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Abstract

This thesis presents sites of violence and despair as engines of opportunity and social transformation through the endeavors of the Butterflies with New Wings Building a Future, an organization that works to improve the lives of women victims of violence in Buenaventura, Colombia. This thesis places the Butterflies in the broader context of the Colombian armed conflict, in and beyond Buenaventura, and uses their own words and experiences to explain their perspectives, experiences, and strategies for change. This thesis explores the ways in which this organization is awakening hope in individuals and communities who have lost it, rebuilding bonds that the war broke, helping women not only to heal the wounds of their experiences with violence but also to transform themselves into agents of social change, and creating mechanisms for reconciliation in communities profoundly affected by armed conflict.

Butterflies with New Wings Building a Future

By

Maria Camila Martínez Velasco

Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College

(May 2016)

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My sincerest thanks to my thesis advisor, Margarita Fajardo, for her honesty, dedication, comments, and encouragement.

I am extremely grateful to Priscilla Murolo for giving me the opportunity to visit Buenaventura, and meet the Butterflies with New Wings. Priscilla guided me and supported me in the hardest times during these two years, and always encouraged me to do better. There are no words to describe how much I have learned from her, and how much she means to me.

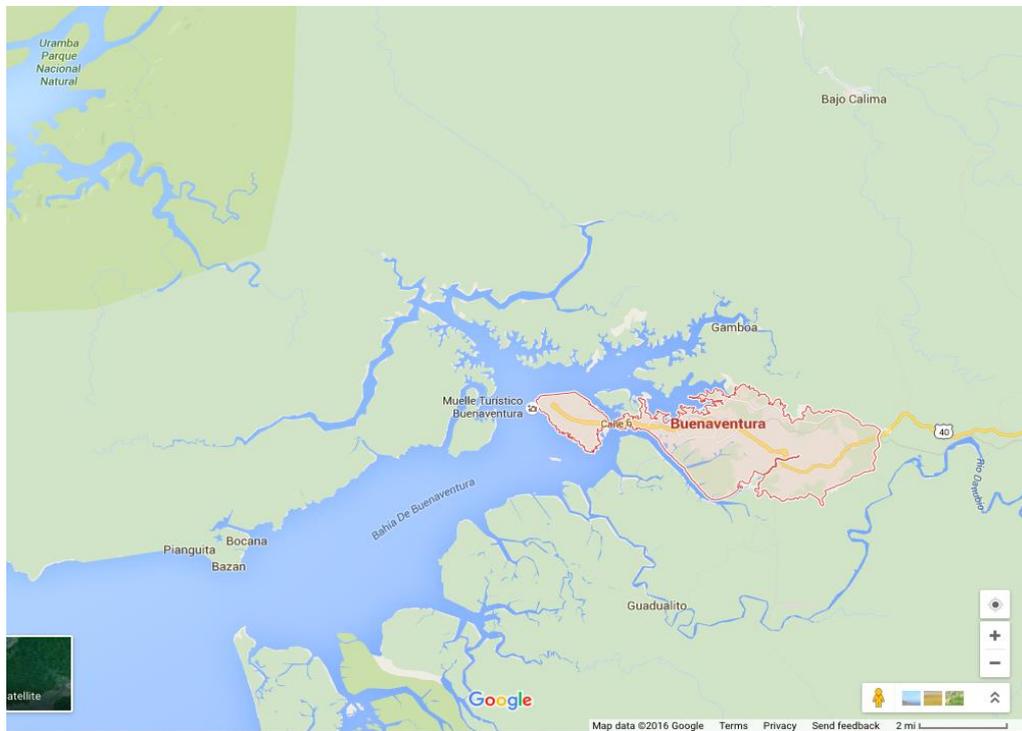
Thank you to my family. Wherever I go, you are with me. Ale, Juani, and Juan, thank you for your amazing ability to make everything funny. Ma, for inspiring me to create my own dreams, and for teaching me not to be afraid to be myself. Grandma, for all the candles you light for me. Daddy, seeing life through your eyes keeps me standing. So much of who I am, I got it from you.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Sebastian, for walking always by my side.

Maps



(Google Maps 2016).



(Google Maps 2016).

Introduction

During the month of September 2014, a group of Afro-Colombian women from Buenaventura, Colombia, hit the headlines in the national and international press. They are the Butterflies with New Wings Building a Future (in Spanish Mariposas de Alas Nuevas Construyendo Futuro), a women's organization that received that year's Nansen Refugee Award from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The Butterflies were honored for their work in helping survivors of forced displacement and sexual violence in Buenaventura, one of the cities especially affected by the Colombian armed conflict between the state, paramilitary groups, guerrilla movements, and other illegal organizations.

When they received the award, countless articles and radio programs reported on the work of the Butterflies with New Wings and, in that way, unveiled the humanitarian crisis taking place in Buenaventura. The media made it possible for the stories of the Butterflies to be heard by thousands of people around the world.¹ The reports were incomplete, however. They focused mainly on two things: first, statistics about the violence taking place in Buenaventura, and second, the Butterflies' seemingly superhuman courage to live and work in such circumstances. These perspectives obscure

¹ Some examples are the articles published by The Guardian, The Los Angeles Times, and El Espectador: "Colombian activist risk their lives to protect women from gang warfare," The Guardian, October 8, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/oct/08/colombian-activists-women-gang-warfare>; "In Colombian city, aid group seeks to give displaced women new wings," Los Angeles Times, September 26, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-colombia-displaced-20140926-story.html>; "ONG Colombiana Red Mariposas de Alas Nuevas gana Premio Nansen [Colombian NGO Butterflies with New Wings wins Nansen Award]," El Espectador, September 11, 2014, <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/ong-colombiana-red-mariposas-de-alas-nuevas-gana-premio-articulo-516217>.

the Butterflies' environment beyond the numbers, and the human beings behind the organization.

In relation to the humanitarian crisis in Buenaventura, the majority of articles about the Butterflies—especially in the international press—listed and described the types of violence that have plagued the city, stressing the most gruesome episodes in the last ten years, and the high number of people who have been victims of human rights violations. The reader learns only that Buenaventura is a terrifying place. This reportage pays little attention to the context of the region or the possibility of transformation, which is precisely the driving force of the Butterflies movement. Without such information, the situation in Buenaventura becomes unintelligible. This project will start filling this gap by exploring the Butterflies perspectives on social change, and the different strategies they are implementing to achieve it.

As for the Butterflies with New Wings, the press gave a lot of attention to the risks they take in order to help others, and how they face those risks with extraordinary courage. Some articles, for example, emphasize the different types of violence that they could experience while traversing Buenaventura, and how helping others could cost them their lives.² The level of attention given to the danger the Butterflies face overshadows their strategies, their capacity to generate social transformation, and the profound impact they are making on their community.

² “Un ejército de Mariposas Para Frenar la Violencia Contra las Mujeres en Colombia [An Army of Butterflies to Stop the Violence Against Women in Buenaventura],” *El Diario*, September 28, 2014, http://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/colombia-premio_nansen-conflicto-red_mariposas_0_307969433.html; “Colombian activist risk their lives to protect women from gang warfare,” *The Guardian*, October 8, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/oct/08/colombian-activists-women-gang-warfare>.

The objective of my research is to present sites of violence and despair as engines of opportunity and social transformation through the endeavors of the Butterflies with New Wings. This organization is awakening hope in individuals and communities who have lost it, rebuilding bonds that the war broke, helping women not only to heal the wounds of their experiences with violence but also to transform themselves into agents of social change, and creating mechanisms for reconciliation in communities profoundly affected by armed conflict. This thesis places the Butterflies in the broader context of the Colombian armed conflict, in and beyond Buenaventura, and uses their own words and experiences to explain their perspectives, experiences, and strategies for change.

Besides the press articles published about them when they won the Nansen Refugee Award, there is no literature on the Butterflies with New Wings. The only way to explore their work and impact in a deeper way is through the voices of the Butterflies themselves. The main primary sources for this thesis, then, are formal interviews I conducted with some of the members of the network, as well as the informal conversations we had. I started this process by getting in touch with the leaders who represented the Butterflies in Geneva in September of 2014: Gloria Arboleda, Maritza Asprilla, and Mery Medina. Because I was in the United States at the time, I conducted the first interviews over the phone. This type of interview has many limitations, starting with the impossibility of looking into each other's eyes or observing body language. More important, I wanted to talk with these women not only about the Butterflies' work, but also about their personal experiences, and, for that, I thought, I needed them to trust me more than they could a stranger calling them on the phone. To my surprise—relief, excitement, among other things—they were very open with me from the very first call. In spite of the limitations of phone interviews, we talked about the context of their region, their work with the organization, and some aspects of their personal lives and history.

In the months that followed our first conversations, I stayed in touch with Gloria Arboleda, whose help made it possible for me to carry out the most important part of my research: visiting Buenaventura and meeting other members of the Butterflies' network. I arrived in Buenaventura in February of 2016. In the company of Gloria, her daughter Milade, and Maritza, I got to see different neighborhoods of Buenaventura that I had previously known only through the press and its usually sensationalist portraits. I heard about life in Buenaventura in countless conversations on buses, in cabs, and during walks around the city.

