

# Sex Trade and ‘Floating Migration’ in the Colombian Armed Conflict

Carlos Alfonso Laverde Rodríguez

## Abstract

This article analyses the dynamics of the sex trade in the context of the Colombian armed conflict. It argues that the sex trade has adapted to the conflict and its different actors and demonstrates how it operates in such constrained contexts. The article is based on ethnographic research with sex workers in Bogotá who have experience working in different conflict zones. It found that the sex trade is dynamic and that sex workers develop strategies to resist violence and adapt to the respective contexts. These sex workers are a type of ‘floating migrants’, living and surviving on the sex trade not only for the income it generates but also for the relationships they build with other sex workers, establishment managers, and combatants. The article concludes that the sex trade in Colombia did not arise as a result of the armed conflict. Rather, it is a phenomenon that exists as part of a broader market before, during, and after episodes of violence.

**Keywords:** sex workers, armed conflict, sex trade, Colombia

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## Introduction

Violence against sex workers in the context of armed conflict has been extensively documented, involving both women and men who have been subjected to forms of sexual exploitation ranging from trafficking to sexual slavery.<sup>1</sup> However, it is

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<sup>1</sup> V Mackie, ‘Sexual Violence, Silence, and Human Rights Discourse’, in A-M Hilsdon, M MacIntyre, V Mackie and M Stevens (eds.), *Human Rights and Gender Politics. Asia-Pacific perspectives*, Routledge, Abington, 2000; S Meger, *Rape Loot Pillage: The Political Economy of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016; Y Tambiah, ‘Sexuality and Women’s Rights in Armed Conflict in Sri Lanka’, *Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 12, issue 23, 2004, pp. 78–87, <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968->

incorrect to generalise that all sex workers in conflict zones have been trafficked or sexually enslaved. Even in extremely violent contexts, questions arise as to the fate of those sex workers who choose to provide sexual services in war-affected areas and who adopt an itinerant lifestyle as part of their economic strategies. This article focuses on analysing the dynamics of the sex trade in the context of the Colombian armed conflict during the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

The Colombian armed conflict has lasted for over 60 years and has involved various illegal armed actors, not only communist guerrillas but also extreme right-wing paramilitary groups, all largely financed by drug trafficking.<sup>2</sup> Civilians have been the main victims of the confrontation. It is no coincidence that Colombia had the third-highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world in 2021.<sup>3</sup> Alongside the armed conflict, partially successful peace negotiations have taken place, allowing for processes of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), transitional justice, the construction of historical memory, and truth commissions, among other mechanisms of reconciliation and peacebuilding.<sup>4</sup> All these processes have allowed for the discovery of a significant amount of information, including instances of violence and sexual exploitation within the armed conflict.<sup>5</sup> However, there is limited knowledge regarding the functioning of the sex trade within the conflict, beyond extreme cases. Information on the operation of the sex trade in the armed conflict has

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8080(04)23121-4; C Villacampa and K Flórez, 'Human Trafficking for Criminal Exploitation and Participation in Armed Conflicts: The Colombian Case', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 69, 2018, pp. 421–445, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-017-9765-4>.

<sup>2</sup> Á Camacho, 'Paranarcos y Narcoparas: Trayectorias Delincuenciales y Políticas', in *A la sombra de la guerra: ilegalidad y nuevos órdenes regionales en Colombia*, Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá, 2009; G Duncan, *Los Señores de La Guerra: De Paramilitares, Maftosos y Autodefensas En Colombia*, Planeta, Bogotá, 2006; W Tate, 'Paramilitary Forces in Colombia', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 46, issue 3, 2011, pp. 191–200, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2011.0050>.

<sup>3</sup> IDMC, *Niños y Jóvenes En Desplazamiento Interno. Informe Mundial Sobre Desplazamiento Interno 2022*, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> D Rico and I Medina, *Construcción de Paz En El Posacuerdo: Avances, Tensiones y Desafíos*, Uniandes, Universidad del Norte, Barranquilla, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> R Martínez Montoya and A Bello Ramírez, *La guerra inscrita en el cuerpo: informe nacional de violencia sexual en el conflicto armado*, Primera edición, Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, Bogotá, 2017; M C Ramírez and Centro de Memoria Histórica (Colombia), *El Placer: Mujeres, Coca y Guerra En El Bajo Putumayo*, Primera edición en Colombia, Taurus, Bogotá, 2012.

mainly focused on its regulation through fear and manipulation in tolerance zones, particularly by paramilitary and guerrilla groups, with little to no attention given to the role of the Armed Forces.<sup>6</sup>

The presence of sex trades in the context of wars is characterised by its diversity and adjusts to the inherent logics of the conflict. This variation derives from specific conceptions of sexuality and the level of control exerted over it as a directive within the armed group.<sup>7</sup> This form of regulation of sexuality amid war has been a consistent element in different conflicts, especially those that seek to safeguard social institutions and their ideological view of bodies and sexuality.<sup>8</sup> Tambiah has illustrated how in the Sri Lankan nationalist conflict, female sexuality was protected within the framework of marriage, and any form of sexual practice deviating from this norm could be considered treason.<sup>9</sup> Expressions such as sexual labour or sexual violence were therefore excluded from their practices.

