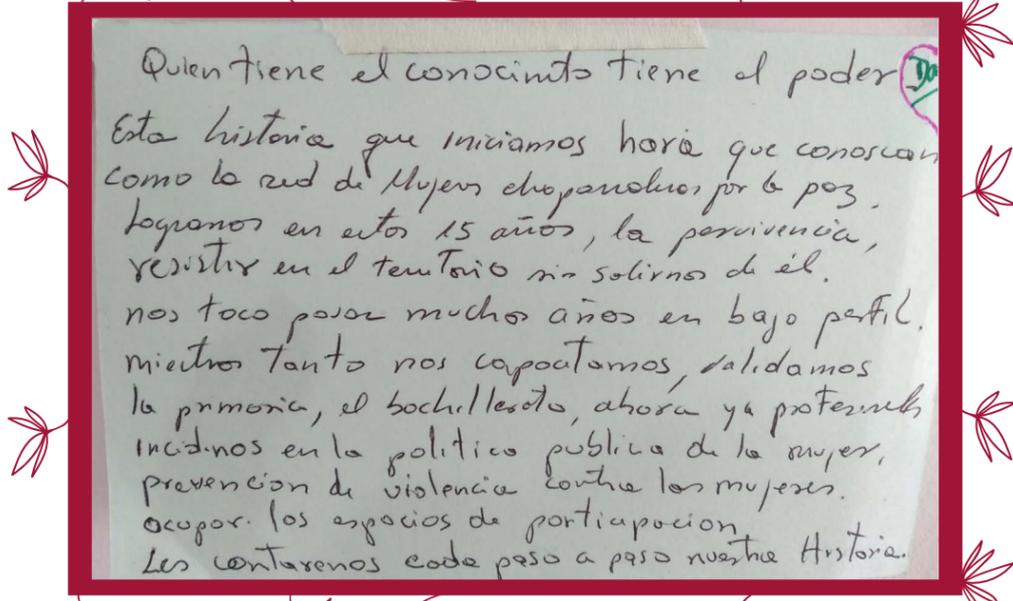


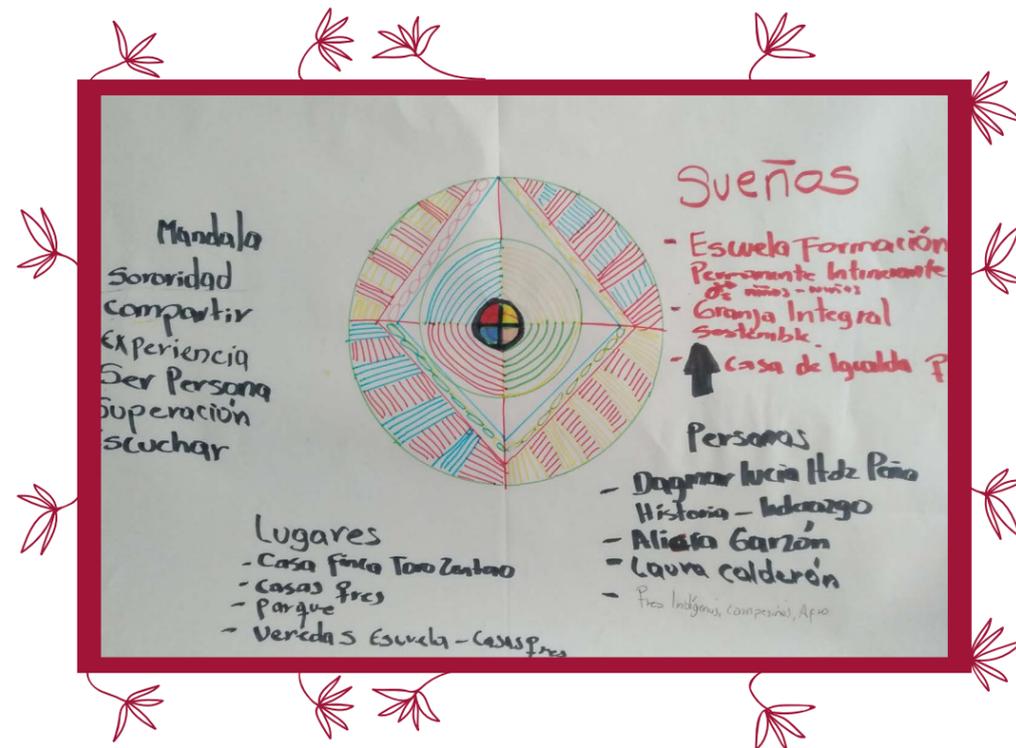
Images 33, 34, and 35. Dreaming Our History workshop. Project School, Territory, and Post-Conflict archive, April 2019.