In addition to showing me around, Gloria and Maritza found places for me to meet other Butterflies whom I would not have known otherwise. In one of those meetings, which took place in the city's Office of the Ombudsman, I had the pleasure of meeting and interviewing a group of rural women from the Bajo Calima: Andrea Moreno, Carmen Rosa Inestrosa, Maria Amina, Maria Tania Ibargüen, and Jesica Juliet Sánchez. On another occasion, Maritza accompanied me to a meeting with Mery Medina, with whom I had spoken over the phone a few months before. Finally, I was invited to one of the courses the Butterflies are attending, and there I met Bibiana Peñaralda Sepúlveda, one of the founders of the Butterflies network. All of their testimonies, anecdotes, explanations, and memories are the foundations of this thesis.

The recent history of Buenaventura and, particularly, the humanitarian crisis has been explored and documented by journalists, historians, and human rights organizations, but has overlooked the activities of the Butterflies. Since 2006, the media have been documenting the emergence of new criminal organizations in Buenaventura after the demobilization of the paramilitary group AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) in 2005. Journalists have not only reported on recurrent waves of violence in the city after the demobilization and the emergence of groups trafficking in drugs and

arms; they have also attracted authorities' attention by predicting the expansion and consolidation of these groups led by former paramilitary fighters, which the press has called "criminal gangs."³

Since 2013, by which time the journalists' prediction had become a reality, human rights organizations have produced their own analysis and recommendations. Some examples are the reports published by the Jesuit Refugee Service in 2013, Human Rights Watch in 2014, and the Norwegian Refugee Council in 2014. All these reports focus on exposing the violations of human rights that armed groups, especially criminal gangs, commit daily in Buenaventura, as well of the failure of the Colombian state to protect the population.⁴

Soon after the publication of these reports, a study about the recent history of Buenaventura, titled *Buenaventura: Un Puerto Sin Comunidad [Buenaventura: A Port without Community]* was published on 2015.⁵ The research was conducted and published by the National Center for Historical Memory (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica),

³ "Buenaventura, Dividida por Narcos, ex paras y Milicianos [Buenaventura, Divided by Drug Traffickers, ex Paramilitary, and Militiamen]," *El Tiempo*, November 8, 2006, <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-2263244>; "Paras, Lejos del Fin [Paramilitary, Far from the End]," *El Tiempo*, May 2, 2006, <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-2006904>; "El Desarme: ¿Una Ficción? [Disarmament: A Fiction?]," *El Tiempo*, November 8, 2006, <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-1914352>; "¿Y Después de desmovilizar? [And, after the demobilization?]," *El Tiempo*, February 7, 2006, <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-1908434>.

⁴ Max Schoening, *La crisis en Buenaventura: Desapariciones, Desmembramientos y Desplazamiento en el Principal Puerto de Colombia en el Pacífico [The Crisis in Buenaventura: Disappearances, Dismemberment, and Displacement in Colombia's Main Port on the Pacific]* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2014); Angela Carillo, *Desplazamiento forzado y Violencia basada en Género: Buenaventura, Realidades Brutales [Forced displacement and gender-based violence: Buenaventura, Brutal Realities]* (Bogotá: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2014); *Buenaventura: Una Crisis Humanitaria sin Respuesta [Buenaventura: A Humanitarian Crisis Unanswered]* (Jesuit Refugee Service, 2013), <https://www.jrs.net/Assets/Regions/IOR/media/files/InformeBuenaventura.pdf>.

⁵ National Center for Historical Memory, *Buenaventura: Un Puerto Sin Comunidad [Buenaventura: A Port Without Community]* (Bogotá: NCHM, 2015).

a public institution created in 2011 to uphold the right to the truth for the victims of the Colombian armed conflict.⁶

The National Center for Historical Memory, as well as the human rights organizations that reported on Buenaventura, used interviews with victims of the armed conflict in order to reconstruct the history of the war in the region, expose the human rights violations, and find the patrons and strategies used by the armed groups to control the civilian population. This thesis will contribute to this literature by using testimonies and interviews from another perspective: to explore the strategies of resistance of the civil population and the ways in which they, especially women, are repairing the social fabric disrupted by the war in Buenaventura.

The stories of the Butterflies with New Wings reveal not only the conditions under which people in Buenaventura are living, and the crimes that the armed groups have committed against them. The stories of the Butterflies with New Wings also exemplify the actions that communities and individuals affected by violence carry out on a daily basis to improve their lives and the lives of others. The Butterflies found that sharing their stories and experiences, breaking the silence on what happened to them and their families, and listening to others, have the power to heal the wounds created by the violence; heal the wounds of individuals as well as communities. Beyond that, by sharing their stories with each other, the Butterflies create strong relationships based on trust and solidarity among communities whose bonds have been broken by the war. As Bibiana Peñaralda Sepúlveda, one of the founders of the Butterflies, explains:

In a conflict environment there are many fears; in a conflict environment there is intimidation; there are murders, there is...everything. This broke the bonds between families and neighbors. When these bonds get broken,

⁶ National Center for Historical Memory, *Desmovilización y Reintegración Paramilitar: Panorama Posacuerdos con las AUC [Paramilitary Demobilization and Reintegration: Panorama after the agreement with the AUC]* (Bogotá: NCHM, 2015).

distrust appears. Trust gets reduced to very few people, the people that you really, really know We are learning that we can transform pain, conflict, differences, into something else, into something positive. How do we do it? Well, before all else, there is our affectionate relationship.⁷

The work and the stories of the Butterflies with New Wings matter because, as Bibiana explains, and this thesis will show, the bonds and relationships they build have become sources for profound social transformation and hope.

This thesis is organized in three chapters. In Chapter One I introduce the Butterflies with New Wings Building a Future, placing them in the local context of Buenaventura and the broader context of the Colombian armed conflict. In Chapter Two I present the story of Gloria Amparo Arboleda, one of the leaders of the Butterflies of New Wings. Through her life story and her journey as a defender of human rights I capture three things: forced displacement as one of the most serious problems in Buenaventura, the inefficiency of the Colombian state to respond to this problem, and the ways in which victims of forced displacement have managed to survive and help each other to survive.

In chapter Three, through the eyes and experiences of the Butterflies of New Wings, I expose domestic violence as one of the most common types of violence in Buenaventura, I also explain how the resistance to this particular type of violence became a pillar of the organization. Throughout the thesis I include quotations from the interviews with the Butterflies, since their voices, their personal stories, and their perspectives are at the core of this research.

⁷ Bibiana Pañaralda Sepúlveda, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

“Before the domino effect of the war, the Butterflies’ effect emerges, that is, the reconstruction.”

Bibiana Peñaralda Sepúlveda
 Founder of the Butterflies with New
 Wings

Chapter One:

Building Comadreo: The Power of Sharing Life Stories

“We call them delinquents,”¹ said Mery Medina, a member of the Butterflies with New Wings Building a Future, an organization that works to improve the lives of women victims of violence in Buenaventura, Colombia. Mery is referring to the armed groups that today control many areas of the city. Generally known as criminal gangs, and led by former paramilitary fighters, these groups have expanded tremendously since their emergence in 2006. Although many people in Buenaventura call them bandits or simply “the bad people,”² the gangs are becoming strong criminal organizations, and are involved in drug trafficking, arms trafficking, micro-trafficking of drugs, illegal mining, money laundering, extortion, and control of local commerce.³

In the past ten years, the gangs Los Ratrojos, Los Urabeños, and La Empresa quickly gained control over many neighborhoods in Buenaventura. They have committed countless violations of human rights, and have altered the daily life of the majority of the population by imposing their own rules in the areas they control. For example, they impose invisible borders between neighborhoods, demand tolls from

¹ Mery Medina, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

² Maria Amina, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

³National Center for Historical Memory, *Buenaventura: Un Puerto Sin Comunidad [Buenaventura: A Port Without Community]* (Bogotá: NCHM, 2015), 125-150.

people who cross those borders, and implement massive extortion in the zones where they operate. What this means for people in Buenaventura is that they cannot always move around freely and safely. Mery explains, “In your own neighborhood, in your own sector, you cannot always walk from one street to another because you can become a target.”⁴ The inhabitants of Buenaventura, then, have to adapt and find ways to continue with their daily routine under a high level of social control.

In this context, four years after the emergence of the criminal gangs, a group of Afro-Colombian women from the rural and urban areas of Buenaventura came together in order to transform their lives and their communities, ones deeply affected by violence and poverty. In 2010 they founded the self-help network Butterflies with New Wings Building a Future. The network includes women who have been victims of diverse types of violence, mostly victims of forced displacement and domestic violence, who are working together not only to recover from emotional damage, but also to become subjects of social change.