In Colombia, although the studies that emerged after the negotiation processes with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the United Self-Defences of Colombia (AUC) have contributed to clarifying the processes of violence experienced by the actors involved and the civil society,<sup>10</sup> a lack of

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<sup>6</sup> S Ávila, 'Cuerpos Del Bajo Mundo: Prostitución y Violencia En Colombia', PhD Thesis in Anthropology, Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá, 2013; G Gallego-Montes, 'Prostitución en contextos de conflicto armado en Colombia', *Revista CS*, issue 31, 2020, pp. 413–437, <https://doi.org/10.18046/recs.i31.3508>; J M Nieto and C I Pacheco, 'Which Conflict? Which Body? Which Nation? Prostitution, Gender, and Violence in the Colombian Postconflict Context', in T S Germain and S Dewey (eds.), *Conflict-Related Sexual Violence. International Law, Local Responses*, Kumarian Press, Sterling, 2012; J M Nieto, 'A angústia dos corpos indóceis: prostituição e conflito armado na Colômbia contemporânea', *Cadernos Paga*, issue 31, 2008, pp. 365–397, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-83332008000200016>.

<sup>7</sup> Y Tambiah, 'Turncoat Bodies: Sexuality and Sex Work under Militarization in Sri Lanka', *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, issue 2, 2005, pp. 243–261, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243204273076>; E J Wood, 'Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When Is Wartime Rape Rare?', *Politics & Society*, vol. 37, issue 1, 2009, pp. 131–161, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329208329755>.

<sup>8</sup> C Brown, 'Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Conflict: An International Crime?', *American University International Law Review*, vol. 34, issue 3, 2019, pp. 503–533; J Halley, 'Rape in Berlin: Reconsidering the Criminalisation of Rape in the International Law of Armed Conflict', *Melbourne Journal of International Law*, vol. 9, issue 1, 2008, pp. 78–124.

<sup>9</sup> Tambiah, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> L Carrillo, *De La Infantilización a La Agencia Política: Otra Mirada Para Prevenir El Reclutamiento*, Policy Brief 8, Instituto Colombo-Alemán para la Paz – Capaz, 2023; H Paredes-Mosquera, J Guachetá-Torres, and E Paredes-Londoño, 'Las Víctimas de Violencia Sexual En El Marco Del Conflicto Armado En Relación Con Los Procesos

information still prevails regarding the role played by the sex trade in the backdrop of the conflict.

Although there have been valuable contributions, the efforts to understand the role of sex work in this context are still scarce.<sup>11</sup> The reports released by Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Centre for Historical Memory, CNMH) document multiple manifestations of violence suffered by sex workers,<sup>12</sup> but confuse trafficking and sex work. This reflects the dominant global discourse where voluntary sex workers are seen as victims, thus denying their agency.<sup>13</sup>

Research on sex work in the country has mainly focused on the legal regulation of the market in tolerance zones<sup>14</sup> and the violence sex workers experience.<sup>15</sup> However, how a labour market such as the sex trade developed, especially in the context of the conflict, and how it differs from human trafficking, has not been addressed.

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de Paz En Colombia, 1991 a 2017', *Jurídicas*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2018, pp. 88–109, <https://doi.org/10.17151/jurid.2018.15.1.6>; M Tamayo, L Tamayo, and L Acevedo, 'La Violencia Se Vive de Miles Maneras: Voces de Mujeres Víctimas de Violencia Sexual En El Conflicto Armado Del Carmen de Bolívar - Región Caribe, Colombia, 2018–2019', *Estudios Sobre Las Culturas Contemporáneas*, vol. 26, no. 51, 2020, pp. 9–34.

<sup>11</sup> Ávila; A Carrillo, N Millán, and J Babativa, 'Aportes y Asuntos Críticos En La Medición de La Violencia Sexual Contra Las Mujeres En El Marco Del Conflicto Armado En Colombia: Una Reflexión a Partir Del Diseño y Los Resultados de La Envisé 2010–2015', *Estudios Socio-Jurídicos*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2020, pp. 55–86; I Suárez, 'Violencia de Género y Violencia Sexual Del Conflicto Armado Colombiano', *Cambios Y Permanencias*, issue 6, 2015, pp. 173–203; Tamayo *et al.*; Comisión de la Verdad; Nieto and Pacheco; Paredes-Mosquera *et al.*

<sup>12</sup> Martínez Montoya and Bello Ramírez.

<sup>13</sup> E Bernstein, '¿Las Políticas Carcelarias Representan La Justicia de Género? La Trata de Mujeres y Los Circuitos Neoliberales Del Crimen, El Sexo y Los Derechos', *Debate Feminista*, vol. 50, 2014, pp. 280–320.

<sup>14</sup> C Laverde, 'Aportaciones Desde Una Perspectiva Socio-Jurídica al Debate Del Trabajo Sexual Femenino En Colombia', *Revista Logos Ciencia & Tecnología*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2014, pp. 244–262, <https://doi.org/10.22335/rict.v5i2.124>; C Laverde, *Prostitución y Trabajo: Condiciones Sociales y Laborales de Mujeres Trabajadoras Sexuales En La Ciudad de Bogotá*, ILAE, Bogotá, 2015; M Tirado, C Laverde, and J Bedoya, 'Prostitución En Colombia: Hacia Una Aproximación Sociojurídica a Los Derechos de Los Trabajadores Sexuales', *Revista Latinoamericana de Derecho Social*, issue 29, 2019, pp. 289–315, <https://doi.org/10.22201/ijj.24487899e.2019.29.13909>.