Thus, we realized that this story is mediated by many feelings such as admiration, sisterhood, respect, resistance, and love of territory. Therefore, it was vital that they be present throughout the entire narrative, since it is thanks to these emotions that this process has been sustained. So, we set the goal of telling the story of the *Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz* with two objectives: to vindicate women's political participation and the bonds of sisterhood that unite us; and to make visible and recognize women's role in territorial peacebuilding.



Images 36, 37, and 38. Dreaming Our History workshop. Project School, Territory, and Post-Conflict archive, April 2019.





### Phase 3: Constructing our history

The Network's history is found within our memories and experiences. Thus, to get at all that, we conducted group interviews among ourselves in which we talked and asked each other questions as a group about how we met, what motivated us to make the organization, how it has been sustained, what has been learned, and what have been the greatest challenges and difficulties.

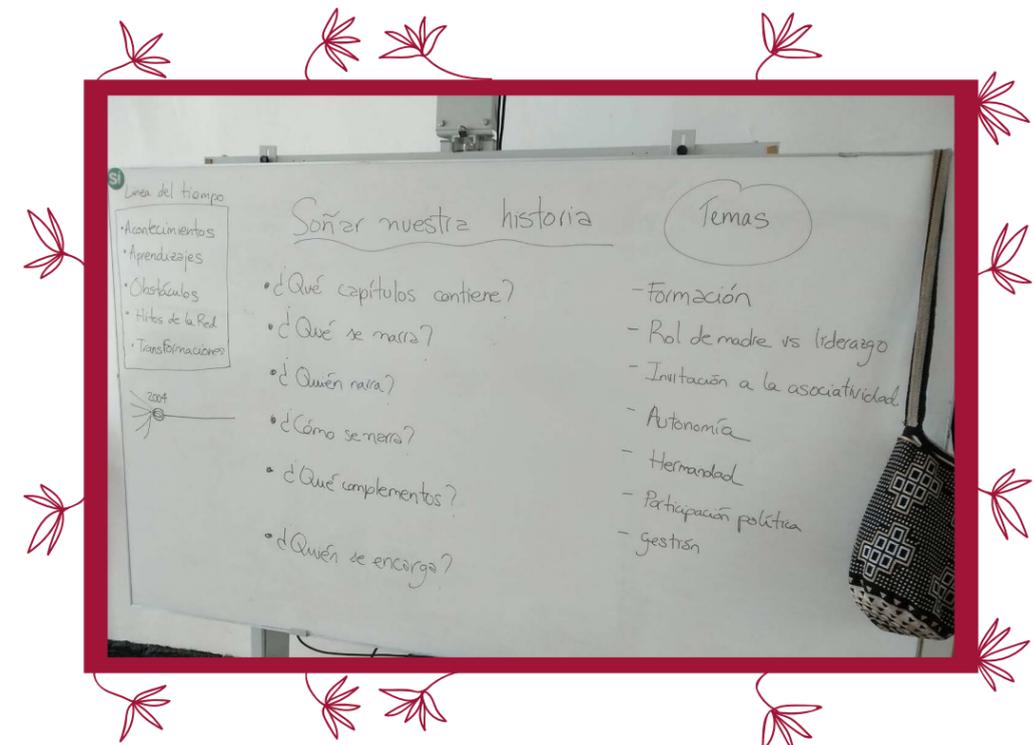


Image 39. Constructing Our History workshop. School, Territory, and Post-Conflict Project archive, July 2019.