The Butterflies created their network based on one apparently simple idea: that sharing with each other their personal stories and their experiences with violence could improve their lives significantly, and furthermore could have a tremendous impact in their communities. As this thesis shows, they were right. The Butterflies found that sharing their stories with each other not only was a crucial step towards emotional recovery after episodes or even years of violence, but it was also a strategy to create strong bonds with each other to rebuild social fabric disrupted by war. As Bibiana Peñaralda, one of the founders of the network, explains,

When we started talking about what had happen to each of us, we started to comprehend each other’s pain. We began to share and heal ourselves. We transformed our pain and our experiences with violence into something else,

⁴ Mery Medina, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

into an affectionate network We became comrades in the construction of projects: personal projects, family projects, community projects.⁵

Through the ritual of trading their intimate stories, the Butterflies create a bond that they call *comadreo*: a relationship based on trust, solidarity, love, and unconditional support. In Bibiana's words, "Being comadres is to be friends, being comadres is to be confidants; to be comadres is to accompany each other; to be comadres is to be there The comadre takes the place of a mother when she is gone. She becomes a family bond, when those are broken."⁶

Although the Butterflies founded the network in 2010, their experiences and stories with violence go back a long way, dovetailing with the armed conflict in Colombia, and its dynamics in Buenaventura. Like thousands of people in the Pacific Region and in the rest of Colombia, a majority of the Butterflies have been victims of the armed conflict, which has ravaged the country for more than fifty years, and has included the participation of diverse illegal armed groups.⁷

Today, the criminal gangs in Buenaventura are led by former members of the demobilized paramilitary forces AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), who started their actions in the Pacific Region in the 2000s.⁸ For this purpose they created

⁵ Bibiana Pañaralda Sepúlveda, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The confrontation between the Colombian state and the guerrilla groups that are still active started in the mid 1960's. The previous two decades, however, also marked by violence. This period was characterized by the political polarization between two political parties, the Liberal, and the Conservative. Their dispute for political power caused a decade of intense sociopolitical violence which affected the entire population, but was more aggressive in the rural areas. The intensity of the confrontation explains why the period between 1948 and 1958 is called, simply, The Violence. For a good general study of this period, see Gonzálo Sánchez Gómez, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics: The Case of "La Violencia" in Colombia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Daniel Pécault, *Orden y Violencia: Colombia 1930 – 1953 [Order and Violence: Colombia 1930 – 1953]* (Mdellín: Universidad Eafit, 2012); Carlos Miguel Ortiz, *Estado y Subversión en Colombia: La Violencia en el Quindío, años 50 [State and Subversion in Colombia: The Violence in Quindío in the 1950s]* (Armenia: Universidad del Quindío, 2011).

⁸ During their first years, the paramilitary's objective was to fight the guerrillas and protect private properties from their attacks. Later on, in the 1990s, their objectives as well as their numbers expanded. What started as diverse counterinsurgency armed groups, transformed into a unified and organized military structure whose purpose was to gain political and economic control over territories nationwide.

the Calima Bloc led by Ever Veloza, alias HH. A decade before, the guerrilla group FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) had intensified their actions in the area in the 1990s, putting the Front 30 in charge. Along with them, came the National Army. In their struggle for territory, civilians became the main victims.⁹ All illegal armed groups had a nexus with drug cartels, financed their activities with drug trafficking, and used attacks on civilians as a strategy of war. Therefore, violence perpetrated against the civilians is not a new phenomenon in the Pacific Region and Buenaventura.¹⁰

Even though all armed groups have used attacks on civilians as a strategy of war, the intensity and the modalities of violence used by the guerrillas and the paramilitary were different. The paramilitary made more use of targeted killings, massacres, forced disappearances, torture and *sevicia*,¹¹ massive forced displacement, and sexual violence. The guerrillas, on the other hand, resorted to kidnappings, assassinations, attacks on civilian property, pillaging, terrorist attacks, threats, illegal recruitment and selective forced displacement.¹² The majority of the Butterflies with New Wings have been victims of the violence perpetrated by the armed groups, especially, by the AUC. A large

For a detailed account of the emergence and strategies of the paramilitary forces in Colombia, see Manfredo Koessl, *Violencia y Habitus: Paramilitarismo en Colombia [Violence and Habitus: Paramilitarism in Colombia]* (Bogotá: Siglo Del Hombre Editores, 2015); Gustavo Duncan, *Los Señores de la Guerra: De Paramilitares, Mafiosos, y autodefensas en Colombia [The Warlords: Paramilitary, mobsters and Self-Defense groups in Colombia]* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta Colombiana, 2007); Claudia López Hernández, ed., *Y Refundaron la Patria... De cómo los Mafiosos y Políticos Reconfiguraron el Estado Colombiano [And they Refounded the Homeland... Of How Mobsters and Politicians Reconfigured the Colombian State]* (Bogotá: Random House, 2010).

⁹ For a good general study of the dynamics of the armed conflict in Colombia, see Marco Palacios, *Violencia Pública en Colombia: 1958 – 2010 [Public Violence in Colombia: 1958 – 2010]* (Bogotá: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012).

¹⁰ National Center for Historical Memory, *¡Basta ya! Colombia: Memorias de Guerra y Dignidad. [Enough! Colombia: Memories of War and Dignity]* (Bogotá: NCHM, 2013), 158 - 168.

¹¹ This term does not have an equivalent term in English, and means extreme cruelty. It has been defined by the National Center of Historical Memory as the signature of the paramilitary forces. *Ibid.*, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 35.

number of these women were forcibly displaced from their homes, and they lost their loved ones in the war.

The criminal gangs that operate in Buenaventura today—Los Ratrojos, Los Urabeños and La Empresa—have maintained the modalities of violence inherited from the AUC. This paramilitary group demobilized in 2005 through a process of negotiation with the government of president Alvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010). The law that served this purpose—presented by Uribe and approved by the congress—is the 975 of 2005, better known as The Justice and Peace Law. When the law was approved, one third of the congress as well as the president, a significant fraction of the political class, and the National Army, had a nexus with the paramilitary forces. It was not, then, a negotiation between adversaries. In exchange for truth and reparations for the victims, the law established light sentences, from five to eight years in prison for very serious crimes. Although not all blocs of the paramilitary forces laid down their arms, more than 30,000 fighters did, including the Calima Bloc.¹³

By 2015, ten years after the process started, only-twenty three sentences had been handed down, and only 1,360 ex-members of the paramilitary forces were actively contributing to the truth and reparations program. This means that only around 5 percent of the 30,000 paramilitary members who were reintegrated into society are taking responsibility for violations of human rights.¹⁴ The demobilization of the Calima Bloc should have, in theory, diminished the violence in Buenaventura. However, what happened was the exact opposite. Although the Calima Bloc disintegrated, the criminal

¹³ For a detailed account of the demobilization of the AUC and its aftermath, see National Center for Historical Memory, *Rearmados y reintegrados. Panorama Posacuerdos con las AUC [Rearmed and Reintegrated. The Panorama after the Agreements with the AUC]* (Bogotá: NCHM, 2015).

¹⁴ Organización de los Estados Americanos, “Seguimiento a la implementación de la Ley de Justicia y Paz (ley 975 de 2005) en Colombia [Monitoring the Implementation of the Justice and Peace Law (Law 975 of 2005) in Colombia],” accessed December 9, 2015, <http://oas.org/es/cidh/multimedia/sesiones/154/default.asp>.

gangs maintained the illegal businesses that the AUC had run during the preceding decade.¹⁵

There are two reasons why the Pacific Region in general, and Buenaventura in particular, continue awakening the interest of illegal armed groups: their strategic geographic location, and their immense natural wealth. The Pacific Region is located in the west of the country, bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the west, and the Andes to the east, and covers the 1300 kilometers between the south of Panama and the north of Ecuador. Covered by ten million hectares of tropical forest and a network of rivers, it harbors one of the highest levels of biodiversity on the planet. Its territory is used for coca cultivation, gold extraction, and oil palm plantations. More important, Buenaventura is the major sea port in the country. Buenaventura is close to the Panama Canal and the coast of Ecuador, and it is equidistant from the ports of Vancouver, Canada, and Valparaiso, Chile. These reasons have made of Buenaventura an epicenter of illegal activities.¹⁶

In addition to the presence of illegal armed groups, Buenaventura harbors another problematic. Although it generates tremendous wealth, handling sixty percent of the country's imports and exports, Buenaventura is one of Colombia's poorest cities, because the wealth it generates is so unequally distributed. A full 63.7 percent of the population lives in poverty, and the unemployment rate is 63.7 percent, five times higher than in the rest of the country. One of the reasons for this irony is that the port was privatized in the early 1990s, leaving all the wealth produced by the port to a few companies owned by families from other cities, especially from the interior of the country. After the port's privatization, the companies started bringing in employees

¹⁵ National Center for Historical Memory, *Buenaventura: Un Puerto Sin Comunidad [Buenaventura: A Port Without Community]* (Bogotá: NCHM, 2015), 215.

¹⁶ National Center for Historical Memory, *Buenaventura: Un Puerto Sin Comunidad*, 32.

from the interior and excluding local people. This policy reflects discrimination against people of African descent, who are 90 percent of Buenaventura's population and the poorest.¹⁷

Besides the very high unemployment rate, the situation of Buenaventura is also alarming regarding access to formal education. In the city, 49 percent of children attend high school; in the rural areas, only 23 percent do. The quality of education is also significantly lower than in the rest of the country. Something very similar happens with healthcare, since only 38 percent of the population has access to it. Under these circumstances, the inhabitants of Buenaventura are especially vulnerable to violence, and to the illegal armed groups. They find very few opportunities to break the cycle of poverty.¹⁸

The Butterflies with New Wings argue that in this context one of the most serious problems is the indifference of the Colombian state, not only regarding the situation of Afro-Colombian population in general, but also regarding women in particular. In Buenaventura the violence against women is normalized, omitted, and ignored. Therefore, women who have been victims of different types of violence do not find the help they need. The Butterflies founded the network as a response to this deficiency. In Bibiana's words,

We realized that, in Buenaventura, the violence against men is becoming more visible: the assassinations, the havoc caused by drug trafficking and the paramilitary, the massacres and disappearances. But, within these investigations, the violence caused to women in particular was not addressed. When we got together to talk about it, we saw the pain that existed inside of the women. But more than that, we saw that there was not a network that helps women, the institutions of the state were not responding to our

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Joaquín Vilorio de la Oz, ed., *Economías del Pacífico [Economies of the Pacific]* (Bogotá: Editorial Nomos, 2008), 77.

needs, access to justice, education, and health was denied. So we created the network.¹⁹

The Butterflies with New Wings building a Future cannot eliminate the presence of the illegal armed groups in the region, they cannot take over the role that the Colombian state is not fulfilling, and, certainly, they cannot solve the structural problems that have caused the poverty in Buenaventura. They do, however, make visible the specific ways in which the war has affected women. They foster support for women who are and feel alone in the middle of the conflict. They work to improve the internal dynamics of their families by transforming violence in their homes and communities into constructive ways to solve conflicts. They implement strategies to help each other fight poverty.

