

“This Patriarchal, Machista and Unequal Culture of Ours”: Obstacles to Confronting Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

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Prior research has established that conflict-related sexual violence against women is anchored in patriarchal norms and practices that assert gendered hierarchies. What remains relatively underresearched, however, is how patriarchal structures shape individual, social, and institutional responses to conflict-related sexual violence and its victims. This article sets out to shed light on this question, identifying different social and institutional processes that impede efforts to confront conflict-related sexual violence. The analysis of interviews with Colombian civil society activists illustrates how patriarchal norms and practices normalize sexual violence in society, but also ostracize, stigmatize, and ultimately seek to silence its victims. This risks obliterating conflict-related sexual violence from the political map and severely undermines the pursuit of justice. Power imbalances disadvantaging and further marginalizing the victims permeate these processes. Civil society organizations play an important role in reclaiming power for the victims, by overcoming disabling silences, making sexual violence visible, and confronting harmful patriarchal practices.

Speaking about sexual violence is not easy because it is the only crime where the victim feels shame, feels guilty, and also where there is little solidarity because the very society stigmatizes you, the family and everyone stigmatizes you, labels you, and causes you harm.

This patriarchal, machista and unequal culture of ours leads to women having to flee into silence even after having been victims of rape.

Such sentiments were echoed many times over in interviews I carried out in Colombia to examine how civil society actors understand and confront

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conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Feminist scholars have long argued that sexual violence against women—in conflict settings, but also beyond—is anchored in patriarchal structures. Their analyses illustrate how this violence is both the result and a reassertion of masculine power over women, reflecting gendered power relations that are entrenched in society and magnified in war (Kelly 1988; Davies and True 2015; Krefth 2020). What has received less attention, by contrast, is how patriarchal norms and structures shape social and institutional *responses* to this violence, and with what socio-political implications. This is the angle I pursue in this article. I ask: How do patriarchal norms and ideas impede efforts to confront CRSV?

Patriarchy thereby denotes “a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby 1989, 214). This does not mean that all men—as individuals—dominate over and oppress women, or that all women—as individuals—are oppressed. Rather, patriarchal norms are anchored and perpetuated in social relations, institutions, and practices that assert gendered hierarchies. It is the *social collective* of women that is disadvantaged relative to the social collective of men. Patriarchy operates at different levels, from household to the macro-level, and in different spheres, e.g. politics, media, religious institutions, etc. (Walby 1989; Hunnicutt 2009). The understanding of patriarchy transcending different spheres is closely linked to the feminist concept of the continuum of violence (Cockburn 2004): sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated against women in war or peace, in the public or the private sphere, shares a common basis in patriarchal social norms that devalue women (Swaine 2015; Boesten 2017; Gray 2018; Krefth 2020).¹

In the analysis, I extend the notion of the continuum from the perpetration of sexual violence to the *responses* to this violence. Specifically, I leverage interviews with women active in Colombian civil society to tease out how (i) families, communities, and society (the social environment) and (ii) state institutions relate to victims in the context of persisting misogynist socio-political imaginaries about sexual violence. In Colombia’s long-running conflict, sexual violence perpetrated by state, paramilitary, and rebel armed actors has been widespread. As women are by far the most visible (and vocal) group affected by this violence, the article focuses on sexual violence against women only.²

The analysis reveals the salience of patriarchal tropes revolving around the victim’s shame, guilt, and complicity in her own victimization, which shape individual, institutional, and societal responses to sexual violence. By simultaneously normalizing and stigmatizing sexual violence, these responses impose disabling silences (Mannergren Selimovic 2020) on its victims, with political ramifications for the visibility of sexual violence and the pursuit of justice. The article concludes with reflections on how women’s civil society activism, which extends from the grassroots to the national level in Colombia (Restrepo

2016; Zulver 2017; Kreft 2019), must be seen as a political act of (re)claiming power for the individual, and for women as a social collective.