<sup>15</sup> Gallego-Montes; Nieto.

This article explores how sex workers exercised their agency, and the strategies and forms of mobility they employed, in environments marked by the presence of armed conflict. It demonstrates how sex work, as a labour market, was part of a sexual market shaped by the circumstances of the armed conflict, and how sex workers were ‘floating migrants’.<sup>16</sup> Although sex workers suffered various forms of violence in the context of the conflict, sex work did not originate exclusively as a tool of war or as part of the logic of the conflict, but reflected many of the dynamics of this market, present in times of both peace and war. This perspective enables a differentiated analysis of cases in which phenomena such as sexual slavery, human trafficking, or forced marriage were manifested. In the remainder of this article, I problematise the concept of agency of women who have experienced violence in conflict environments, describe my research methodology, and present and discuss my research findings, before offering a brief conclusion.

## Sex Work and Agency in the Context of Armed Conflicts

Armed conflicts and sex work are linked by complex dynamics. Enloe has shed light on the connections between the sex trade and conflict situations, exploring cases such as the militarisation in Vietnam, Thailand, and South Korea. In these contexts, militarisation had a significant impact on the sex industry due to the presence of US military bases during the Cold War. For example, as troops returned from combat zones in Vietnam, they would often head to Bangkok and coastal villages in Thailand to rest, creating a growing demand for the services of sex workers.<sup>17</sup> Enloe argues that militarised prostitution differs from other forms of sex work, since the state or illegal organisations implement explicit measures to safeguard male clients from exposure, for example, by screening for sexually transmitted diseases. Thus, in the context of conflict, the sex trade system operates to protect combatants.<sup>18</sup>

According to de la Garza, individuals involved in a labour market do not only behave logically;<sup>19</sup> they create their own interpretations of work and the places where they work. This implies that their decisions to work is not only based on

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<sup>16</sup> The term ‘floating migrant’ (*flotante migrante* in Spanish) is used by Fidelia Suárez, leader of the Colombian Sex Workers Union, to describe the phenomenon of the constant mobility of sex workers, mainly within Colombia, in response to the economic dynamics of each region.

<sup>17</sup> C Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*, University of California Press, 2000; C Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*, University Of California Press, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> E de la Garza, *Trabajo No Clásico, Organización y Acción Colectiva*, UAM-I, Mexico, 2001.

rational choices, but on a complex web of social meanings that are interwoven around work activity. In addition, economic decisions made by sex workers, as by other workers, are influenced by extra-work factors that relate to historical and situational contexts.<sup>20</sup> As Maruani has pointed out, work implies not only a wage but also a position within the given social structure.<sup>21</sup> Thus work, as a social activity, carries significant social meanings, involving power dynamics and not only wages as the factor determining employment choice. Therefore, in the case of sex work, it is not possible to reduce the importance attributed to work to a single choice, but rather it lies at the confluence of various elements.<sup>22</sup>

The sex trade sparks debates about the violence sex workers face, their motivations, and the extent to which they act out of choice and exercise agency. There are two discernible streams in the feminist debate on sex work framed in the so-called sex wars.<sup>23</sup> On one side are those who claim that all sex work is a form of violence against women and never a freely chosen occupation.<sup>24</sup> On the other side are those who, while not denying that there can be violence in sex work, consider that it always involves a process of negotiation and a degree of agency.<sup>25</sup> In the context of wars, the former perspective tends to lump sex work,

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<sup>20</sup> M Granovetter, 'Economic Action and Social Structure. The Problem of Embeddedness', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 91, no. 3, 1985, pp. 481–510, <https://doi.org/10.1086/228311>.

<sup>21</sup> M Maruani, 'De La Sociología Del Trabajo a La Sociología Del Empleo', *Política y Sociedad*, issue 34, 2000, pp. 9–17.

<sup>22</sup> C Laverde, 'Apropiación subjetiva de derechos laborales: Mujeres trabajadoras sexuales organizadas en defensa de sus derechos en la ciudad de Bogotá', Doctoral thesis in Sociology, El Colegio de México, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> L Duggan and ND Hunter, *Sex Wars. Sexual Dissent and Political Culture (10th Anniversary Edition)*, Routledge, New York, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, K Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality: The Global Exploitation of Women*, New York University Press, New York, 1995; A Dworkin, *Intercourse*, Touchstone Books, USA, 1997; M Farley, "'Bad for the Body, Bad for the Heart": Prostitution Harms Women Even If Legalized or Decriminalized', *Violence against Women*, vol. 10, issue 10, 2004, pp. 1087–1125, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801204268607>; S Jeffreys, *The Idea of Prostitution*, Spinifex, Melbourne, 1997.