In every way they can, the Butterflies take care of each other. All these apparently small actions, when brought together, have enormous impact and have the power to transform these women's lives significantly. Bibiana puts it this way: "Our small wingbeat, together with the wingbeat of the others, creates change." This is what being comadres means. Practicing solidarity and trust may seem a too simple strategy for creating social change in a context like Buenaventura, but, as the following chapters will show, it has enormous power of transformation.

¹⁹ Bibiana Peñaralda Sepúlveda, interview by author, February 11, 2016.

Chapter Two

Gloria Amparo Arboleda: A Butterfly's Journey

They call her “la profe Gloria” (teacher Gloria). Born in the rural area of Buenaventura, Gloria Amparo Arboleda worked for and with her community for more than twenty years before joining the Butterflies with New Wings Building a Future. As a community leader, Gloria has taught hundreds of women about their rights, and helped them to recover after episodes, or even years, of abuse. As a teacher, she has helped boys and girls who are in vulnerable situations to imagine and work for a better future. Like the women she helps, and the children she encourages, Gloria has lived and seen different types of violence throughout her life in Buenaventura. She knows well how life is in a context of war and poverty. However, she also learned to transform herself into an agent of social change, and inspire others to do the same.

Along with her many years of experience, Gloria possesses a captivating personality, a strong commitment to her community, and the unconditional support of the many people who admire her. All these characteristics make Gloria a very influential and respected figure in her community. If there is one feature that defines her as a leader, it is her ability to inspire confidence. Gloria is straightforward and sincere in her way of speaking; she is not afraid to explain clearly the reality of her region, or to share the ups and downs of her own life. At the same time, her kindness and openness with others—friends or strangers—create an air of closeness and camaraderie that defines her as a community builder. Gloria's explanations and descriptions of the conflicts and challenges in her region always come with an invitation to action, and the assurance of

help to whomever decides to accept that invitation. Her immense collaboration with this research is only one example of it.

From the very first time I spoke with Gloria over the phone, she did not hesitate to answer all of my questions. Not only did she express her opinions and explanations on the current situation of Buenaventura, and the work that the Butterflies are doing; she also offered to help me in any way that she could. Even though she made this offer in a very casual tone over the phone, the ways in which she actually helped me when I visited Buenaventura were invaluable, and made evident how her activism is thoroughly intertwined with her life.

I met with Gloria a couple of hours after I arrived in Buenaventura, one day in February 2016. She greeted me like a close friend and, only a few minutes later, she and her daughter Milade were showing me Buenaventura. "Where do you want to go first?" Gloria said, with her distinctive husky voice, while she adjusted the colorful fabric she had wrapped around her head—I have never seen her a headdress. We took a cab to the neighborhood Vista Hermosa, one of the areas most affected by violence in Buenaventura. Once inside the neighborhood, Gloria introduced me to other women who also work with the Butterflies with New Wings, and started to share with me countless anecdotes of their life in Buenaventura.

From that day until I left Buenaventura, Gloria took me under her wing. She arranged all the meetings where I got to meet other Butterflies, and, through countless stories, memories, and glasses of lemonade, she gave me a glimpse of her life. Gloria's journey as a human rights defender is inseparable from her personal experience of the war and forced displacement. Her life mirrors the story of hundreds of men and women in Buenaventura, and, at the same time, it is a story of a passionate and unstoppable leader.

Gloria was born in Bajo Calima, a rural area located forty kilometers northeast of the port of Buenaventura. It has been one of the areas more affected by the armed conflict; it has been occupied by the armed groups many times over the past decades, leaving a large number of victims of forced displacement. Gloria, like many other Butterflies, arrived in Buenaventura as a refugee from the violence.

The first time I was displaced my mother brought me [to Buenaventura] because the town was taken by the guerrilla. They knocked down the precinct and killed the policemen. The town ended up with no one. Since then, it was known that there were illegal groups there.¹

Gloria is referring to the first years of the FARC's emergence in the region in the 1980s and their constant confrontations with the National Army. Since then, many families have been forcibly displaced from Bajo Calima by the FARC, the Army, and, more recently, by paramilitary forces. In 2003, for example, the population was displaced by the AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia). The number of people who left the area was so high that the media referred to Bajo Calima as a "ghost town."² Later on, in 2014, due to another confrontation between the FARC and the Army, 427 people had to leave their homes.³

In spite of the enormous risk entailed in going back to rural areas, many families have returned to their lands. For this reason, there are people in Bajo Calima who have been displaced more than once, and more than once they have returned. Among the many reasons that people may have for going back to the rural areas, Gloria emphasizes one: the city of Buenaventura is not necessarily a safer place for peasants, due to the

¹ Gloria Arboleda, telephone interview by author, November 23, 2015.

² "Bajo Calima, un Pueblo Fantasma por la Violencia [Bajo Calima, a Ghost Town by Violence]," *Caracol Radio*, June 27, 2003, http://caracol.com.co/radio/2003/06/27/judicial/1056664800_084532.html

³ "Huyen 427 Desplazados del Bajo Calima [427 Displaced People Run Away from The Bajo Calima]," *El Tiempo*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/cali/huyen-427-desplazados-desde-bajo-calima/13676476>; Gloria Arboleda, telephone interview by author, November 23, 2015.

presence of former paramilitary fighters. In reference to the displacement of 2003, she explains:

Entering the urban area they killed a lot of our people because they say that, just for being from the countryside, people are part of the guerrilla... so sometimes it is better to go back to the countryside... It is a direct attack on people who supposedly are from the guerrilla, because there are still people in the city... these groups who control the city [the criminal gangs] they have a paramilitary mentality, counterinsurgent.⁴

In addition to the attacks that peasants may suffer in the city, another characteristic of urban life made an impact in Gloria: selfishness as a distinctive trait of urban culture. Gloria found that the biggest challenge to survival in the city was its individualistic dynamics. In her words, “In the city is more difficult... [E]ach person with their own things; they only look out for themselves.” In contrast, Gloria describes rural areas as spaces where the bonds among the members of the community are crucial for survival as well as an important part of culture. Like every displaced family in the region, Gloria and her family lost not only their lands and their homes, but also their network of support. Their communities disintegrated, and they arrived in the city—a more hostile environment—in a situation of extreme poverty.

In spite of the extremely difficult situation that Gloria and her family were in, they never received aid from the Colombian state. After leaving the countryside and an abusive partner, Gloria’s mother arrived in a shantytown in Buenaventura with her four children. As an illiterate peasant and head of household, Gloria’s mother found very few opportunities in Buenaventura. She managed to survive and support her children by selling fruits and mazamorra⁵ in the streets. Gloria grew up doing exactly the same⁶.

⁴Gloria Arboleda, telephone interview by author, November 23, 2015.

⁵ *Mazamorra* is a traditional maize-based food or drink.

⁶ Gloria Arboleda, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

The story of Gloria's family exemplifies the experiences of thousands of people in Buenaventura and other cities where victims of forced displacement arrive every year. Between 2005 and 2014, Buenaventura alone received 208,367 victims of forced displacement.⁷ The national number of displaced persons in this period reached 2,996,196.⁸ Usually the local governments have been unable to respond promptly to the accelerated growth of the cities, and have failed to provide to these families the aid they need. In Buenaventura, the aid from the state has been inefficient and insufficient. For the past twenty years, government aid has consisted of emergency humanitarian aid with a very low rate of coverage. This means that the majority of the displaced population does not receive any help from the government and, when people get it, it lasts for only a few weeks after their displacement. These families, then, are left without permanent solutions or opportunities to break the cycle of poverty.⁹

The responsibility of the Colombian state in the armed conflict as well as its failure to protect the victims leave the civil population with a profound feeling of abandonment and distrust of government institutions. In Gloria's words,

The level of impunity in Colombia is very high....Do you think that Buenaventura and the rest of the country is governed by an authority that does not know about all of this? No! These are agreements, this is a system Buenaventura, because it is a territory forgotten by all state policies and seen as empty territory whose population does not count for anything, has not satisfied basic needs. There are many problems. It is a municipality whose development is based on thinking about it from outside, as a space for transporting merchandise. They do not think of development with the people who live here.¹⁰

⁷ National Center for Historical Memory, *Una Nación Desplazada: Informe Nacional del Desplazamiento Forzado en Colombia [A Displaced Nation: National Report on Forced Displacement in Colombia]* (Bogotá: NCHM, 2015), 278.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁹ Angélica Castro Franco, *Las Políticas Públicas y las Redes Sociales de Desplazados: Efectos en los Desplazados en Buenaventura. Una mirada a las Conexiones Sociales y la Reproducción de la Pobreza [Public Policies and the Networks of Displaced Persons. The effects on Displaced Persons in Buenaventura. A look to the Social Connections and the Reproduction of Poverty]* (Saarbrücken: Editorial Académica Española, 2011), 34.