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

CRSV is a depressingly common phenomenon in wars. In almost two-thirds of internal armed conflicts ongoing between 1980 and 2009, widespread or systematic rape was reported in at least one conflict year (Cohen 2013a, 467). This violence is distinctly gendered (Davies and True 2015; Boesten 2017). Violent masculinities in war exacerbate gender inequalities that exist in society and the home: harmful norms such as the objectification of women and male appropriation of women's bodies are magnified and even instrumentalized in war to harm women individually or collectively, or to target entire communities (Kreft 2020). Indeed, CRSV primarily (albeit by no means exclusively) affects women and girls (Cohen and Nordås 2014), and further reasserts structurally entrenched gender inequalities (Davies and True 2015; Meger 2016; Boesten 2017; Kreft 2020).

This is why feminist scholars speak of continuums of violence spanning war and peace; war and everyday life in conflict settings; and the public—the sphere where observers usually locate CRSV, as a distinctly political form of violence—and the private—in which sexual violence by intimate partners, family members, or acquaintances is usually understood to fall (Cockburn 2004; Porter 2015; Swaine 2015; Boesten 2017; Gray 2018). Both CRSV and sexual violence that occurs in conflict-affected settings but is not perpetrated by armed actors thus share a common basis in patriarchal structures, i.e. in gendered hierarchies that structure informal, social (e.g. families, communities), and formal (e.g. political or legal) institutions. This does not mean that sexual violence perpetrated by armed actors and sexual violence perpetrated by family members, acquaintances, or unarmed strangers are qualitatively equivalent: prior research has discussed how the two tend to differ in scope, manifestations, and functions (Kreft 2020, 471–72). CRSV, for example, is more frequently perpetrated with the help of arms and in the form of gang rape (Cohen 2016). In addition, armed actors may specifically instrumentalize patriarchal notions of the objectification of women, and of women belonging to men, when they rape women to humiliate or “emasculate” men or to weaken communities (Seifert 1994). The continuum of violence signifies, however, that both modes of sexual violence arise from the same underlying patriarchal structures, norms, and practices (Kreft 2020; Boesten 2017; Davies and True 2015). As these transcend multiple social structures, such as the family, sexual relations, or cultural institutions (Walby 1989), there are multiple, intersecting causal levels of gendered violence: individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural (Moser 2001). In this article, I tease out the continuities between individual, interpersonal (social), and institutional *responses* to

CRSV, illustrating how these are anchored in “the cultural gender norms . . . that permeate society” (Moser 2001, 40), and highlighting the obstacles these cause for an effective confrontation of CRSV.

Consequences of and Responses to CRSV

This section briefly reviews the existing literature on the many adverse consequences of, and the societal responses to, CRSV. Physical consequences of CRSV include injuries to anus and genitalia, such as traumatic tears and fistulae, disabilities and sexual dysfunctions, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, and increased (maternal) mortality (Kelly et al. 2011; Stark and Wessells 2012; Ba and Bhopal 2017). Among the many psychological consequences are depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, suicidal intentions, social dysfunction, withdrawal, and substance abuse (Stark and Wessells 2012; Dossa et al. 2015; Ba and Bhopal 2017). Social consequences take the form of stigmatization, social ostracism, rejection by spouses, families or communities, displacement, marginalization and exclusion in society, insufficient access to healthcare and education, and poverty (Kelly et al. 2011; Stark and Wessells 2012; Buvinic et al. 2013; Verelst et al. 2014; Ba and Bhopal 2017). Social stigmatization and rejection often contain distinct elements of victim-blaming and misogyny, such as when “[w]omen who have sex outside of marriage, whether voluntarily or by force, [are] perceived to bring misfortune to the household” (Kelly et al. 2011, 4 on the DRC; see also Mukamana and Brysiewicz 2008 on Rwanda).

Given the prevalence of CRSV and the stigma associated with this violence, CRSV has received increased attention globally. Within the Women, Peace and Security framework, the United Nations Security Council has since 2000 authorized five resolutions specifically on CRSV, its handling, and prevention, and established the Office of Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict in 2009. Regional organizations and individual states have undertaken similar efforts; of note here is in particular the United Kingdom’s Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (Davies and True 2017a).