<sup>25</sup> For example, K Kempadoo, 'Prostitution, Marginality and Empowerment: Caribbean Women in the Sex Trade', *Beyond Law*, vol. 5, issue 14, 1996, pp. 69–84; M Lamas, 'Trabajadoras Sexuales: Del Estigma a La Conciencia Política', *Estudios Sociológicos*, vol. 14, issue 40, 1996, pp. 33–52; M Lamas, 'Feminismo y Prostitución: La Persistencia de Una Amarga Disputa', *Debate Feminista*, vol. 51, 2016, pp. 18–35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.df.2016.04.001>; M Lamas, *El Fulgor de La Noche. El Comercio Sexual En Las Calles de La Ciudad de México*, Editorial Oceano, Mexico, 2017; J O'Connell Davidson, *Power, Prostitution, and Freedom*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998; R Weitzer, *Legalizing Prostitution: From Illicit Vice to Lawful Business*, NYU Press, New York, 2012.

human trafficking, and child prostitution together without differentiation,<sup>26</sup> while the latter attempts to draw conceptual distinctions based on the dynamics and complexities inherent in this phenomenon.<sup>27</sup>

The first perspective considers women involved in the sex trade in areas of military influence as victims. Scholars assert that these women are coerced directly through deception or due to their circumstances of poverty and argue that this coercion ultimately leads to situations of rape and sexual slavery.<sup>28</sup> This is largely the case in the Colombian context too, where the sex trade is considered as a manifestation of sexual violence perpetrated during the conflict,<sup>29</sup> ignoring the experiences of women who chose to carry out this activity relatively freely. The second perspective recognises the complexities linked to violence and sex work in conflict contexts. For example, Jørgensen and Rauxloh provide analytical tools to distinguish between forced prostitution and sexual slavery.<sup>30</sup> Approaching the two as synonymous limits the understanding of the complex logics of organised crime and human trafficking, which, indeed, go beyond the simple enslavement of women. Likewise, McAlpine, Mazeda, and Zimmerman have investigated the inconsistencies in the use of the concept of sexual exploitation in literature related to this topic.<sup>31</sup> Their study enables a critical understanding of the dynamics of the armed conflict and its impact on the sex trade.

The academic literature has shown significant interest in sexual violence against women in conflict contexts, including in recognising their agency and the ways

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<sup>26</sup> L Ahmad and P Anctil Avoine, 'Misogyny in "Post-War" Afghanistan: The Changing Frames of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence', *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 27, issue 1, 2018, pp. 86–101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1210002>; J S Butler, 'Prostitución militarizada: La historia no contada', *Mora*, vol. 15, issue 2, 2009, pp. 119–141; M O'Brien, "Don't kill them, let's choose them as wives": The Development of the Crimes of Forced Marriage, Sexual Slavery and Enforced Prostitution in International Criminal Law', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 20, issue 2, 2016, pp. 386–406, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2015.1091562>.

<sup>27</sup> N Jørgensen and R Rauxloh, 'Profiting from Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: A Case for the Resurrection of the Crime of Enforced Prostitution', *Chinese Journal of International Law*, vol. 19, issue 3, 2020, pp. 393–423, <https://doi.org/10.1093/chinesejil/jmaa029>; A McAlpine, M Hossain, and C Zimmerman, 'Sex Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation in Settings Affected by Armed Conflicts in Africa, Asia and the Middle East: Systematic Review', *BMC International Health and Human Rights Volume*, issue 16, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-016-0107-x>.

<sup>28</sup> Butler.

<sup>29</sup> CNMH, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Jørgensen and Rauxloh.

<sup>31</sup> McAlpine *et al.*

they develop strategies to address their circumstances.<sup>32</sup> Acknowledging women's agency in situations of violence during war does not imply that victims cease to be victims, but rather highlights the strategic actions that some victims undertake, thus demonstrating their capacity for action. Agency manifests itself through forms of resistance against oppressive structures or practices,<sup>33</sup> allowing women to obtain various resources and ensure their own safety or that of their families.

In this sense, agency cannot be conceived without resistance or strategic actions to confront violence, even if they manifest as forms of strategic submission. These strategies consist of the victims' ability to make small strategic decisions within oppressive environments as a defence mechanism against more extreme forms of violence.<sup>34</sup> However, these resistance strategies face social stigma, as victims are expected to exhibit passive behaviour.

## Methods

This article is based on a larger research project in which I analysed the subjective appropriation of rights, specifically labour rights, expressed by organised sex workers in the city of Bogotá, Colombia.

Data collection spanned two periods: in August and December 2016, and the second half of 2017. I accompanied members of SinTraSexCo, a sex worker union in Bogotá,<sup>35</sup> and participated as a volunteer in three regional meetings that they organised with sex workers in Barranquilla, Bucaramanga, and Tunja. All participants in my study were affiliated with SinTraSexCo, so they were all over the

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<sup>32</sup> N Begikhani, W Hamelink, and N Weis, 'Theorising Women and War in Kurdistan: A Feminist and Critical Perspective', *Kurdish Studies*, vol. 6, issue 1, 2018, pp. 5–30; K Stallone, 'Strategic Submission to Rape Is Not Consent: Sexual Violence in the Colombian Armed Conflict', *Violence Against Women*, vol. 28, issue 14, 2022, pp. 3482–3504, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012211054872>; M Utas, 'West-African Warscapes: Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone', *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 78, issue 2, 2005, pp. 403–430, <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2005.0032>; P Yadav, 'Can Women Benefit from War? Women's Agency in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 58, issue 3, 2020, pp. 449–461, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320905619>.