¹⁰ Gloria Arboleda, telephone interview by author, November 23, 2015.

Growing up in this context, witnessing all the types of violence and exclusion her mother suffered during her life, the poverty of her people, and the inefficiency of the state, Gloria knew that, if she wanted a better life, she had to build it herself. She also knew that she could not do it alone, and that it was not going to be easy. In order to make a change in her life and contribute to the lives of others, Gloria embarked on two very important projects: first, to put herself through college, no matter the circumstances; and second, to build bonds with her community and contribute to it in every way she could.

Gloria finished high school by attending classes at night and selling fruits during the day. Later on, she put herself through public college, and obtained her diploma in literature and Spanish from the Quindío University. Since then, she has worked in different schools in Buenaventura, where she has encouraged boys, girls, and teenagers to imagine a better future, to embrace their education, and not to drop out.

Gloria's work as an educator is not separate from her role as a human rights defender and her work with the Butterflies with New Wings. Actually, some of the Butterflies, like Maria Tania Ibargüen, joined the network because they were inspired by Gloria's work as a teacher. Maria Tania is a math teacher in the rural area of the Calima River, and has always admired Gloria's ability to work with young people:

She talks a lot with the boys and girls in a way that touches them. We have some teenagers who are very rebellious, who are on the verge of consumption. She makes them think about what they are doing ... I also work with them and, somehow, they also listen to me, but I want to learn how to get closer to them. They expect a lot from us as their teachers because, sometimes, they have more confidence in us than their own parents.¹¹

Eager to learn from her, Tania started attending some of the meetings that Gloria organized, and found the Butterflies with New Wings Building a Future. Maria Tania joined the network in February of 2016, and now is bringing her daughter Jessica Juliet,

¹¹ Maria Tania Ibargüen, interview by Author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

also a teacher, to the meetings. Jessica has not joined the network yet, but she is exploring its work and its strategies.

School teachers have a crucial role in Buenaventura today, since children and teenagers have become the main target of the criminal gangs. About fifty percent of the members of these groups are underage, this means that the criminal gangs are the primarily responsible for child recruitment in the country. Although the gangs use intimidation and threats in order to recruit children and teenagers, they also use another strategy: convincing them that joining their criminal organizations is the best and fastest option to overcome poverty.¹² With youth in such a state of vulnerability, one teacher has the capacity to make an enormous difference. The Butterflies with New Wings are convinced that solidarity, trust, and respect are crucial strategies for social transformation. Teaching from these perspectives and values has the power to prevent young people from becoming participants in the cycle of violence. Therefore, the social impact of the Butterflies who work as educators, like Gloria and Maria Tania, goes way beyond the particular subjects they teach.

Although Gloria, Maria Tania, and Jessica, who work as teachers, are women who had access to higher education, the Butterflies network gathers women with different educational levels. Some of them are professionals—although they are the minority—and others could not attend or finish school. In order to support their children, the women with fewer years of education work usually as community mothers¹³ or

¹² “Bandas Criminales, Principales Responsables del Reclutamiento Infantil [Criminal Gangs, Primarily Responsible for Child Recruitment],” *El Espectador*, February 12, 2015, <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/bandas-criminales-principales-responsables-del-reclutam-articulo-54370>; “Bandas Criminales Tienen Acorralados a los Jóvenes en Buenaventura [The Criminal Gangs Have the Young People Cornered in Buenaventura],” *Noticias Caracol*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.noticiascaracol.com/colombia/bandas-criminales-tienen-acorralados-los-jovenes-en-buenaventura>.

¹³ The community mothers are child care providers who, in their own homes, take care of up to fourteen children under the age of five. This is a program of home-based community day care created by the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF). For a detailed account of the program, see Instituto

domestic workers. This is the case with Carmen Rosa Inestrosa, who, encouraged by Gloria, joined the Butterflies with New Wings in 2012.

Carmen Rosa, who arrived Buenaventura when she was a little girl, describes education as a basic need she could not fulfill, not only because of her limited resources, but also because she was discouraged from it. Living with her aunt, she was raised to believe that getting an education was not something for her. In Carmen Rosa's words, "She used to say that I could not go to school because I only wanted to learn how to write letters to boyfriends.... That is why I could not study. And if I asked her questions, she used to scold me, not hit me, but scold me."¹⁴ For many women like Carmen Rosa, formal education was not an option when they were growing up. The education at home was also very limited, and reinforced traditional gender norms. Carmen explains how not getting the education she needed not only limited her options and opportunities, but also had many other consequences in her life:

I got pregnant because at home nobody told me I had to take a pill, or that if you sleep with a man you could get pregnant...so with him [her former partner] I had three children, but he was a bad person. ... I am a single mother. I work, and work, and work to support my children. I work as a domestic worker since...all my life! Now I can read a little because I have enrolled in some courses, but sometimes my work does not allow me to stay in school.¹⁵

Although too many opportunities were denied to her, Carmen Rosa is now working hard to learn what she could not when she was a girl. Many other women in the network are doing the same. A wonderful example of this is Maritza Asprilla. After surviving different types of violence—from forced displacement to domestic violence—Maritza changed her life completely. In her late thirties she went back to school, and she graduated from high school in 2008. Two years later, supported and encouraged by

Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, "Madres Comunitarias [Community Mothers]", accessed March 17, 2016, <http://www.icbf.gov.co/portal/page/portal/PrimeraInfanciaICBF/Madres>.

¹⁴ Carmen Rosa Inestrosa, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Gloria, she joined the Butterflies with New Wings, and has worked for her community since then. “You should never forget,” she says.

You need to take into account what you have lived in order to help others. And to let them see that we are all capable! We can improve ourselves! I feel that I have improved myself. I have given everything, and I will continue to do so. Just in 2008 I graduated, because I hadn't had the opportunity to go to school before, not a whole year. I went two months, three months...then a week [W]e all, my siblings and I, graduated later, as adults, because when we lived with my mom, we didn't have the chance... because of the terrible life she had with my stepfather.¹⁶

Today, some of the most important missions in Maritza's life are to help women who have lived the same to acknowledge their own potential, to accompany them in moments of pain and struggle, and to continue exploring and learning. Working together with Gloria, Maritza became one of the leaders of the Butterflies, and a very inspiring figure in the eyes of many women who are now trying to rebuild their lives.

Maritza, Carmen, Maria Tania, and Jessica are only a few of the many women who have been touched and inspired by Gloria's work. Her passion and determination are certainly admirable, and her effect on people who surround her is undeniable. She has developed these qualities over many years of struggle.

Gloria's work with the community has always been a learning process. She started very young with actions that may be perceived as too simple, but she remembers them as crucial for her growth as a human being and as defender of human rights. When asked about her first steps working with her community, there is one experience that Gloria especially recalls and shares with fondness:

First I was godmother of soccer teams. By playing in the cement field, the boys hurt themselves...so I was always there to help them and cure them. They used to call me godmother. I started like that, I was just a young girl. At the soccer matches of the community, those with rag balls, I used to hand out water to people. Later on, we started talking, "Let's bring some lemons, let's bring some sugar..." and then we had lemonade instead of

¹⁶ Maritza Asprilla, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

water. That's how I started to grow, with the act of sharing. Later on I joined the rural organization where I am now [ANMUCIC¹⁷].¹⁸

This memory is very important to Gloria not only because it represents a defining moment in her life, but also because it exemplifies her philosophy of life, and the core of her strategy. To her, sharing is more than a good deed. It has the power to build strong bonds and change the way in which people interact with each other, and it can give birth to social transformation.

The power of sharing is also the core of the Butterflies with New Wings Building a Future. Pooling resources, exchanging knowledge, confiding their life stories, experiences, and hopes, the Butterflies have created their own, very broad definition of solidarity. This relationship of solidarity has helped them to resist the problems and challenges that come with living in poverty in the middle of an armed conflict.

One very clear example of the importance of solidarity in this context is the Butterflies' approach to the most urgent problem: hunger. Poor women who have been displaced from rural areas, especially single mothers, have to fight against scarcity and hunger every day, even the women who return to the rural areas to rebuild their homes and the life they had in the countryside. Doing this alone can become a very difficult, not to mention painful, process. Sharing resources has thus become a crucial strategy for survival. Gloria explains how this works in the countryside:

If one of us has three hens in the house, she is not going to keep them there anymore; we keep all the hens together. For example, I'm in a group, and we have three hundred hens, so we can all have eggs. It has been hard, but this way we have more food. We are also sowing a few things. Our resources are not enough, but we have to do this to survive; we have to cultivate collectively. If I do it alone, or you do it alone, it will take us too much time to have enough food. If we do it together, it is easier.¹⁹

¹⁷ ANMUCIC stands for National Association of Peasant, Black, and Indigenous Women of Colombia.

¹⁸ Gloria Arboleda, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

¹⁹ Gloria Arboleda, telephone interview by author, November 23, 2015.

