

# Gendering Violent Pluralism: Women's Political Organising in Latin America

Kristin Bergtora Sandvik

*S.J.D Harvard Law School 2008*

*Research Professor in Humanitarian Studies, PRIO*

*Professor of Sociology of Law, Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo*

[Bergtora@prio.no](mailto:Bergtora@prio.no)

Kristin Bergtora Sandvik (Doctor of Juridical Sciences, S.J.D Harvard Law School 2008) is a Research Professor in Humanitarian Studies at PRIO, and a professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Oslo. Sandvik is the founder and previous director of the Norwegian Centre for Humanitarian Studies, and a member of the board of the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) and the International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA). Sandvik is a leading international scholar in the field of humanitarian ethics innovation and technology. Her feminist scholarship has focused on women's access to refugee resettlement in Uganda and displaced women's legal mobilisation in Colombia. Her most recent work focus on the need for gendering ICT harm theory and the politics of feminist recognition with respect to 'dead male bodies'.

## Abstract

*As a theory on violent democracies, the theory of violent pluralism is silent on the gendered realities of this violence as it plays out in Latin America. To bridge that knowledge gap, this article begins to develop a theory of the “gender of violent pluralism”. The article builds on socio-legal research on displaced women’s political organising in a violent context in Colombia (2010-2014) while also drawing on empirical examples of violence against women activists from Brazil, Central America and Mexico in the same period. The article proposes to unpack this concept as a three-pronged relationship between political organising and gendered violence: political organising as a response to gendered violence, gendered violence as an obstacle to organising and finally, political organising as a cause of further gender-based violence. Ultimately, the article is also an attempt to articulate a more general critique of the concept of violent pluralism—its conception of democracy, its possible erasure of the efforts of non-violent actors and how it calibrates the scope and intensity of political violence.*

Keywords: violent pluralism, gender violence, displacement, Colombia, Latin-America, legal mobilisation

## Introduction

“Unfortunately, we can’t say that nothing is going to happen” Luz Estela, a lawyer in her early thirties from the COLEMAD women lawyer’s collective, told the congregation of women grassroots leaders gathered for a workshop at the University of Magdalena in Santa Marta, an old Colonial town at the Colombian east Coast. The women – leaders of associations for displaced people, indigenous groups, Afro-Colombians, dispossessed peasant women and victims of massacres – had travelled from all corners of the war-ravaged department of Magdalena to take part in a planning meeting in April 2013.<sup>i</sup> “They have threatened me too”, added an Afro-Colombian participant, “they said ‘things are what they are, don’t mess it up’”. While the violence in Colombia continues to be particularly intense<sup>ii</sup>, in recent years, these kinds of threats have increasingly materialised into deadly violence against women activists across Latin America.

In May 2015, Francela Méndez was murdered in El Salvador. Despite her prominent role as a defender of the rights of the transgender community, the El Salvadorian Police attempted to link the murders to drug trafficking, rather than investigate the links to her work with Salvadorian human rights networks<sup>iii</sup>. In July 2015, Nadia Vera was found dead in her flat in Mexico City. She had been raped, tortured and shot in the head alongside four other people. Vera campaigned against attacks on journalists and the selling of oil reserves in Veracruz State. She had fled to Mexico City to find safety. She was the 36th female human rights defender to be killed in Mexico since 2010.<sup>iv</sup> Nilce de Souza Magalhães was active in denouncing human rights violations perpetrated by the consortium Sustainable Energy of Brazil in the construction of the Usina Hidrelétrica (UHE) in Jirau, Porto Velho. In addition to participating in several demonstrations and public hearings, Nilce submitted several complaints that initiated civil and criminal proceedings against UHE. In June 2016, her body was found by the UHE dam by the project's workers. Her hands and feet were tied

with ropes and her body was attached to heavy rocks. While an arrest was made, the accused escaped from prison.<sup>v</sup> In March 2017, leaked court documents suggested that the murder of the Honduran environmentalist Berta Cáceres was an extrajudicial killing planned by units linked to the country's US-trained Special Forces. Cáceres was shot dead in March 2016, despite being under state protection after receiving death threats over her opposition to a hydroelectric dam project led by Desarrollos Energéticos SA, (Desa). Cáceres had reported 33 death threats linked to her campaign against the dam, including several from Desa employees. Initially, investigators suggested the murderer was a former lover or disgruntled co-worker, but following international condemnation, arrests were made in May 2016.<sup>vi</sup> These are recent examples of the hundreds of killings and countless instances of harassment, threats, attacks, rapes, and torture against women who engage in political organising in Latin America. In 2017, the region was described by the UN as the world's most violent for women.<sup>vii</sup>