<sup>33</sup> K Abrams, 'From Autonomy to Agency: Feminist Perspectives on Self-Direction', *William & Mary Law Review*, vol. 40, issue 3, 1999; Begikhani *et al.*

<sup>34</sup> Stallone.

<sup>35</sup> El Sindicato de Mujeres Trabajadoras Sexuales de Colombia – The Colombia Women Sex Workers' Union.



age of 18 to approximately 50 years old. Although this was not the focus of my research, many of the women's narratives were related to their experiences in the context of the conflict, and the conflict thus became a central element of analysis.

I conducted 19 in-depth interviews with sex workers, ranging in length from one to four hours each. I also facilitated three focus groups, which together involved 40 sex workers. The focus groups were organised in the context of union activities. My presence at these meetings was agreed in advance with the organisation, in return for which I delivered three personal finance workshops in Bogotá, each consisting of five hour-long sessions.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted using a questionnaire specifically designed to explore the various strategies employed by participants to claim and exercise their rights. The individual interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants, but in the focus groups, recording was not permitted; therefore, I took notes. To preserve the confidentiality of the participants, the data collected was anonymised.

I also conducted an exhaustive documentary review of the materials generated in the framework of the 2016 Peace Agreement signed by the government. This analysis covers both the documents produced by the Comisión de la Verdad (Truth Commission) and those produced by the CNMH. These reports have played a fundamental role in the clarification of the events that took place during the armed conflict and contributed to a fuller understanding of its complexities.

## Findings

In the context of the trade union struggle, it is common for sex workers to argue that their work is on a par with other occupations. However, it also exposes them to situations of violence, especially in the context of the armed conflict. To further understand the context of sexual violence during conflict, it is essential to delve into what Wood calls the pattern of violence.<sup>36</sup> This implies the need to explore the repertoires of violence that encompass the selection of targets, the frequency of violent acts, the period during which they were perpetrated, and the region in which they were manifested.

Within the framework of the conflict, sex workers were subjected to acts of violence as a result of the dynamics inherent in the conflict itself. The CNMH and others have documented testimonies about sex workers who were abused, raped,

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<sup>36</sup> E J Wood, 'Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and the Policy Implications of Recent Research', *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 96, issue 894, 2014, pp. 457–478, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383115000077>.

and killed by paramilitary groups due to their working relationship with guerrillas.<sup>37</sup> The presence of armed groups in each territory has led to the establishment of control over sexuality in communities, which implies the imposition of certain norms to prevent violations committed by civilians. However, depending on the degree of control exercised by the military hierarchies over their subordinates and the civilian population,<sup>38</sup> other types of violence also occurred.

Violence perpetrated against sex workers originated mainly for three reasons. Firstly, because of direct or indirect participation in conflict dynamics, violence against sex workers is linked to two connections attributable to the logic of the conflict: in cases where there were suspicions of possible infiltrators sharing information with other armed groups; and as a strategy to maintain group cohesion and reinforce the notion of the virile soldier. Secondly, as a way of regulating sexually transmitted diseases, sex workers were subjected to violence, either for the risk of carrying sexually transmitted diseases or for having infected combatants.<sup>39</sup> Finally, violence against sex workers was meted out as a punishment for their activity, which was considered immoral. On some occasions, as noted in the final report of the Comisión de la Verdad,<sup>40</sup> sex workers were raped as punishment because they were considered a danger to morality. Similarly, this dynamic is reflected in the reports of the CNMH,<sup>41</sup> which noted that paramilitaries punished women who were presumed to have had sexual relations with guerrillas. These rapes were not only an act of revenge, but also a form of symbolic ‘cleansing’, considering the enemy as impure, or so-called ‘social cleansing’, as the following account shows:

*One night in the early hours of the morning a car arrived and a tall man got out of the car. [...] When we were inside he said to me, ‘I haven’t come to be with you, I’ve come to give you some advice: go away, many of these girls aren’t worth it, and it’s not worth it if you end up with a stray bullet because you’re close to them.’ That’s when I woke up completely, and when I was with the man, some shots rang out. He said to me, ‘Did you hear? [sound of a gunshot] Get ready, I’m leaving’. Two blocks away they killed a colleague of mine who had stolen [something] and they shot her*

<sup>37</sup> Ramírez and Centro de Memoria Histórica (Colombia). See also: Mesa de trabajo mujer y conflicto armado, *VIII Informe Sobre Violencia Sociopolítica Contra Mujeres, Jóvenes y Niñas En Colombia*, Generalitat Valenciana, Bogotá, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Comisión de la Verdad; Ramírez and Centro de Memoria Histórica (Colombia); G Sánchez and Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación (Colombia) (eds.), *Mujeres y guerra: Víctimas y resistentes en el Caribe colombiano*, Primera edición, CNRR - Grupo de Memoria Histórica, Taurus, Bogotá, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Ramírez and Centro de Memoria Histórica (Colombia).

<sup>40</sup> Comisión de la Verdad.