Because the dynamics in Buenaventura are different, this strategy cannot be applied the same way in the city. Rural women have adapted their collaborative traditions to the city by creating groups of mutual support in the neighborhoods. Members help each other save money; they help each other in difficult times; and they pool resources when one of them is in need. For example, when one woman, or a member of her family gets sick, they all contribute to buy the medicine; if a family member dies, they all help to provide a decent funeral and burial.²⁰

Sharing knowledge is another, especially important element of collaboration among the Butterflies. Gloria, for example, organizes meetings and workshops with women with less education to talk with them about human rights, women's rights, and the Colombian law regarding violence against women. The Butterflies always emphasize the importance of educating themselves in these matters, and sharing what they learn with other members in the community. In a context where formal education has been denied to many, the act of sharing knowledge plays a very important role, especially if this knowledge includes their rights as human beings, women, and Colombian citizens.

Although meetings and workshops are two of the most important activities of the network, the Butterflies need to be careful to come together in a way that does not draw too much attention from the criminal gangs who control the neighborhoods. These groups are always alert to strangers who enter the territories that they call their own. In order to get together, the Butterflies must find ways around this impediment. For example, a person who does not live in the neighborhood where a meeting will take place cannot get into that neighborhood alone. She must be accompanied by someone the local gang will recognize—someone Gloria describes as an “entry card.” Such women will

²⁰ Ibid.

rendezvous with others outside the neighborhood, and bring them in. By pretending simply to be visiting a comadre, the Butterflies cross neighborhood borders without putting themselves at risk. Maria, one of the Butterflies who works as a community mother, explains what the risk means in her neighborhood:

Well, if you go, like you went yesterday, but you do it alone, they will take you and ask you a lot of questions. If you don't answer the questions they might stab you, shoot you, I don't know... they leave you there chopped up ... or they can kill you and leave you there.²¹

Maria is describing the situation in the neighborhood Vista Hermosa, in the commune 12, where violence has escalated during the last few years. However, not all neighborhoods are experiencing the same level of violence. As in any city, there are areas that are safer than others, and the Butterflies always look for the safest places to hold their meetings. In spite of the risk that comes with being a community leader, none of the Butterflies' leaders has become a target of the gangs.

Although Gloria knows the risk involved in moving around as a community leader, she continues working not only in the different neighborhoods of Buenaventura, but also in different rural areas such as the rivers Calima and Anchicayá, where she organizes meetings and workshops with peasants, both women and men. This means she may encounter not only the gangs in the city, but also other armed groups in the countryside. Gloria is convinced, however, that because her mission consists only of helping others—regardless of who these others are—there is no reason for her to gain enemies:

We are not adversaries of any groups. I run into one of them, and then with the other, and nothing. My role is to serve who needs me, especially women The point is to be willing to help anyone from one side or other....If you are willing to help the Army but never the police, the police may be forever against you. But if you help the soldiers when they need help, and also the

²¹ Marina Amina, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

thief, and anyone who needs you, who would be against you?
Although...there is always a risk....²²

This is one of the most striking characteristics of the Butterflies philosophy. Their mission is all about creating bonds, helping each other, and in so doing, building the foundation for peace. In spite of all the violence that the Butterflies and their families have experienced and seen, their discourse and actions are not about retaliation or hatred; they are about participating actively, in a daily basis, in a process of reconciliation and peace building. Making this shift is one of the most difficult steps that a society affected by a prolonged war needs to take to rebuild itself.

Gloria understands the journey as the goal in itself, and comadreo as a way of life that can transform society. She believes is it in daily life and relationship with others that reconciliation and peace are built. When she envisions her future in the Butterflies with New Wings, she sees herself doing the same work she has done all her life:

In the future I see myself... as I am today. I am a motivator, one link of the chain. One step of this immense staircase that life is.... I see myself continuing with my work as a mediator, as a connection between the countryside and the city, between rural and urban women, helping young women and young men to live their lives the best way possible. I will continue to help women who, for one reason or another, are not living life. The most important thing is being able to live life. Thinking without living, and without taking action, is not life.²³

With these words, Gloria captures three very important elements of the Butterflies philosophy. First, social change is constructed collectively, and it is a lifetime responsibility. Second, being an enemy of injustice and inequality implies taking action. Third, taking action means transforming our ways of interacting with others, more than performing great feats.

²² Gloria Arboleda, telephone interview by author, November 23, 2015.

²³ Gloria Amparo Arboleda, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

It is not surprising that, after fifty years of war, communities and individuals may get exhausted. It is not uncommon that under these circumstances people start to believe that their individual actions do not make an impact in society as a whole, or even that collective initiatives will not lead, in the end, to a significant improvement in their lives or the lives of others. Gloria and the Butterflies with New Wings work every day to transform this scenario. The Butterflies are convinced that daily practices of solidarity that may seem small—like pooling resources to make a lemonade for a soccer match—do make a difference. The Butterflies know that their individual actions and their relationship with others have impact in their communities, and have the capacity to change lives. This means that believing in social change requires participating in its construction. Hope involves a responsibility, and the Butterflies with New Wings have transformed that responsibility in a way of life.

Chapter Three

Dismantling Domestic Violence: Empathy, Solidarity, and Trust

There is one particular topic of discussion at their meetings that the Butterflies identify as especially important for them: strategies for improving their relationships with their families.¹ A large number of the Butterflies grew up in families affected not only by the war, but also by domestic violence. Unfortunately, many of them experienced that violence again with their own partners, or decided to stay single in order to avoid repeating the story of their parents. There are also women who, in response to abuse, became as violent as their abusive partners. In their meetings, the Butterflies discuss ways in which they can change the internal dynamics of their families, improve their relationships with their partners, find constructive ways to solve problems between them, and educate their children in a safe and non-violent environment.

When Buenaventura became a crucial point of interest for the armed groups, violence against civilians became part of daily life. The population had to adapt to the conditions and dynamics imposed on them—such as the invisible borders and illegal tolls—and find strategies to continue with their daily activities in the safest ways possible. After all, in spite of the war, work continues, school continues, life goes on. In a context like this, where the violent dynamics of the city itself and its public spaces create a permanent state of alert, homes may be seen as a refuge from harm. However, this is not always the case. For many women in Buenaventura, their homes are also

¹ Maritza Asprilla, telephone interview by author, November 6, 2015; Carmen Rosa Inestrosa, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016; Andrea Moreno, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

affected by violence. Besides brutality that affects the public spaces, domestic violence affects the private spaces of many families.

Like many women in Buenaventura, a large number of the Butterflies with New Wings have been witnesses to or victims of domestic violence at one point in their lives. Therefore, creating strategies to fight this type of violence became one of the most important objectives of the network. The Butterflies with New Wings have two approaches to the problem. First, they assist women who are recovering from this type of violence by providing emotional support and guidance; second, they create strategies to transform family dynamics, helping couples find new ways to interact with each other and solve conflicts. In other words, the Butterflies work with women who have left abusive partners and are rebuilding their lives, and also work with women—and sometimes with their partners—who are trying to transform their relationship in order to stay together. The personal experiences of Maritza Asprilla, Carmen Inestrosa, and Andrea Moreno exemplify the Butterflies' strategies in these two different situations.

Maritza Asprilla is one of the leaders of the Butterflies with New Wings. Although today she is completely committed to ending all types of violence against women, it took her years to get to this point. Like many other Butterflies, Maritza witnessed domestic violence while growing up and, later on, experienced the same with her own partner. She remembers very vividly seeing her mother mistreated, and the fear that she and her siblings used to feel. However, Maritza also recalls her mother's teaching her that her role as a woman would be to please her future husband. Somewhere between her fear of her father and her mother's words, Maritza started to believe that violence was an inevitable component of love. Avoiding romantic love, she thought, would allow her to be safe.

My stepfather, who I call father because he raised me, treated my mom very badly, so I grew up thinking that I wouldn't fall in love ... but that is what you say, and the heart says something else. So I fell in love. I had these ideas that my mother taught me because patriarchy has existed for a long time. She said, "When you have a husband you have to do everything he says." So I was willing to do so. We lived very happily for two years and then the other three were such torture that.... Oh my God. I had to sleep in the woods, naked, one night in Teresita because he wanted to kill me.²

Maritza used to think about love, violence, and marriage as if they were firmly interwoven. Due to the normalization of domestic violence in Buenaventura, it took Maritza years to understand that the violence she experienced with her former partner was not normal, does not happen to everyone, and not her fault.

Maritza found the support of the Butterflies with New Wings at a time of acute crisis for her. They accompanied her in a process of emotional recovery, and profound transformation in the way she sees the world, family life, and women's role in her social context. As comadres, the Butterflies listened to her story with empathy and without judgment; they shared their own stories with her; and they offered her unconditional help. Through the network, Maritza learned about human rights and women's rights, and created a new relationship with herself. In order to create a new life, Maritza had to unlearn what she had been taught while growing up. Encouraged by Gloria Arboleda, Maritza became increasingly active in the Butterflies of New Wings and, today, she helps women who are having experiences similar to hers:

I remember how I cried, so I know how to receive the comadres when they are crying, and how to support them.... It is very important to respect the comadres; not only to be listened to, but to listen to them as well. Sometimes we can be so devoted to pain that we talk without listening to others. Unless you strip that pain off, you won't have peace....³

Because of her own experience with domestic violence, Maritza has the tools and the empathy to help other women.