In their influential edited volume *“Violent Democracies in Latin America”*, Arias and Goldstein (2010) argue that the ‘evolutionist’ democracy theory’s understanding of disorder as a failure of institutions, resulting in the material loss of rights, and the attendant reliance on concepts such as ‘modified’ or ‘low-intensity’ citizenships, are analytically inadequate to grasp Latin American politics in the context of proliferating violence. Instead, they propose a concept of politics that looks to the complex ways in which order and disorder are created through the interactions of multiple violent actors, both within and without the state. Arias and Goldstein deploy the concept ‘violent pluralism’ as a prism for interrogating and understanding the co-existence of structural and personal, political and social violence and democracy in contemporary Latin America. Violence, they argue, is not an aberration but a ‘mechanism for keeping in place the institutions of neoliberal governance’. Violent pluralism is defined as ‘states, social elites, and

subalterns employing violence in the quest to establish or contest regimes of citizenship, justice, rights, and a democratic social order.’<sup>viii</sup>

While noting the importance of interrogating how violence constitutes political subjectivity<sup>ix</sup>, their framing of violent pluralism does not take into account the way the violent experiences of Luz Estela and her dead and living colleagues are structured by gender – and how this violence genders political subjectivity. Across the Latin-American continent, in countries like Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Brazil, women who engage in political organising of any form are subjected to systematic and brutal forms of violence. Given the utility—and success— of the violent pluralism concept, this article argues that the lack of attention to gender and how actors, political subjectivities and relationships are constituted through and by gendered modes of violence, constitutes an important and problematic analytical blind spot with respect to the conceptualisation of democracy in Latin America, including the role and relevance of non-violent mobilisation. This blind spot also renders us with an incomplete understanding of the nature and intensity of contemporary political violence. To that end, the article sets out to provide a lens which more adequately recognises how violence is gendered and political.

In the period between 2010 and 2013, in a project with Julieta Lemaitre and her team at University of Los Andes in Bogotá, we followed displaced women’s organisations as they demanded government support and assistance. Over time, we also concentrated on the ways they managed risk, and dealt with violent contexts, including insecurity arising from attempts at accessing government resources to be distributed by local governments.<sup>x</sup>

To begin the analytical work of gendering violent pluralism, the article maps out a three-pronged relationship between political organising and gendered violence. I suggest that gendered violence can be an *obstacle* to organising in a social field consisting of non-violent women’s

organisations; that women's political organising is also structured in *response* to gendered violence; and finally, that political organising is a *cause* of further gender-based violence, but the connection between organising and violence remains contested: political violence is often reframed as private and/or interpersonal. While taking the collaborative study of displaced women's organisations in Colombia as the empirical starting point for articulating these relationships, the article also draws on several strands of feminist literature analysing interfaces between gender, political organising and violence in Latin America; and on the four highly publicised and prototypical examples of individual murders of women activists from Brazil, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico presented above.

Some caveats are in order: taking my own disciplinary grounding in legal anthropology and socio-legal studies as its point of departure, this article privileges legal mobilisation as the thematic angle through which the relationships between political organising, political subjectivity and violence are explored. My attempt to gender violent pluralism is a bottom-up effort, and a tentative one. My approach is inevitably shaped—and limited—by my positionality as a Northern feminist. The empirical examples used in this article are partial and incomplete representations of the multiple linkages between violence and organising experienced by women in Colombia and beyond. The literature referenced is mostly English-language Latin American studies publications to provide accessibility for a global audience—these are deliberate but contestable choices. What I try to do is to conceptualise some of the ways in which the violence interacts with women's organising and use this to frame a concept of gendered violent pluralism.

The article proceeds as follows: the first part elaborates on Arias and Goldstein's notion of violent pluralism and identifies existing feminist engagements with democracy and violence that can help us gender violent pluralism. The second part uses my own work with Colombian feminist

scholar Julieta Lemaitre and topical examples to identify and reflect on a set of relationships that together make up the gender of violent pluralism.

### Putting gender into violent pluralism

In the last two decades, most countries in Latin America have witnessed a sharp increase in new forms of interpersonal violence, labelled “new violence” in scholarly debates. While political violence has receded, other forms of violence have multiplied.<sup>xi</sup> Arias and Goldstein’s concept *violent pluralism* describes the situation that ensues when demands for democratic, non-violent alternatives to conflict resolutions that can bring into dialogue multiple divergent voices are met with resistance by the state, while the civilians who embrace a non-violent approach are treated as potential enemies threatening the integrity of the state. The concept represents a critique of evolutionist framings of Latin American democracies as ‘incomplete’ in comparison with those of the Global North. It is also intended as a conceptual tool for identifying “particular social locations within Latin American States and civil societies in which violence can be found, joining it specifically to democracy”.<sup>xii</sup>

However, as in much of the scholarship on new violence, the formulation of the violent pluralism concept has been disconnected from the bodies of feminist literatures dealing comprehensively with one or several aspects of women’s political organising in Latin America; the pervasiveness of gendered violence across the continent; and the agency that women collectively and individually deploy in resisting, living with and overcoming insecurity and violence. This article proposes to fill the distance between the violent pluralism and feminist literatures by arguing that the absence or lack of acknowledgement of feminist and women’s

organising has left the violent democracies paradigm void of a lens which adequately recognises how violence is gendered and political.