<sup>41</sup> Ramírez and Centro de Memoria Histórica (Colombia).

*in the mouth and the one next to her was shot in the leg. That's when the killings started. (Sex worker interview, August 2017)*

However, it is possible that there are other forms of violence perpetrated by combatants which lack a direct connection to the organisation's goals, as maintaining control over such acts would not represent a fundamental threat to military aims. This type of violence is opportunistic, originating from personal impulses rather than the pursuit of organisational purposes, or motivated by strategic reasons.<sup>42</sup> This provides evidence that sexual violence, like the demand for sexual services, was not uniform across armed groups. In the context of irregular warfare, commanders' control over combatants may be weak, resulting in a diversity of violent practices.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the violence and insecurity experienced by individuals engaged in sex work, in my fieldwork, women expressed that they were aware of the context and conditions they would face when engaging in it. Their involvement was primarily motivated by the substantially higher remuneration than that in town or city establishments. Furthermore, the conflict has disrupted many traditional livelihood opportunities, so some women choose sex work because it is the most profitable alternative.<sup>44</sup>

Sex workers' choices may put them at greater risk of violence, but it would be inappropriate to suggest that they lack agency. In the context of the Colombian armed conflict, some women have chosen what Stallone has termed 'strategic submission', i.e. giving in to sexual violence to protect themselves or their loved ones.<sup>45</sup> This survival strategy can be considered a form of agency in an environment where options are limited. However, these expressions of agency may not be immediately recognised by society and may even lead to the victim being stigmatised for not having explicitly resisted. In the sex trade, the motivations of sex workers are complex and their agency can take on a strategic nature.

Nieto has outlined the dynamics of sex work in one area under paramilitary control. Sex workers were offered a high payment of around USD 60 per service<sup>46</sup> which, given the general lack of work in the area, was an attractive incentive. The work involved servicing many combatants over an entire weekend, during which

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<sup>42</sup> Wood, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Wood, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Lamas, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Stallone.

<sup>46</sup> Based on data from the National Administrative Department of Statistics of Colombia - DANE (Colombia estadística 2000–2009. Volume I), the average daily minimum wage during the first decade of the twenty-first century was approximately USD 4.6.

they could not leave their work without the group's authorisation.<sup>47</sup> During my fieldwork, sex workers reported that the paramilitaries did not always respect the previously agreed upon working conditions in the camps. Sometimes they were forced to continue working even during their menstrual period and had to resort to measures such as using tampons or rags with vinegar or taking medication to control the flow and meet the demand. However, despite the poor living and working conditions in the camps, as well as the long periods of work that could extend over several weeks, the women said that the work was attractive because of the high payment.

In addition to administrators, drugstores and health centres also made profits by carrying out examinations required by the armed groups and providing medicines in cases of sexually transmitted diseases. These examinations were conducted on a regular basis, every two to three weeks, and sex workers were required to carry a card. This card allowed the authorities and illegal armed groups to monitor and control the health conditions of both sex workers and the combatants involved. However, cards were often obtained fraudulently in order to allow sex workers to continue their work unhindered, thus generating an additional brokering process.

The control exercised by managers or brokers in relation to hours, fees, client interaction, and alcohol consumption function similarly in both conflict and non-conflict contexts. In both cases, regulation is put in place to safeguard potential clients or combatants, as sex workers are perceived as a moral or health risk. This construction of the sex worker as a threat was the state's approach to prostitution in the 1990s.<sup>48</sup>

### *Floating Migrant Sex Workers'*

Sex workers offered their services in three different ways. Those who had relatively permanent residences offered their services in brothels. Itinerant sex workers worked discreetly in camps and trenches; given the potential threat of infiltration, these workers were selected by the administrators because of their level of trustworthiness. Thirdly, some worked in bars, where they offered their services in a more disguised manner.<sup>49</sup> Some supplemented their income by playing additional roles such as cooks, *raspachines* [coca workers], or service personnel.<sup>50</sup> The women who worked in the trenches were generally more experienced, as they catered to a larger number of men than those in the conventional brothels or bars.

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<sup>47</sup> Nieto.

<sup>48</sup> Corte Constitucional de Colombia, *Sentencia T-620*, 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Gallego-Montes.

<sup>50</sup> Ramírez and Centro de Memoria Histórica (Colombia).

Many of the women also migrated to Bogotá and other major cities in Colombia, and even to cities in neighbouring countries, such as Ecuador. These displacement strategies are interpreted as manifestations of the nomadic lifestyle adopted by sex workers, who use the exchange of information with their peers to guide their movements in search of more favourable economic conditions. In addition to seeking financial improvements, this mobility is also motivated by a desire to distance themselves from their family environment.<sup>51</sup>

The sex trade in conflict zones is part of broader processes of mobility and itinerant sex work. This form of mobility by sex workers is linked to the displacement of temporary income sources, such as local fairs and festivals, or the harvest of both legal and illegal crops (coca leaf, for example). It is also closely linked to networks of contacts among them. During my research, I found that, despite being in different regions of the country, sex workers could establish connections and relationships with other sex workers that facilitate the dissemination of relevant information about the feasibility of carrying out their work in specific locations. Whether in times of peace or war, sex workers deftly move between different territories that are characterised by the constant presence of armed and unarmed actors. This incessant movement immerses them in relationships marked by violence, highlighting the complexity and challenges they face, regardless of the context.<sup>52</sup>