Even though the most recent resolution on CRSV (2467 from 2019), and the Murad Code (2020) explicitly adopted a survivor-centric focus that notes the importance of confronting gender inequality, and of ensuring medical and psycho-social care for victims, many responses to CRSV approach this violence as “a problem of law,” decoupled from the broader context of structural gender inequalities (Houge and Lohne 2017). But even the promise of criminal accountability is rarely fulfilled and impunity remains rampant, factors that further exacerbate underreporting and unbridled perpetration of CRSV (Schulz and Krefl 2022). In this context, civil society organizations—primarily women’s organizations—have across contexts become important forums for the articulation of women’s and victims’ perspectives, needs, and demands for justice (Tripp 2015; Restrepo 2016; Zulver 2017; Berry 2018; Krefl 2019). In

this article, I examine the challenges in confronting CRSV by drawing on the experiences and expertise of Colombian women's civil society organizations.

The Colombian Context

In terms of conflict patterns, e.g. the widespread use of sexual violence targeting civilians, Colombia is fairly representative of other conflict-affected states. In other respects, Colombia diverges from most conflict-affected settings: it is a relatively democratic middle-income country whose peace process with the rebel group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) has been the most gender-sensitive in the world to date, although implementation of the gender components in particular has been slow ([Peace Accords Matrix Barometer Initiative/Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies 2021](#)). In short, gender has been central to violence dynamics in the armed conflict, as well as to the peace process with the FARC. This makes Colombia a particularly intriguing case to examine how the salience of patriarchal structures, norms, and practices can undermine a successful confrontation of CRSV.

Violent manifestations of patriarchy plague Latin America as a region. In global comparison, it ranks second for intimate partner violence and first for non-partner violence against women ([Essayag 2017](#)). In the Colombian conflict, all armed actors have perpetrated sexual violence against civilians, primarily against women and girls (see [figure 1](#)). This sexual violence has been perpetrated in different contexts, i.e. during incursions, in detention, and within armed groups, and for different motives, i.e. opportunistically, to exert territorial control, to intimidate or “emasculate” communities, as punishment, or to assert male dominance over women ([Govasli Nilsen 2014](#); [Kreft 2020](#)). Nonetheless, existing data suggest that even in conflict-affected areas sexual violence is actually more prevalent in the private sphere ([Sanchez et al. 2011](#)).

Women's organizations and victims' associations have mobilized against sexual violence, both in its conflict-related and “everyday” manifestations.³ Everyday sexual violence here refers to violence that is not (clearly) conflict-related, i.e. that is not perpetrated by armed actors but by family members, intimate partners, acquaintances, or civilian strangers, i.e. what is commonly referred to as occurring in the private sphere. The distinction between acts of violence that are or are not conflict-related is not always so clear-cut, however, which makes the concept of the continuum of violence that transcends war and not-war ([Cockburn 2004](#); [Gray 2018](#)) and the public and the private ([Swaine 2015](#)) particularly relevant.

Colombia boasts high levels of civil society mobilization, with “thousands of women's organizations across the country” ([Restrepo 2016](#), 2), many of these very small and operating at the grassroots level. Some women's organizations and victims' associations emerged specifically in response to CRSV,

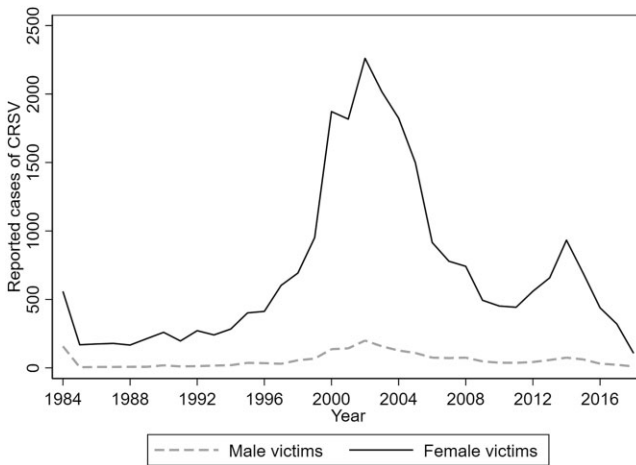


Figure 1 Reports of conflict-related sexual violence in the Colombian Registro Único de Víctimas, 1984–2016.