Images 40 and 41. Group interviews. Project School, Territory, and Post-Conflict archive, June 2019.



Image 42. Reviewing the Network's archive, June 2019.



From these conversations came a narrative of how, from different identities and kinds of social work, the Network's founders came together and created the organization. On the other hand, there was a need to shine light on our lessons about autonomy, social organization, the role of the mother vs. leader, cultural diversity, training, political participation, and inter-generational relationships. Finally, were the struggles we have had and our proposals over these more than twenty years of political and social work (as we have recounted in this book).

Subsequently, we reviewed the Network's archive (which contains clippings of our articles or interviews published in newspapers, correspondence, acknowledgments, special mentions, among other things), as these are also part of our organizational memory. As we read, remembered, and told stories, we developed a timeline from 1998 to 2019 that expressed the obstacles, actions, allied organizations and people, projects executed, and milestones that we have had as an organization.



Image 43. Timeline of the Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz. School, Territory, and Post-Conflict Project archive, July 2019.

After the interviews and drawing up the timeline, we did another collective writing exercise, but this time we produced short texts about the previously mentioned lessons. To do this, each one chose a theme and narrated it, since we thought that these could be the common thread of our story. Unlike the previous writing exercise, these were narrated in the singular or plural “first” person, which gave us clues to make decisions about how this text would be written.

Another tool used at this stage was the body cartographies. This was a very special exercise for us during which we cried, laughed, and got angry, because very rarely in life do you have the time to focus on corporeality and explore the places where memories are housed, where dreams, desires, frustrations, and fears arise. It was a healing space for many that allowed us to approach our body-territory and thus recognize it as a place of struggle and vindication. This is a methodology that we will certainly use with other women.



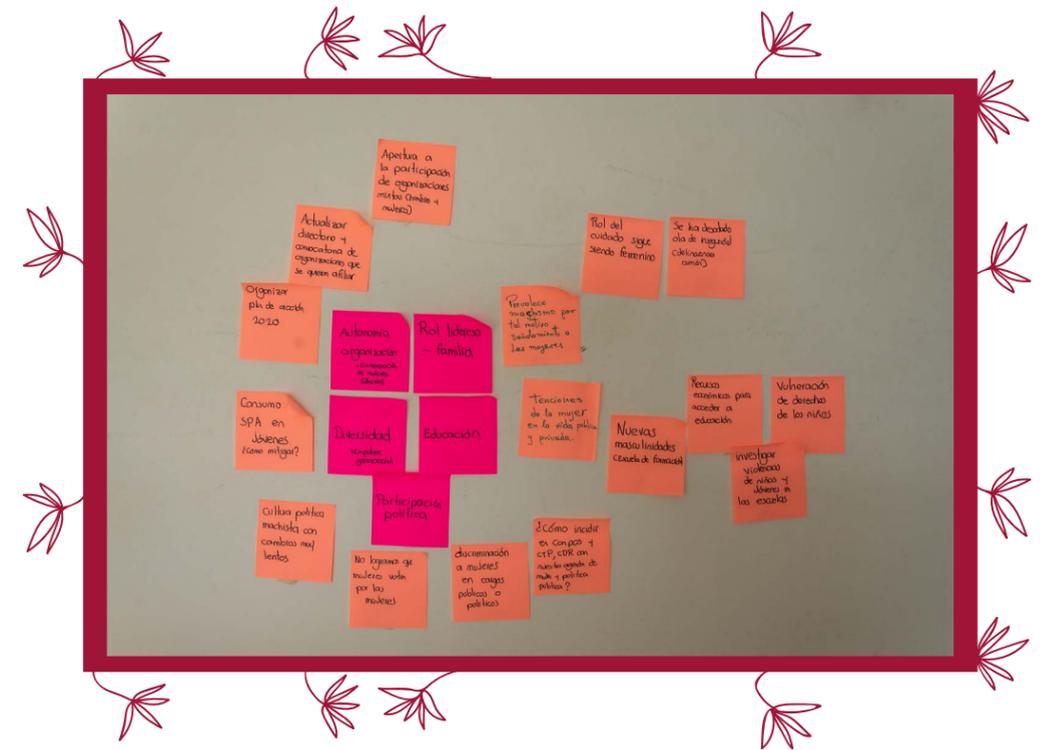


Images 45, 46, and 47. Body Cartography workshop. Project School, Territory, and Post-Conflict archive, August 2019.