Despite clashing with the values and moral aspirations that guided various armed groups in the territories, sex workers were an integral part of the wartime economic dynamics. In the case of paramilitary groups, sex workers were transported in groups of forty or sixty to the locations where the squads were stationed, with the purpose of offering their sexual services. This practice of concentrating sex workers in conflict zones has also been reported by the CNMH.<sup>53</sup> In municipalities where illicit economic activities flourished—such as coca cultivation or, in some cases, mining—prostitution venues quickly emerged to meet the demand of these mostly male-dominated economies.<sup>54</sup> Sex workers' presence in the camps also provided a morale boost to the combatants.

*I would work seasonally in red light areas, go away for three months and then go back, generally with the support of administrators I knew in the places where I moved. Approximately 40 women would arrive in these places, although a few days later, many of them would enmozában [get a partner]. (Sex worker interview, August 2017)*

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<sup>51</sup> Ávila.

<sup>52</sup> Enloe, 2000; Nieto and Pacheco.

<sup>53</sup> Ramírez and Centro de Memoria Histórica (Colombia).

<sup>54</sup> Defensoría del Pueblo de Colombia, *El conflicto armado y el riesgo para la mujer rural: estudios de caso en los departamentos de Chocó, Córdoba, Santander y Caquetá*, Defensoría del Pueblo, Bogotá, 2014.

In the focus groups, some sex workers shared their experiences of migration across the country. These moves were based on their knowledge of different regions or on recommendations from colleagues, considering the perceived availability of income in each area. This continuous movement around the country is the reason why the leader of the sex workers' union and numerous other members call themselves 'floating migrant sex workers' (*trabajadora sexual migrante flotante*). This self-description sheds light on the dynamics of constant mobility inherent in sex work, supported by a network of information that facilitates the choice of destinations and the conditions under which sex work is performed.

A similar pattern is observed in different conflict contexts, such as Peru during the confrontation between the army and the Shining Path. In this scenario, sex workers known as 'the Charlies' were hired and transported to conflict zones to offer their services to soldiers, who were afterwards deducted the corresponding amount from their salaries.<sup>55</sup> Soldiers were incited to resort to these services under the threat of questioning their masculinity and, consequently, affecting the group cohesion.

In Colombia, although there is no conclusive evidence of this form of persuasion, it is likely that a similar dynamic occurred. This interpretation raises questions about sexual violence in the conflict, given that knowledge about sexual violence and the pressures faced by combatants to engage in certain sexual practices, such as group encounters that affirmed the image of the sexually voracious soldier, is limited.

Therefore, sex work acquires strategic relevance for armed groups because, from their perspective, on one hand, they 'control' the expression of unbridled sexuality among men, preventing problems such as possible rape, and on the other hand, it ensures control over sexually transmitted diseases, as well as relationships considered deviant, such as homosexuality.<sup>56</sup>

#### *Work and Friendship Networks in the Sex Trade*

Sex work also took place in covert ways. Sometimes it was carried out in secret and the client was referred to as a 'friend' from whom they received payments that were not always monetary but could also take the form of in-kind assistance. This linguistic choice to name or not to name, to reveal or conceal sex work, has allowed sex workers to tailor their actions to cultivate more or less long-lasting relationships with many of their clients. The conception of the client as a friend, in addition to concealing the type of activity, allows the money to be symbolically

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<sup>55</sup> J Boesten and I Gavilán, 'Military Intimacies: Peruvian Veterans and Narratives about Sex and Violence', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 58, issue 4, 2023, pp. 762–778, <https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.18>.

<sup>56</sup> Boesten and Gavilán; Wood, 2009.

cleansed, as it is not explicitly agreed upon in an economic negotiation.<sup>57</sup> The distinctions proposed by Viviana Zelizer on the separation of the public spheres of the market and the private, affective life present significant variants in the context of sex work.<sup>58</sup> As Adriana Piscitelli has pointed out, in Brazil, there is a fusion in some cases with the logics of the marriage market.<sup>59</sup>

According to one of my interviewees, many sex workers in the camps became involved in romantic relationships soon after their arrival, sometimes establishing long-term relationships or even marrying. This dynamic, present in conflict zones as well as other contexts, has been recognised as a strategy for sex workers to not only ensure regular income but also to maintain romantic relationships, sometimes simultaneously.

The significant role played by the administrators in the sex trade premises is well known, as they were often responsible for transporting them to the places where the paramilitary groups operated. This intermediary work was a strategic component in connecting combatants to an already established market. According to the CNMH, it is plausible that the managers of the sex trade venues were urban members of the paramilitary groups, playing both military and organisational roles, such as, in this case, recruiting sex workers.<sup>60</sup> In some cases, sex workers also relied on local people who offered transport services to rural and remote areas that could only be reached by boat.