A significant contribution of the large literature on women's political organising in Latin America are the accounts of how women's civil society organisations—almost uniformly non-violent in nature—have contributed to the democratisation of the continent.<sup>xiii</sup> Scholarly attention has been paid to the spread of neoliberalism, its impact on the state and its relationship to processes of 'NGOisation' and 'feminist' middle-class activism. Women's political organising often aim to contest neoliberal governance structures while at the same time being conditioned by them. Here, specific focus has been given to the role and relevance of the international women's rights discourse and its attendant ideas about the state as the provider and guardian of women's rights.<sup>xiv</sup>

The literature concerned with the interpersonal, symbolic and structural aspects of gender-based violence and its rising prevalence across Latin-America sees violence as political, as tied to governance paradigms and as structural. Explaining violence in the context of gender inequality, this literature aims to make violence visible, but also to draw linkages between gendered violence, a legacy of colonial oppression and contemporary processes of neoliberalisation to show how violence creates precarious, gendered citizenships. This includes analysis of domestic violence, harassment, sexual violence, manslaughter, disappearances, and gang violence<sup>xv</sup>, as well as investigations of the specificities of violence against different groups of women (indigenous, minority, LGBT, peasants, urban poor<sup>xvi</sup>). Significant focus has been given to women's social suffering under dictatorships, armed conflicts, entrenched organised crime and the gang violence that have plagued the continent.<sup>xvii</sup> This includes a concern with testimonies of gender-based violence in older transitional justice processes (Chile, Argentina, Peru, Guatemala)<sup>xviii</sup> and in recently ended armed conflict (Colombia)<sup>xix</sup>. The recognition of systemic violence against women

has given rise to the terms ‘femicide’ (in the case of Mexico and Guatemala<sup>xx</sup>) and ‘femincide’, to which I will return below. In the following, I use insights from this literature and topical examples from my own work with Julieta Lemaitre in Colombia to reflect on the recognition of violence as gendered and political, and to develop a gendered typology of violent pluralism.

### Processes of recognition: violence as gendered and gendered violence as political

From an analytical perspective, the work of developing a gendered dimension of violent pluralism entails a general and a contextual process of recognition. The first concerns the conceptualisation of gendered violence and its political constituents. What is specifically gendered about the violence described in this article? Nayak and Suchlands (2006) describe gender violence as comprising of the acts and practices that systematically target a person, group or community to dictate what ‘men’ and ‘women’ are supposed to be and to discipline marginalised communities or any other perceived threats to dominant political structures and practices. In any of these processes, a *recognition* and *normalisation* of violence is required, and dominant political institutions, ideas and discourses determine what ‘counts’ as gender violence.<sup>xxi</sup>

Writing on El Salvador, Hume (2008) argues that the normalisation of violence has happened through a “political project that has actively employed terror to pursue its ends. This process has been made possible by a legitimisation of violence as a key element of male gender identity.”<sup>xxii</sup> The silencing and invisibilisation of gender-based violence – by society and through academic analysis– is part and parcel of this normalisation. Criticism has here in particular been directed at the concept of “new violence” for example in El Salvador<sup>xxiii</sup> or Brazil<sup>xxiv</sup>, which tends to focus on young men with guns. At the same time, Latin America scholars have coined the important term femincide (as opposed to femicide), which encompasses the idea that the crime of

murdering a woman also has political implications; the murderer is guilty, but so are the state and judicial structures that normalise misogyny via impunity, silence, and indifference when it comes to prevention, investigation, and prosecution<sup>xxv</sup>.

The second process of recognition concerns how we as scholars make sense of how the activists personal experiences of suffering, pain and loss in the Colombian context shape their response to violence and threats of violence in the present. While being a longstanding liberal democracy, Colombia is one of the most unequal countries in the world. Poor, rural citizens suffered the brunt of the violence during the civil war (1959-2016). 220 000 were murdered, and more than 6 million displaced, most intensely in the period between 1996 and 2004.<sup>xxvi</sup> Torture, disappearances, sexual violence, harassment and extortion of civilians have been common, especially in the war-torn sections of the country. Community leaders have been particularly targeted.<sup>xxvii</sup> The Colombian state –generally described as ‘neoliberal’—is deeply fractured. Various factions of the State (the administration in Bogotá, regional governments, the military, the security agencies), guerillas, paramilitary forces and criminal actors have been behind this violence, but exactly who is responsible for a given threat or act of violence and why often remains unknown.

At the same time, a remarkable legacy of the later decades of the Colombian civil war is the continuous proliferation women’s grassroots organisations using peaceful means to end the war and further Colombian democracy. Many of the women we interviewed had been displaced, sometimes multiple times, because of their grassroots activism as peasant leaders. The violence that led to the initial displacement often follow women in the sites of reception, where they suffer crosscutting forms of marginalisation related to impoverishment, poor maternal health, double responsibilities for household and family income as well as increased exposure to sexual violence.