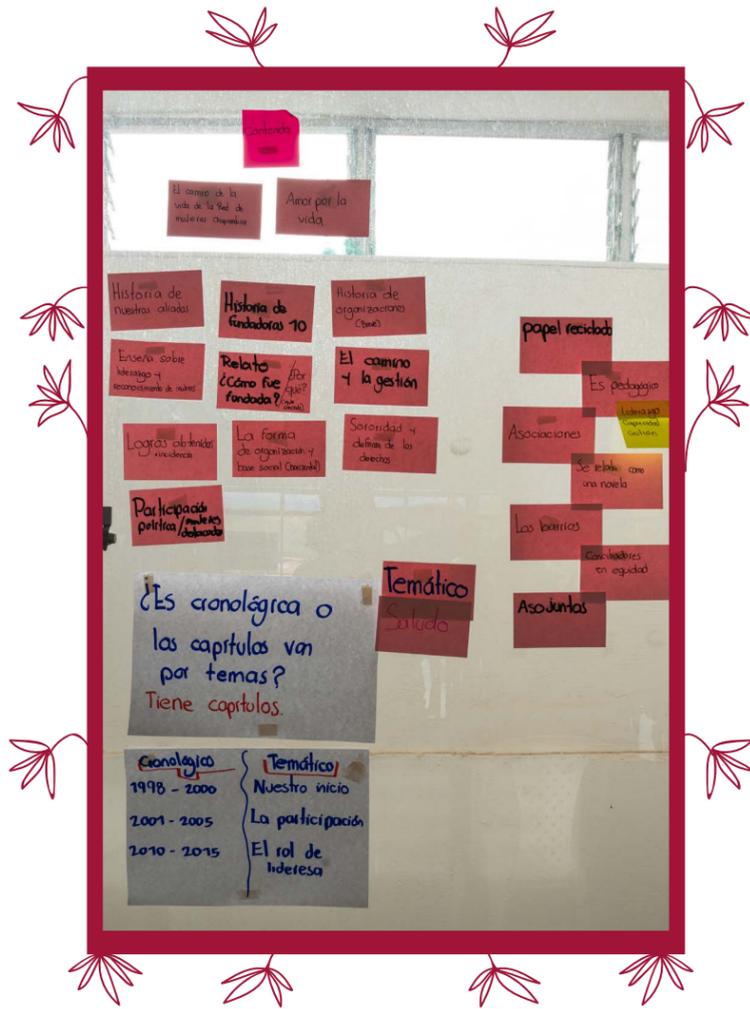


## Phase 4: Collective writing agreements

The researchers from the universities of Ibagué and East Anglia were in charge not only of proposing tools to facilitate our memories but also of transcribing the testimonies that came out of our meetings. With this input we began to shape what would become our book. Researchers from the universities of Ibagué and East Anglia wrote a draft of the first chapter based on our testimonies, which we read collectively and upon which we gave feedback. Since we had seen that this exercise worked, we agreed that this would be our work method.



Images 48 and 49. Community meeting. Project School, Territory, and Post-Conflict archive, December 2019.



Then we proceeded to make collective decisions regarding the chapters and their contents, such as the audience to which they would be addressed and the channels of intended circulation. This was followed by a meeting to jointly create a chapter structure, read the interviews from our gatherings, collect the testimonies, and choose which chapters they would be featured in.



Researchers from the universities of Ibaguè and East Anglia collected this material and helped give narrative structure to the book. In addition, we created an editorial committee within the Network, which worked virtually for about two months. This committee was in charge of reading, making corrections, providing feedback, and confirming that our working agreements were reflected in the final version. In the same way, we established the audience to have in mind and channels through which we expect to distribute the book.