starting as early as the 1970s, and others took on sexual violence as a priority area over time, and in particular as CRSV became widespread in the armed conflict in the early 2000s (Krefl 2019, 225). Women’s collective civil society mobilization has openly and persistently challenged gender inequalities and patriarchal norms, often from a distinctly feminist perspective (Zulver 2017; Krefl 2019, 2020; Zulver 2021a).

Methodological Approach

The analysis is based on twenty-five in-person and two telephone interviews with thirty-one representatives of twenty-three women’s organizations and victims’ associations in Colombia. I carried out the interviews in the three biggest cities of Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali between January and April 2018, with the help of a Colombian research assistant trained in psychology and development studies. Six of the interviewees self-identified as victims of CRSV, thirteen were displaced by the conflict. Twenty interviewees identified as mestiza/no ethnic minority, seven as Afro-Colombian, and one as Afro-Indigenous (three did not disclose their ethnicity). Of the organizations sampled, eight operate nationally, five regionally, and ten locally. Twenty of the organizations’ offices are located in the three cities, two in rural areas, and one in a smaller city.

In identifying interviewees, I relied on theoretical sampling (Miles and Huberman 1994, 27–29), combining initial web searches with snowball sampling. I prioritized civil society organizations working on the armed conflict. The women’s organizations and victims’ associations represented in the

interviews provide psycho-social and psycho-legal support to victims, engage in documentation, research, awareness-raising, education, capacity-building, and political advocacy relating to (conflict-related) sexual violence, and many carry out activities that explicitly challenge gender inequality and patriarchal norms in society. As such, I interviewed the civil society representatives in their capacity as experts with comprehensive second-hand information on the gender dynamics of the armed conflict through years or even decades of individual and organizational experience. Several interviewees' personal experiences with the armed conflict, including sexual violence, moreover add valuable first-hand insight.

Ethical considerations were paramount in designing the interview guide and recruiting research participants. The interview questions were restricted to general perceptions of (conflict-related) sexual violence, its patterns, and its causes. At no point did I enquire about personal victimization experiences, although several interviewees shared their experiences on their own. For all interviews I obtained informed consent.

The thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) is based on horizontal coding of all interviews, followed by vertical coding at the node level in NVivo. This ensured both coding consistency across interviews and an in-depth engagement with the empirical material, and nuances within. My approach was generally inductive, building up the coding scheme based on the themes I identified in the transcripts. All quotes included in the analysis are my own translations (edited for clarity).

Findings

The activists identified two main obstacles to confronting sexual violence in Colombia: (i) stigmatization and silencing by the victim's social environment, i.e. family, community, and society at large and (ii) incomplete justice, broadly conceived, as a result of neglect by state institutions. Both the social and institutional responses to CRSV and its victims exist on a continuum and are steeped in patriarchal norms and practices, as I highlight throughout.

Stigma and Silencing: The Role of the Social Environment

The activists highlighted different social consequences of CRSV, primarily stigma, marginalization, and ostracism by the victims' families, communities, and society at large. Closely related are psychological harm and suffering—including withdrawal, depression, self-hatred, and suicidal intentions (a few of the victims I interviewed mentioned their own suicide attempts). These can result from any type of (conflict) violence, but in the case of sexual violence they are magnified by patriarchal social norms and stereotypes that stigmatize the victim rather than placing the blame with the perpetrator. Recent psychology research confirms that social and family rejection are higher for women

victims of sexual violence compared to other forms of conflict violence in Colombia, and further increase with the number of victimization experiences (González-Castro et al. 2021, 6).