Hence, my analytical starting point is that IDP activists are already actors with a political subjectivity constituted by and through violence and inequality.

### Studying violence against IDP women and IDP women's organisations

Law 387 of 1997 required the Colombian government to prevent and address internal displacement and protect the rights of IDPs. In the context of escalating rates of displacement in the early 2000s and the inadequate implementation of Law 387, in 2004, in tutela T-025, the Colombian Constitutional Court declared an 'unconstitutional state of affairs'. The ensuing litigation before the Constitutional Court generated multiple spaces for the proliferating number of organisations that represented the interests of IDPs and women in particular. From a gender perspective, Auto (award) 092 of 2008 is the central follow-up decision to T-025. In Award 092, the Court found that the government's failure to address the disparate impact of displacement on women violated the Constitution as well as Colombia's international human-rights obligations. To provide a comprehensive structural remedy, the Court ordered the creation of thirteen specific programs for displaced women, and granted individual orders of protection to 600 women across the country (the inadequate implementation of Award 092 of 2008 has itself been the subject of several follow-up awards issued by the Court). As the Colombian state – and regional authorities in particular— have been unable and unwilling to comply with this order, activism has continued.

Between 2010 and 2013, the research team— which consisted of the Colombian project lead Julieta Lemaitre, the author, three graduate students, and two undergraduate research assistants—conducted a multi-method study that followed internally displaced women's organisations as they demanded government assistance and protection. By 2013, we had identified 66 organisations in 26 of Colombia's 32 provinces and interviewed 63 of their leaders; we also

recorded their public appearances in various forums and collected media coverage of their appearances. We interviewed key government officials and observed 12 extended public meetings between IDP leaders and government entities. This article uses topical examples from five of the projects extended case studies of women's IDP organisations. These case studies also illustrate some prototypical dimensions of IDP organising: Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas is a relatively large and well-organised grassroots organisation led by a feminist lawyer. The Liga is based in the northern department of Bolívar, which has a significant problem with organised crime and paramilitary capture of the local government. The Mesa Municipal de Organizaciones de Población Desplazada de Mocoa is based in the war-torn southern department of Putumayo. The case study illustrates both the mixed forms that IDP women's organising takes and the specific risks of organising in ongoing conflict. Corporación Casa Amazonía is also based in Putumayo but is largely run by to women leaders as a therapeutic initiative. The case study on the Consejo Nacional de Mujer Indígena, a branch of ONIC, Colombia's largest indigenous rights association, is an example of ethnic IDP organising. Finally, COLEMAD is a collective of women lawyers based in Barranquilla, on the troubled Caribbean coast.

As noted above, our focus expanded from a concern with the struggle for the implementation of rights, to a broader focus on the systemic violence IDP women were subjected to at the economic, political and personal level. Over time, it became evident that management of risk and strategies to deal with violent contexts were key components of organising, and that they differed from those deployed by all-male or mixed IDP organisations. Despite the advent of a transitional justice frame with the 2011 Victims Act, the women IDP leaders and activists continued to be haunted by the violence of their pasts; struggling with the various forms of violence that hindered their individual and collective organising efforts; and trying to anticipate and protect

themselves against the threats of violence that came as a consequence of their political and social engagement in a post-conflict context.

### Gendered violence as an *obstacle* to organising

First, I draw on field data to illustrate how gender violence can be an obstacle to organising. As a category, women's organisations overwhelmingly deploy peaceful tactics and strategies. By emphasising violent civil society actors, the violent pluralism framework risks erasing the efforts of non-violent actors, but also their vulnerability and the impact of violence. Gendered violence can deter or end mobilisation because women are not able to take advantage of political opportunities or harness necessary resources. Fear of violence or actual violence can undermine the collective action frame. In the deeply unequal Colombian context, physical and symbolic violence work together as a deterrent to women's activism. Physical violence and state repression can undermine and destroy ongoing activism, for example by "leadership-decapitation". The rising lethal violence against activists across Colombian civil society combine with a political economy of symbolic violence arising from the way messages, icons, or signs transmit messages of domination of or aggression against women. The impact of these threats depends on their nature, context and whether they are addressed to individuals or collective entities.

The everyday life of Colombian women grassroots-activists is filled by an avalanche of sexualised threats against women framed around particular social and cultural conceptions of gender roles and the role and place of women's bodies in the public domain. These threats are often mediated through cell phones or social media, using vulgar language (*fucking whores* or similar) to describe the activists or containing threats of grave sexual violence. For example, in May 2010, the neoparamilitary group Águilas Negras (the Black Eagles) declared Liga de Mujeres

(and many other women's organisations) a military objective, and declared its members to be "hijueputas" (*bastard*, vulgar term) that should be exterminated. Similar threats by Águilas Negras followed in June and October the same year, and in February 2011. In April 2011, a network of IDP organisations in Cartagena, including the Liga received a written threat from the Ejército Revolucionario Popular Anticomunista (ERPAC) in which the women advocating for the implementation of Award 092 were declared military targets and threatened with anal rape.<sup>xxviii</sup>

While threats such as these towards non-violent actors have an impact, they will have a different effect depending on whether they are group threats or directed towards particular organisations. Their seriousness also differs with context: It matters if the threat actor can be verified. Unknown threats may be perceived as *more* menacing but also as a 'fake threat'; for example there might be suspicion that the threat is being put forward by competing IDP organisations or rivals for leadership positions.<sup>xxix</sup> Threats can be directed against a large number of organisations. In the threat from February 2011, Aguilas Negras specifically declared death and persecution ('declaramos de muerte y seguimiento') to several organisations, but the Liga was *at the top* of this list. As explained below, organisations – as did the Liga – will then often ask the State for protection measures for its leaders, and sometimes also its rank and file members.