Images 50, 51, and 52. Collective Writing Agreements workshops. School, Territory, and Post-Conflict Project archive, February 2020.



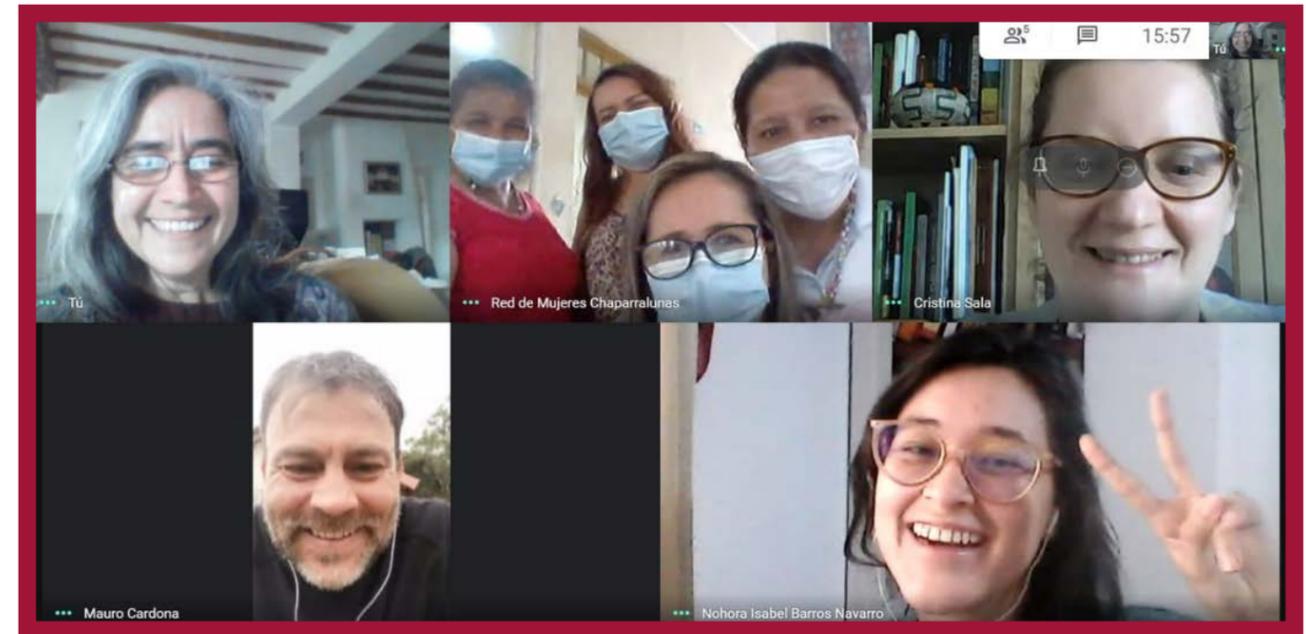
Images 53 and 54. Editorial Committee meetings. School, Territory, and Post-Conflict Project archive, January and March 2021.



As we wanted to reach a very wide audience of women and beyond, the team of researchers from the Universidad de Bagué and the University of East Anglia proposed we make a participatory video. In the video we summarize the story that we tell here. It was considered complementary to the writing work so that this story can reach the many women who do not know how or do not have the time to read through audiovisual materials, or to motivate many others to read this book after watching the video.



*Image 55. Recording the participatory video at the El Rubi farm, Chaparral. School, Territory, and Post-Conflict Project archive, December 2020.*



*Image 56. Meeting to share the first cut of the participatory video. Project School, Territory, and Post-Conflict archive, March 2021.*

After finishing all this work, we remembered many women who have been part of this collective growth, education, and struggle, a process that today makes us proud of the paths we have traveled and that reaffirms our conviction to build peace from our territories. The freedom to and possibility of making this memory is thanks to the Peace Agreements that silenced the rifles and allowed our voices to publicly rise to the fore. In addition, we are aware that this closure is unfinished because we still have many paths, obstacles, challenges, and joys to experience. Therefore, we will continue to weave those ties that unite territories and a common purpose; we will continue to weave peace, sisterhood, and the future.