² Martiza Asprilla, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

³ Maritza Asprilla, telephone interview by author, November 6, 2015.

However, she knows that women who need help do not necessarily seek it; instead, the majority stay silent about the situation in their homes. Maritza has found different strategies to get closer to women whom she knows may need help. She explains one of these strategies with an anecdote:

We went to knock on her door; there we were five of us. And she was so disheveled, horrible. We initiated a conversation with her, but she asked us to leave. I told her, “No, I can’t leave! With what energy will I go outside if I made love seventy-seven times yesterday? I don’t have the energy for it!” Getting that beautiful smile of hers that I never forget made me realize this is my strategy. Then she started telling us, “Come on; take a seat.” One little piece of us was able to get in and found a place. Today she is a woman that you wouldn’t believe.⁴

This anecdote shows the difference that having a network of support can make in someone’s life. For women who have lost their loved ones or their houses, for women in very difficult economic situations, for women suffering from domestic violence, and for women who are or feel alone, the comadres have become a source of hope and strength. They remind us the importance of and need for human connection. Solidarity, friendship, and empathy have the power to improve people’s lives, and their relationships with others.

Even further, as happened with Carmen Rosa Inestrosa, a network of support like the Butterflies with New Wings can save lives. For many years Carmen Rosa lived with an abusive partner with whom she had three children. When she had her youngest child, her partner became, in her words, “a delinquent. He robbed, killed, everything. He started to say that he was going to kill me. He hit me a lot.”⁵ Out of fear, Carmen stayed with him for years, until the violence became intolerable and she feared for her and her children’s lives. After she left her partner, he looked for her until he was killed months later. The following years were not easier, however. Carmen was in a very difficult

⁴ Martiza Asprilla, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

⁵ Carmen Rosa Inestrosa, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

economic situation, got very sick due to stress and work overload, and was devastated and exhausted. At one point, in a moment of desperation, she tried to kill herself and her three children. The solidarity and friendship she found in the Butterflies gave her a new chance in life and helped her get back on her feet.⁶

Although emotional support is the pillar of the Butterflies with New Wings, they have also developed complementary strategies to help each other. The Butterflies know that, at least in their context, domestic violence against women is related with economic dependence. Many women rely completely on their partners, or earn less money than they do. This dependence makes them more vulnerable to abusive partners, or prevents them from leaving and supporting their children on their own. To respond to this situation, the Butterflies have created a food and savings scheme that they call food chains. Each chain consist of a group of women who contribute a small amount of money or food every month. The money gathered goes, every month, to one of the members. Although each woman has her turn to receive the money and food, the order can change if one of the women needs help urgently. This arrangement combines emergency assistance with a predictable distribution of money that women use to cover needs that they could not meet otherwise.

The food chains are not only a very creative arrangement; they are also an exercise of solidarity and trust. As Maritza explains, when people who are in a situation of scarcity manage to contribute with a monthly quota of money and food, they know what solidarity and sharing actually mean, and the difference they can make.⁷ A food chain is also built on trust, for it places one person to be in charge of gathering and distributing the money. The women chosen to be treasurers of the chains are those

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Martiza Asprilla, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

women whom the members trust and respect, and they have become important figures in the network as they foster participant's unity and faith in one another. The role of treasurer is also very important for the bearer of the title. It is a role that requires responsibility and commitment, and is crucial for the network. Maria Amina, for example, is the treasurer of a chain in the Vista Hermosa neighborhood, and talks about the chain and her work for it with excitement and satisfaction:

I am the treasurer, I take care of the money. [Smiles proudly]. In Vista Hermosa people did not want to save anymore; they said that the money would get lost. Because I am a woman of my word, in the neighborhood some women said, "If Maria joins the chain, I join." All right, then! Right now we have a chain of 1,200.000 pesos (about \$400 dollars). It's big. Each month one person receives 1,200.000 pesos. We are twelve. Each month we all contribute with 100.000 pesos (about \$32 dollars). When is my turn, I use the money to buy materials and fix my house.⁸

In the case of single mothers or women who have left abusive partners, the food chains help them provide for their children and take care of their homes. For women who live with their partners, the chains have allowed them to increase their contributions to the home and, by doing so, increase their self-confidence and independence from their partners.

Along with the food chains, the Butterflies have organized workshops to teach women to make products they can sell to earn extra income. In this way, too, the network focuses on increasing women's independence and agency. The Butterflies, then, are working to improve themselves and become agents of change. This perspective helps women improve their self-esteem. Carmen Rosa explains about the Butterflies:

I have never felt that they are giving you money. If someone tells you to join the network because they will fill your pockets, that is not true. That is not what it is about. What the network gives you is information, knowledge, so you can find better ways to save...and find a way of life. For example, there are workshops to learn to make soap and shampoo, there are food handling

⁸ Maria Amina, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

workshops.... You can learn to make things and sell them. Those are the workshops that I am very grateful for.⁹

The workshops, food chains, and emotional support were crucial strategies for Carmen after she left her abusive partner, and they have helped hundreds of other women in the same situation.

This does not mean, however, that all women who have participated in these projects have made the same decision as Carmen. There are many women in the network who have experienced domestic violence and have not left their partners. Instead, they are involved in a very complex process: working with their partners to transform the internal dynamics in their homes. The Butterflies with New Wings welcome all women who want to join them, no matter the circumstances. They try to help each other to improve their lives in any way they can. They do not try to force women who are abused to separate from their partners. What they do in cases like this is to help them find strategies to make the changes they desire.

Maria Amina and Andrea Moreno are two who received such help. Both have stayed in relationships that were violent at some point, and both believe that partners can change the way they interact with each other. For these women, liberation from violence has required cooperation with men. In this connection, they talk about an issue that is usually taboo in patriarchal societies: that women can use violence, not just men.

Even though Maria's husband died from a snakebite seventeen years before the Butterflies network was created, she explains that her relationship with him taught her that partners can overcome domestic violence. In her case, both she and her husband had to change. Maria had started to use violence to defend herself from him, and she was

⁹ Carmen Rosa Inestrosa, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

willing to use the same level of violence he used against her. They lived in a cycle of brutality until both agreed to stop and find a way out. In her words,

My grandma was like a slave to my grandfather. My grandma could not say anything because if she did, he hit her. Growing up with such a mean man, I became very rebellious. So when I got married and my husband was going to hit me, it was one hit from him and then one from me. Finally we made agreements. “If you don’t hurt me, then I don’t hurt you.” So he stopped hitting me, and I did not do anything to him anymore.¹⁰

In a context where violence against women was not questioned, Maria did what she deemed necessary to avoid her grandmother’s fate. She, as well as her husband, did not have other role models, other education or guidance to create a different relationship from the start. They learned to build a non-violent relationship by literally living each other’s pain.

Unlike Maria, Andrea does not mention being a victim of physical violence. Instead, she talks about anger and violence as her own reactions to gender norms that she found unfair. Andrea refers specifically to the distribution of household chores, the servile attitude that her husband expected from her, and how the unfairness enraged her:

I was a very violent person. I have learned how to manage that better. My husband was one of those who, if he had dinner here, in this table, he left the dishes there and I was supposed to clean up after. I used to do it, but with anger. If we were both eating and he wanted water, I was supposed to bring it to him. I have learned how to talk about these things with him, and our relationship has improved a lot.¹¹

In contrast with Maria and her husband, Andrea found a space to talk about her marriage and look for solutions. With the Butterflies’ support, Andrea started to find new ways to interact with her husband to make her opinions and feelings heard and respected without attacking him. To succeed, however, she needed him to get involved and be willing to work with her as a team. And he did. Andrea and her husband started to go together to

¹⁰ Maria Amina, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

¹¹ Andrea Moreno, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 10, 2016.

talks and workshops organized by the Butterflies, and continue to work on their relationship.

The stories of these four women—Maritza, Carmen, Maria, and Andrea—are clear examples of the normalization of domestic violence in Buenaventura, and the Butterflies' strategies to fight against it. There is, however, an alternative that some of the most radical Butterflies have chosen: Mery Medina and Gloria Arboleda, two of the main leaders of Butterflies with New Wings, have decided to stay single. The probability of experiencing domestic violence is so high in their environment that they have chosen to put marriage aside and devote their lives to work for their communities. Also, these women have always questioned gender norms in Buenaventura, and they are not willing to adapt to them in any way.

When I asked Gloria and Mery if they are married, their first response was laughter. My question became an unintentional icebreaker; they found it hilarious. "Happily single, mami, happily single," said Gloria.¹² To the same question, Mery answered, "I have a son. But, married? That I am not [laughter], neither have I allowed any man to mistreat me."¹³ Their chuckles were a sign of relief. In addition to laughter, their answers had another thing in common: they connected marriage with violence. Even though I did not mention or imply domestic violence in any way when I asked the question, for these women, the two seem to go hand in hand.

Gloria mentions only one partner, with whom she had two daughters. Although when growing up she always said she was never going to live what her mother lived at her home, in some point she did. When it happened, she did not think twice before

¹² Gloria Arboleda, telephone interview by author, November 23, 2015.