Personal threats are perceived as much more severe. One of the women collaborating with the projects field team in Putumayo informed us in December 2011 that she had been declared a military objective by Aguilas Negras, and left for Ecuador. She later settled in Europe. The same month, one of the project's co-authors, Sandra Vargas Mahecha left Putomayo as a result of a threat from FARC via her mobile phone which stated that she had 15 days 'to leave the Putumayo and Huila', declaring her as 'military objective' and requiring her to "respond for your life

otherwise we are not responsible for what happens to you or your family (sic).” The threat also stated that they [the armed actors] went to find her at her house three times and could not find her.

Sometimes individuals are the object of threats from multiple armed actors. A FUNMUVIMAG-activist in Magdalena Medio in the South described how the paramilitary AUC had declared her military objective back in 2002, accusing her of being guerilla, while the FARC had been after her for not having agreed to enter their ranks. Later, in 2006, she was threatened by the mayor of Barrancabermeja when the municipal council had approved her and not his project for improving livelihoods<sup>xxx</sup>. In addition, while it matters who the aggressor is, very often the source of the threat will be unknown<sup>xxxii</sup>.

Armed actors perceive activism as challenge to their social control, and deploy threats and violence as strategic resources to limit or eliminate both activism and activists. The organisation AVIPROCOB in Barrancabermeja was denied entry to various barrios by armed actors, or had to ask permission. One of the leaders of this organisation told us how armed actors had given her a specific deadline for leaving the city.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The Liga has also faced instances where threats have led to de-mobilisation. The Liga activist Ana Luz described how, when the Liga petitioned for nationally earmarked funds for IDP healthcare to be used appropriately by a local hospital, the activists were threatened by an “unknown” entity:

“one day one of my compañeras, an older woman, was told -tell them not to look for anything, tell them if they keep looking they will uncover a rotten pot and they will stay here forever [implying death].” Just like that, so she calls me crying and says Ana Luz come here girl don’t do anything else, don’t insist with that petition, they are going to kill us...”

Asked what the Liga had done next, Ana Luz responded:

‘‘What did we do? We held back. We let go. The truth is when you see a threat like that you say, not me, I am already running away from violence, so many things that had happened to me already, my son almost got killed... So. These are the things that happen, that we the victims live every day in our own bodies. This is what it is like, to be a victim.’’<sup>xxxiii</sup>

In sum, gendered violence can operate as an obstacle to organising, because it deters or ends mobilisation. Threats and acts of violence are often sexualised in form, targeting women’s bodies and contesting their presence in the public sphere. As exemplified here, threats have different demobilising impact depending on their wording, the identity of the threat actors and whether they are group threats or directed towards particular organisations or individuals, or their freedom of movement. Yet, the crucial structural aspect of individual instances of demobilisation is that the various types of threats excludes a specific group of citizens—consisting mostly of marginalised women of color—from claiming specific protections, resources and guarantees from actors exercising power within, across and outside the boundaries of the state.

### Political organising as a *response* to gendered violence

Second, I want to propose that the plethora of forms of political organising undertaken by IDP women should be scrutinised for what it can tell us about how collective feminist political subjectivities are construed through gendered violence as a mobilising factor<sup>xxxiv</sup>—and also for how it sheds light on this form of violence-mediated political consciousness as a contribution to

democracy. Here, I want to highlight the role of consciousness raising, credible documentation of threats and violence and how we can make sense of legal mobilisation (including framing) in violent context.

For internally displaced women's organisations, like other IDP organisations in Colombia, the possibilities for collective action suffer multiple constraints. Poverty, exclusion and interpersonal violence against women leaders merge with violent repression by the state and armed actors. IDP women face additional and general obstacles in organising. Displacement places a greater burden on women with respect to generating income without relieving them of domestic work; hence there is a lack of time available for joint activities. The dual workload of women and the tension it generates within the family, have negative effects on the ability to take on civic responsibility. Finally, the greater employability of women does not diminish the impact of poverty and unemployment, creating familial and individual pressures on resources that discourage sustained cooperation within and among IDP communities over time. While the number of IDP organisations increased rapidly after the 2004 T-025 decision by the Colombian constitutional court, statistically, few IDP's organised. When they did, they were frequently subjected to violence.