## Discussion

The sex trade in militarised or conflict-affected areas is different from other forms of sex work. This is evidenced by the implementation of explicit measures designed to favour and protect clients, such as the exclusive testing of women for sexually transmitted diseases, with the aim of protecting combatants.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> C Laverde and M Tirado, 'Carrera Moral y Significados Del Dinero En El Trabajo Sexual: El Caso de Bogotá, Colombia', *Revista CIFE: Lecturas de Economía Social*, vol. 22, no. 36, 2020, pp. 47–67, <https://doi.org/10.15332/22484914/5437>.

<sup>58</sup> V Zelizer, *La Negociación de La Intimidad*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Buenos Aires, 2009; V Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief, and Other Currencies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> A Piscitelli, '¿Actuar La Brasileñidad? Tránsitos a Partir Del Mercado Del Sexo', *Etnográfica*, vol. 15, issue 1, 2011, pp. 5–29, <https://doi.org/10.4000/etnografica.765>.

<sup>60</sup> Ramírez and Centro de Memoria Histórica (Colombia).

<sup>61</sup> Enloe, 2000.

In the context of the Colombian armed conflict, the armed groups have taken control of the management of some forms of prostitution.<sup>62</sup> Those armed groups that permit sex work regulate it to reinforce the narrative of the male warrior with uncontrollable sexual needs to sustain morale and maintain heteronormativity among soldiers during periods of combat; and to shift the responsibility for monitoring sexuality and the risks of sexually transmitted diseases to sex workers.<sup>63</sup>

The relationship between sex work and armed conflict involves complex dynamics that go beyond the mere victimisation of sex workers. While there is a system of oppression marked by gender inequalities in a context characterised by an exacerbated use of violence, sex workers are able to mobilise their resources and develop suitable strategies. In this way, they exercise agency to confront situations of violence in both war and peace contexts.

My research revealed that sex workers in Colombia have been itinerant in their work, constantly migrating from conflict zones to less violent ones, guided by the information they receive, usually from other sex workers. This 'floating migration' highlights a greater influence of variables associated with sex work for economic purposes, rather than being exclusively linked to illegal armed groups, such as the paramilitaries.

It is also important to recognise women's agency and consider power dynamics in complex contexts. Relationships cannot be reduced to a victim/victimiser dichotomy. Even in the presence of violence and victimisation, women may deploy strategies of agency and resistance against a gender order that transcends the scope of the armed conflict. Applying a situated approach to understanding the dynamics of labour markets that enable sex workers' decisions in this context will allow for a better understanding of the dynamics of violence.

## Conclusion

The conflict in Colombia has left behind a considerable number of victims and, after the signing of the peace agreement in 2016, efforts have been made to recognise the ways in which the Colombian population was subjected to various forms of victimisation. As Gualdrón<sup>64</sup> points out, impunity persists in part due to the silence maintained by victims and communities, a consequence

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<sup>62</sup> Gallego-Montes.

<sup>63</sup> Enloe, 1993.

<sup>64</sup> F S O Gualdrón, 'Victimización y violencia sexual en el conflicto armado en Colombia', *Subjetividad y Procesos Cognitivos*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2015, pp. 173–186.



of the relationship of power and control that the various groups involved in the conflict exerted in the territories. However, until the underlying dynamics of the conflict and how the populations experienced them are properly understood, it will be impossible to unravel the intricate relationship developed over decades of confrontation and how violence became ingrained in the fabric of the country.

There are still many gaps in the knowledge about sex workers' connection to the conflict and how they became intertwined with military structures, which acted as consumers of sexual services and perpetrators of violence, reaffirming a male logic of control over sexuality. At the same time, this violence should not be reduced to categories such as human trafficking, sexual slavery, or forced prostitution. Doing so would prevent recognition of sex workers' agency, the similarities between sex work and other forms of employment, as well as manifestations of violence that persist beyond the conflict. It would also exclude sex workers' struggles from broader forms of resistance, like those in other labour sectors where women's work is undervalued.<sup>65</sup>

Although there are gaps in the understanding of the relationship between the sex trade and armed conflicts, my research reaffirmed that the sex trade has persisted in contexts of armed conflict as well as in times of peace. The operations of this market are influenced by various social and economic factors, such as periods of commercial or agricultural bonanza, drug trafficking, or, as examined in this article, the presence of armed groups that demand the services of sex workers.

The sex trade did not emerge as a direct consequence of the conflict; rather, it is a phenomenon that manifests itself before, during, and after episodes of violence. The dynamics of sex work have adjusted and adapted to the context of the armed conflict and its various actors.

There is continuity in the working conditions of sex workers in periods of war and peace, such as long working hours, physical and verbal attacks, threats, and loss of security. In addition to this violence, sex workers are victims of various expressions of violence in other contexts,<sup>66</sup> all guided by the patriarchal social order driven by a moral economy that stigmatises them. However, despite these circumstances, sex workers create information networks and move as 'floating migrants' to resist and evade violence, as well as to find better livelihood opportunities and safety for themselves and their families.

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<sup>65</sup> Kempadoo, 1996.

<sup>66</sup> Laverde, 2018.

**Dr Carlos Alfonso Laverde Rodriguez** is Associate Professor in the Department of Business and International Relations at the Universidad de La Salle, Colombia. His research interests are related to gender and economics, sexuality and labour markets, and the sociology of law. E-mail: [clavede@unisalle.edu.co](mailto:clavede@unisalle.edu.co)