¹³ Mery Medina, telephone interview by author, November 30, 2015.

leaving her partner, and she has been single since then. In the countless conversations we had, the following sentences were Gloria's only words about that part of her life:

I had one partner. We lived together, and, when I saw how things were, that it was all violence, honey, I decided to stay with my daughters, my siblings, and my nephews. I gave birth to two children, did not have more. And I moved on.¹⁴

Gloria's passions and objectives in life have been to work with her community, build a better place for her daughters to live in, and raise them to be free, independent, and happy.

Mery shares these desires. She has dedicated her life to work for her community, to making a change in women's lives, and to giving her son an education based on respect, non-violence, and equality. Since she was a girl, Mery questioned the patriarchal system in Buenaventura, and refused to accept its constraints on her life. Mery is, in fact, one of the few Butterflies who have never been victims of domestic violence. As she explains,

Machismo reigns here in the Pacific coast, I think in the entire country, but it is stronger in the Pacific coast I always questioned why women were supposed to let men to mistreat them. I always thought that we all have the same right to be respected, and to all those things that have always been only for the men. Inside, I just could not understand why a woman had to bow her head before the desires and orders of a man.¹⁵

Following her beliefs, Mery started to help women victims of domestic violence, mostly trying to open their eyes to the fact that domestic violence is not normal. "It was necessary to create a group in which we could talk to women, make them see that they were not born to be mistreated, that they are nobody's servant, that they are people who deserve respect and have rights. This is how my work with women started."¹⁶

¹⁴ Gloria Arboleda, telephone interview by author, November 23, 2015.

¹⁵ Mery Medina, telephone interview by author, November 30, 2015.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Like Gloria, Mery has worked for and with her community since before the creation of the Butterflies with New Wings. She started her work with the Parish of St. Peter the Apostle, located in the Lleras Neighborhood, where she lives. The Barrio Lleras has been, for the last twenty years, one of the main receptors of victims of forced displacement and, during the last decade, one of the most affected by the criminal gang Los Rastrojos. At the same time, the Barrio Lleras has been the birthplace of many initiatives of resistance such as women's organizations, youth organizations, and historical memory initiatives.¹⁷ Over the years, Mery has been involved in many projects in the Lleras neighborhood through her work with the Parish, with the Butterflies, and with FUNDESCODES,¹⁸ a Catholic foundation.

The fact that Mery and Gloria have decided not to get married or live with a partner does not mean they do not expect men to participate in social transformation. On the contrary, they and other Butterflies are currently developing strategies to work with men. Even though the Butterflies with New Wings are a network for women, they know that it is not possible to end discrimination and violence against women without enlisting men's assistance.

The Butterflies are not only looking to help women who have been victims of violence; they also seek to transform the social structures that produce and reinforce that violence. This transformation requires the participation of men. Therefore, they are searching for ways to include men in their activities, by inviting their partners and other

¹⁷ ACNUR, "Espacio para facilitar la búsqueda de soluciones se inaugura en Buenaventura [A space to facilitate the search for solutions is inaugurated in Buenaventura]", accessed March 29, 2016, <http://www.acnur.org/t3/noticias/noticia/espacio-para-facilitar-la-busqueda-de-soluciones-se-inaugura-en-buenaventura/>; Mery Medina, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

¹⁸ FUNDESCODES is a foundation created in 2007 by community leaders with the guidance of Catholic parishes. Its objective is to create spaces to strengthen ethnic and cultural values, where boys, girls, youth, and women heads of household who have been affected by the war, can confront their realities and transform them. For more information about the foundation, see "Sobre nosotros," FUNDESCODES, accessed November 5, 2015, <http://fundescodes.org/>.

men to participate in the network's workshops. It is not easy to get men to take part. The biggest obstacle is that they feel threatened by the organization. Men tend to believe that, by helping women, the Butterflies are attacking men. As Gloria explains, "Men are afraid because they don't know what we really are."¹⁹ Maritza also mentions this problem: "We are not attacking men. We are not saying that all men are mean. What we want them to understand is that women can educate and improve themselves, and that men do not have to or need to subjugate women."²⁰

Currently, the Butterflies are looking for strategies to create bridges with men who see them as adversaries. As Gloria Arboleda describes her approach, "If I am going to get together with ten women, and five of them have husbands, then I go to meet them and talk to them. I try to get to them through whatever it is that they are doing. If they are playing dominoes, then I play with them, and we start chatting."²¹ It has happened, as it did with Andrea's husband, that men feel intimidated until they attend a talk or a meeting and understand what the Butterflies do and think. There are also cases in which the Butterflies deal with men who use extremely misogynist language and harbor sexist opinions. Not all the Butterflies, especially the youngest, feel confident enough to face this type of man in workshops and talks, but the most experienced women do. In these new projects, moreover, all of the Butterflies are learning new and better strategies.

Working with men is, without a doubt, one of the greatest challenges facing the organization, and one of the most important steps toward transforming dynamics in the Butterflies' communities. It involves an enormous effort to work together to question the values and norms that have shaped gender inequality, and that have allowed violence to become a constant response to differences, to disagreements, and conflicts. This

¹⁹ Gloria Arboleda, telephone interview by author, November 23, 2015.

²⁰ Martiza Asprilla, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

²¹ Gloria Arboleda, telephone interview by author, November 23, 2015.

process of dialogue and mutual effort transcends private spaces, contributing to the reconciliation and repair of a society profoundly wounded by violence. Bibiana Pañaralda Sepúlveda, one of the founders of the Butterflies, puts it in these words:

We are remembering how we used to solve problems before the paramilitary arrived to the Pacific. We used to call the aunts, uncles, grandparents to help resolve conflicts. We are human, and have problems and difficulties. The difference is that we do not see the other as an enemy, we are not looking how to disappear the other, to wipe out the other, or solve a problem in a violent and aggressive way. This is an important contribution to the construction of peace.²²

Because their objective is not only to heal and recover from violent experiences, but also to change social structures that have allowed those experiences to happen, the Butterflies are preparing and educating themselves as much as they can. For example, they are working on alliances with public universities so that members can attend different courses. Currently, a large number of them are in courses on Indigenous and Black identities, and they are also creating groups to study the ways in which notions of masculinity have been constructed and have shaped culture and society the Pacific coast.

As all of their stories and projects show, the Butterflies with New Wings go far beyond helping victims of violence. It is a network whose philosophy and strategies are rebuilding bonds in their families and communities, repairing trust and solidarity among neighbors, and transforming the foundations of their relationships in a daily basis. The impact that the Butterflies are making in Buenaventura shows us the enormous power of transformation that can come when women come together with the apparently simple idea to help each other, and talk.

²² Bibiana Pañaralda Sepúlveda, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

Conclusion

After fifty years of armed conflict between the Colombian state and the guerrilla movements, the Colombian government opened the door to peace dialogues. Months after his election in 2010, the President Juan Manuel Santos expressed the willingness of the government to end the armed conflict through negotiation. Soon after that, in 2012, the meetings between the government and the FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) started, placing the negotiation table in Havana, Cuba. The negotiations aim at the termination of the war and the construction of a lasting peace. This process involves the reintegration of thousands of guerrilla combatants to civil life, and the participation of the FARC in politics through the legitimate mechanisms of democracy.¹

In addition to facing enormous challenges—in terms of justice, truth, reconciliation, and reparation of the victims, just to name a few—the peace process has also awakened countless discussions around the role that Colombian society in general has in the construction of peace.² What does it mean, for all Colombian citizens who are

¹ For a detailed account of the peace process, see Oficina del Alto Conisionado para la Paz, “Mesa de Conversaciones con las FARC-EP [Conversation Table with the FACR-EP],” accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/procesos-y-conversaciones/Paginas/mesa-de-conversaciones-con-las-farc-ep.aspx>; Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas, “Colombia Peace: Monitoring Progress in Peace Dialogues,” accessed April 25, 2016, <http://colombiapeace.org/official-documents/>; International Center For Transitional Justice, “Colombia,” accessed April 25, 2016, <https://www.ictj.org/our-work/regions-and-countries/colombia>.

² For a good study of the debates around the construction of peace in Colombia from different approaches of historians, anthropologist, sociologists and political scientists, see Angelika Rettberg, ed., *Construcción de Paz en Colombia [Construction of Peace in Colombia]* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes. Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Departamento de Ciencia Política, 2012).

not at the negotiation table, in the government, or in the guerillas, to become active participants in peace building?

The Butterflies with New Wings are setting a very inspiring example of what that role may look like in daily life. After such a prolonged war, Colombian society is profoundly wounded and tired, just as the Butterflies were before they got together to heal each other. The bonds of too many communities like theirs have been disrupted. Trust and hope have been broken. Still, the Butterflies with New Wings are transforming their lives, their families, and their communities through the daily practice of empathy and solidarity. They are rebuilding trust and hope by transforming their experiences with violence into strategies to connect with others.

The Butterflies with New Wings show us that individual actions and collective efforts at the grassroots actually have the capacity to foster change and transform societies that otherwise seem hopeless and shattered. Their work is a proof that individuals and communities in Colombia are not powerless. Because the idea that small actions have impact in society as a whole involves great responsibility, the stories and work of Butterflies with New Wings are an invitation to action. As Maritza Asprilla, one of the leaders of the Butterflies, clearly says: "I am one of those people who say, yes, peace will come soon. So we have to go for it. With guts. With courage. With verve."³

³ Martiza Asprilla, interview by author, Buenaventura, February 11, 2016.

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