Despite these political and societal pressures, what made IDP women organise in the face of violence, impoverishment and insecurity? I will here point to three vehicles for mobilisation. A common basis for action among organisations with a particular professional direction (health care, food aid etc) centers on increased leadership awareness enhanced through formal documentation: for example, in 2007 and 2008, Corporación Casa Amazonía in war-ravaged Putumayo took part in a diagnostic exercise mapping the mental health of women in the region. The diagnostic uncovered high levels of trauma and sexual violence and served as a catalyst for the organisation's

later therapeutic work with women. However, for grassroots organisations, a key element is the harnessing of a feminist consciousness among rank and file members. Many of the organisations we mapped came into being because IDP organisations commonly excluded women from leadership roles and were rife with discrimination and sexual harassment, providing an initial barrier to IDP women's political activism.

This process is well illustrated by the coming into being of Liga de Mujeres. In the late 1990s, Patricia Guerrero, a Colombian criminal lawyer and feminist, began to host group discussions for displaced and poor women where they would talk about their specific problems as women, and the discrimination, indifference and sexual harassment they experienced in mixed, male-led IDP organisations. The women came from various parts of Colombia: some had fled with their families because they were threatened or had family members or friends killed; others because of violence that had affected neighbors and acquaintances, or due to harassment by the army. Gradually, through a series of meetings, the idea about an organisation for women, led by women, emerged. During these meetings, Patricia Guerrero would talk about human rights and the women would share their own experiences and emergent ideas of gender identity in a collaborative feminist consciousness-building process. The women would call on the Colombian state to fulfill their rights, discuss the provision of aid and at the same time begin to create mutually beneficial projects such as micro credit schemes and collective child care.<sup>xxxv</sup>

An important aspect relates to the collective consciousness about violence and risk. The scholarship on legal mobilisation and social movements has traditionally been built around the institutions of Northern, industrialised democracies. Recently, a number of academic contributions have focused on the specific challenges of women's organising in violent contexts in Latin America. In violent contexts, mobilisation frames are unstable and constantly shifting, resources

tend to vanish and political opportunities often imply considerable physical danger. Frames for mobilisation are unstable as both laws and norms change following the dynamics of pervasive social violence. Access to resources diminishes when legal frames are unstable because of changing rules and regulations. They also vanish following changing priorities among funders and they particularly disappear as the direct result of the actions (destruction, theft) of armed actors. Political opportunities are dangerous when social movements both perceive the political system as open to challenge, while understanding that this challenge comes with substantial risk. At the same time, we share the observations of many other scholars, that among women grassroots leaders in Colombia and beyond, there is an enormous willingness to forge ahead, despite a high likelihood of paying the ultimate personal cost, under the understanding that resignation is an untenable choice.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

A further, interrelated aspect of internal and externally projected identity creation pertains to how IDP women make violence visible through multiple forms of documentation and registration, in the process gaining credibility as an institutionalised player. The Liga's strategic production of 'insecurity narratives', and its insistence of de-privatising violence while seeing women activists as embedded in social and familial networks, is here instructive: Over the past decade, the Liga has carefully documented threats and what it considers security events related to its activism. In 2003 and 2005, the Liga was explicitly listed as an organisation under threat by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.<sup>xxxvii</sup> In 2004, the Liga began issuing 'Acciones Urgentes' to government bodies, the press, national and international NGOs, the UN and OAS when members and their families were intimidated, threatened, disappeared, raped – or killed. Between 2004 and 2009, the Liga issued eight such urgent actions. The Second alert issued in October 2004, concerned the attempted murder of one of the Liga leaders.<sup>xxxviii</sup> From early 2005,

an important recipient for these alerts has been the Ombudsman's office (the Defensoria), which under the System of Early Alerts (SAT) is tasked with the 'Evaluation of the existent risks within the general population as a consequence of the armed conflicts', and issuing early alerts when human rights defenders are threatened.<sup>xxxix</sup> The Acciones Urgentes, the Early alerts and the attention from the UN have been crucial in establishing the credibility of the Liga in the eyes of the Constitutional court and the Inter-American human rights system. In 2007, the persistent denunciation of threats began to yield results at the national level, and in subsequent years, the Liga's security situation was specifically considered in a number of Awards from Constitutional Court, including award 092 from 2008.

In violent context, political organising in direct response to gendered violence also produces political subjectivities. Interrogating how organisations and leaders engage in the production of collective, feminist consciousness about violence and risk can help us understand why IDP women, despite pervasive violence and strong political and societal pressures organise. When activists harness and visibilise insecurity, threats and violence through multiple forms of documentation and registration they do so in order to gain local, national and international credibility, but also as a mode of co-constituting a shared consciousness about the cause for and nature of their activism, and its place in the broader struggle for social justice. Making this bottom-up non-violent struggle visible is crucial for an appreciation of contemporary Latin American democracy.

Political organising as a *cause* of further gender-based violence.

The violence against women who engage in political organising is massive and systemic in much of Latin-America. However, the connection between political organising and violence is a

complex and often disputed process. Above, I discussed how threats of violence could lead to non-mobilisation or demobilisation of groups of IDP women. In this section, focus shifts to the ultimate cost paid by many individual activists.

Being outspoken or even being organised can create risk. The association ASODESAMU explained that they could no longer go into the countryside because they had been “visible” (se han visibilizado), and that had generated security problems<sup>xl</sup>. In response to security problems, some of the organisations we interviewed or worked with had deliberately settled on a “low profile” (bajo perfil). This did not mean that security threats were eliminated, but that the object of the threat – the activist – disappeared from public space. This could for example involve that activists arrange for others to speak for them in public, tone down contentious demands, and do not appear on the radio or allow themselves to be photographed or quoted in the press<sup>xli</sup>. COLEMAD, the women’s lawyers collective in the northern city of Barranquilla focusing on poverty lawyering had received threats among other for representing displaced women reclaiming land. As a self-protection measure, they have at various times adopted a low profile in response to threats. However, adopting a low profile also has non-intended consequences: One leader told us during the interview how the number of members in her organisation had decreased due to insecurity and the low profile they had decided to adopt<sup>xlii</sup>. As exemplified above, the ultimate reduction of visibility is exile.<sup>xliii</sup>

An important observation is that violence persists despite assuming a low profile or the activist’s own systematic efforts to obtain government protection. As noted in the introduction, in Honduras, Berta Cáceres was shot dead in March 2016, despite being under state protection after receiving death threats. In Mexico, Nadia Vera had reported receiving threats and experiencing incidents of serious intimidation in the state of Veracruz before fleeing to Mexico City.<sup>xliv</sup> In

August 2009, the younger son of the Liga leader who had her eldest son threatened was killed. This killing to place despite the fact the family had been given security measures by the constitutional court.<sup>xlv</sup> In November the same year, Liga de Mujeres petitioned the Inter American Human Rights Commission for precautionary measures for 13 members of Liga de Mujeres and 16 members of Liga Joven, the Ligas youth wing. In response to the intensification of threats from Águilas Negras and ERPAC, by 2011, the measures were extended to cover all Liga members.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Finally, acts of violence against women grassroots activists also seem to set in motion specific sets of contestations between civil society and the state over the recognition of gendered violence as political – the recognition that the violence comes in response to the organising, and that the violence itself is a deliberate, political act – and not as an act of ‘private’, domestic violence or as a result of criminal activities, typically drug or gang related. As noted above, threats against women activists are framed around gender roles and are often directed against women’s bodies and the presence of such bodies in the public domain. Deaths are subjected to parallel efforts at privatisation by way of explanations centering on (bad, irresponsible or immoral) personal and moral choices. When Francela Méndez was killed in El Salvador, the El Salvadorian Police attempted to link the murders to drug trafficking instead of investigating the links to her human rights work<sup>xlvii</sup>. In Mexico, a conservative newspaper reported on the circumstances of Nadia Vera’s death (it was a massacre) with the story line “It all began with a night of partying”.<sup>xlviii</sup> Honduran investigators initially blamed Cáceres murder on a former lover or disgruntled co-worker<sup>xlix</sup>. The proliferation of such narratives is also widespread in the Colombian context: When a member of Liga de Mujeres, Keila Esther Berrío Almanza, the killing received widespread condemnation from international human rights bodies<sup>1</sup> and in international activist circles. However, Colombian newspapers reported that she had been killed by her partner in a “passion

tragedy”<sup>li</sup>. In 2013, one of the women who formed part of the council for indigenous women, a Kankuamo woman called Mildred Montero died in a car accident in what the Kankuamo understand as unknown circumstances.<sup>lii</sup>

Nowhere is the predicament of persistent persecution and contested truths more starkly illustrated than in the case of the long-term IDP activist Angélica Bello. At the age of 45, Bello, the director of the National Foundation in Defense of Women’s Rights (FUNDHEFEM) had been displaced four times due to her crusade on behalf of Colombia’s IDPs. Coming out of a meeting at the Ministry of Justice in Bogotá in 2009, she was abducted and sexually assaulted – and told by her assailants that she was being punished for her activist work. February 16 2013, Bello’s struggle for social justice and better protection for displaced women ended with a bullet to the head. Her death was initially ruled suicide- the authorities stated that she had killed herself with a gun left behind by one of her bodyguards in the government-provided security detail. The Colombian human rights community expressed deep suspicions and the National Ombudsman requested an autopsy.<sup>liii</sup>

Showing how political organising is a cause of further gender-based violence, and the massive and systemic nature of this violence, is not straightforward. Regionally, the security situation for activists appears to get increasingly precarious. Violence persists despite the existence of formal legal frameworks protecting women and despite activist’s systematic efforts at obtaining government protection. The deeply antagonistic public contestations between civil society and states over the recognition of the deaths of women activists as political, gendered deaths point to the continued existence of a long-standing tradition of tiered citizenships, as well as to a region-wide predicament of state capture by armed actors.

## Conclusion

The point of departure for this article is that the dearth of attention to feminist and women's organising has left the violent democracies paradigm with an insufficient conceptualisation of how violence is gendered *and* political. Taking a bottom-up approach to theorisation, the article has mapped out a three-pronged relationship between Colombian IDP women's political organising and gendered violence.

The basis for a theory on the gender of violent pluralism is the recognition of linkages between violence, gender and political subjectivity. We must recognise and make sense of the violence women activists experience *because* they are women, and how the consequences of this violence are determined by gender. We must also make sense of women political activists as survivors *and* actors, where experiences of violence and loss shape strategies and tactics in the present. As observed, class plays an intrinsic part in legal mobilisation specifically and political organising more generally and shape the dynamics within grassroots movements. The gendering of the violent pluralism concept also represents an attempt to articulate a more general critique of the concept of violent pluralism—its conception of democracy, its possible erasure of the efforts of non-violent actors and how it calibrates the scope and intensity of political violence.

In conclusion, there can and should be many theories on the gender of violent pluralism. My specific ambition has been to open an analytical path whereby the systematic violence against women activists in Latin America can be incorporated into discussions about violent pluralism; on the way also contributing to make violent pluralism a more sophisticated theoretical concept. Considering the success of this concept, it is important that it has the capacity to help make visible how much of the political violence in the region takes the shape of violence against women

involved in grassroots mobilisation. Similar considerations apply if the concept travels beyond Latin-America.

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<sup>i</sup> Field notes on file with author.

<sup>ii</sup> Frontline, *Annual report 2016*.

<sup>iii</sup> AWID, *Killing of transgender*.

<sup>iv</sup> Ford et al., *Killed defending women's rights*.

<sup>v</sup> Frontline, *Case history Nilce de Souza Magalhaes*.

<sup>vi</sup> Lakhani, *Berta Cáceres court papers*.

<sup>vii</sup> UNDP, *From Commitment to Action*.

<sup>viii</sup> Arias and Goldstein 4.

<sup>ix</sup> Arias and Goldstein 256.

<sup>x</sup> “The Significance of Political Organization and International Law for Internally Displaced Women in Colombia: A Socio-Legal Study of Liga de Mujeres,” was funded by the Research Council of Norway under the Norway – Global Partner (NORGLOBAL) programme, 2010–14. I am immensely grateful to Julieta Lemaitre for her friendship, wisdom and patience, to the research team at Los Andes, as well as to the displaced women’s organizations that participated in our study. I am also grateful to anonymous reviewers and the editors for valuable comments to previous versions of this article.

<sup>xi</sup> Imbusch et al., *Violence research*.

<sup>xii</sup> Arias and Goldstein, 21.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sternbach et al. *Feminisms in Latin America*; Radcliffe and Westwood, *Viva*; Waylen, *Women's movements and democratization*.

<sup>xiv</sup> Alvarez, *Advocating feminism*; Alvarez, *Beyond NGOization*; Prügl, *Neoliberalizing feminism*; Bernstein, *Militarized humanitarianism*; Lebon, *Taming or Unleashing*; Sieder and McNeish, *Gender justice*.

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- <sup>xv</sup> Sagot, *The critical path of women*.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Auyero et al. *Violence at the urban margins*.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Meertens, *Forced displacement*.
- <sup>xviii</sup> O'Rourke, *Transitioning to what?*
- <sup>xix</sup> MacManus, *We are not Victims*.
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- <sup>xxi</sup> Nayak and Suchland, *Gender Violence*.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Hume, *The myths of violence*.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Hume, *ibid*.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Wilding, *New violence*.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Sanford, *From genocide to femicide*.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> CNMH, *¡Basta YA!*
- <sup>xxvii</sup> CNMH, *ibid*.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Copies of threats on file with author.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Lemaitre et al., *Organización comunitaria*.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Interview FUNMUVIMAG Nov 6 de 2012
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Lemaitre et al. *Defensoras de derechos humanos 21*.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Interview AVIPROCOB, Nov 6 de 2012
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Lemaitre and Sandvik, *Beyond sexual violence*; also Sandvik and Lemaitre, *Finding the roads to justice*.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> See similarly Zulvers (2016) notion of “high-risk feminism” as a mode of conceptualizing the particular strategies used by women to mobilise to defend and secure women’s rights in El

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Salvador. Zulver outlines four categories of action, including collective identity creation, social capital building, (legal) framing, and acts of certification for organizations. Zulver, *High-risk feminism*.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Lemaitre et al., *Sueño de vida digna*.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Lemaitre and Sandvik, *Shifting frames*.

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<sup>xli</sup> Lemaitre and Sandvik, *Shifting frames*.

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<sup>xlv</sup> The third report from *The Mesa de Seguimiento 092*

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<sup>ii</sup> Lemaitre et al. 2014, *Defensoras de derechos humanos*.

<sup>liii</sup> Sandvik and Lemaitre, *Internally displaced women as knowledge producers*.