At the heart of negative responses from the social environment are, according to the interviewees, misogynist social practices of locating a (co-)responsibility for sexual violence with the victim. An “imaginary of guilt and shame” that is attached to sexual violence often results in limited sympathy and solidarity from the victim’s surroundings. Where victimization in other forms of violence evokes sympathy, one activist elaborates, sexual violence is perceived as something that the victim provokes with her behavior. Another uses the epitome of rape culture to illustrate this point: a victim is often accused of “asking for it, because she was wearing this dress.” Victim-blaming suggests that the woman has done something wrong, such as “sent the wrong signals,” shown too much skin, or been too flirtatious or outgoing. It places strict limits, in other words, on the attire, behavior, and attitude that is appropriate, unproblematic, and safe for women. Victim-blaming is thus evocative of efforts to try and regulate women’s behavior in both private and public spaces, while diminishing the responsibility of the male perpetrator.

Crucially, these notions are not restricted to everyday sexual violence. The tendency to blame and stigmatize victims extends, as the interviewees elaborate, also to CRSV. One activist was raped by paramilitary actors, in apparent retaliation for previously having affronted one of them while she had been out drinking with friends. She mused that armed actors, like perpetrators of everyday sexual violence, will cite any and all sorts of women’s behavior, even the most quotidian, to “justify” sexual assault.

They conveyed to us that they raped us because we had been drinking a beer, right? And this kind of justification weighs heavily on us, and accompanies us in society at large because [among the public at large] there is never an acknowledgement that “a woman has a right to put on shorts, that does not provide a motive to rape her” . . .

In my case, they entered my house and three paramilitary actors raped me. I was in my house! But there is no condition in which we are perceived as victims, that’s what society signals to us.

The victim-activist suggests, in short, that in their perpetration of CRSV, armed actors may have the tacit endorsement of society at large, where many subscribe to rape myths and engage in victim-blaming (Ruiz and Sobrino 2018). She goes on to say that victims always carry the stigma of “the raped women” [*las violadas*] with them, in their personal lives, and in interactions with the state (see the next section for an elaboration of the response of state institutions). That is, the question of “what will she have done to provoke this?” colors subsequent interactions for victims of sexual violence, and this transcends the private and the public sphere. The ambiguity that is often

interpreted into rape cases, both in peacetime and in war, regarding women's alleged complicity in their victimization thus casts doubt on the legitimacy of their victimhood (Boesten 2010, 123–25).

Many victims, for their part, have internalized the patriarchal notion of shame. As another activist, who was raped by armed actors, said: “Sometimes I think of what happened to me, and I cry, and I say ‘my God, I am filthy, I feel dirty, I feel tainted.’” Unsurprisingly, such emotional responses—fueled by a social environment that tends to treat victims of sexual violence with suspicion and stigmatization—push many women into silence and withdrawal. Several of the victims I interviewed reported that it took years before they were able to speak about their experiences. One activist's organization had conducted a systematic data collection effort across the country, which identified that three almost universally recurring emotions—guilt, fear, and shame—prevent women victims from seeking support, justice, and compensation. She elaborated:

They are political emotions that create obstacles that are tied to cultural imaginaries. Thus: the guilt of reporting the crime, and then families are destroyed, when the husband finds out that I have experienced a sexual violation; the shame because in the background always lingers the notion that ‘I provoked’ the situation of sexual violence; the fear of the loss of whatever it may be, of losing my children.

While the salience and detrimental effects of shame, fear, and guilt were echoed across the interviews, the classification of these emotions as *political* is particularly interesting. It reflects, first, the *basis* of these emotions in socio-political and cultural imaginaries about gendered responsibilities and roles in society: any deviation from a traditional view of the woman's life as centered around the home (such as going out with friends, drinking, or even just dressing in a certain way in public) can justifiably “provoke” sexual violence. It also signifies, second, the socio-political *consequences* of these emotions: guilt, shame, and fear prevent many victims from reporting their victimization, and from accessing the medical, psycho-social, legal, and/or financial support to which they are entitled. Patriarchal structures and practices, as enacted by both the victim and her social environment, thus magnify also the physical consequences of this violence when she does not seek medical help for injuries, infections or unwanted pregnancy.⁴ In operation are what Mannergren Selimovic (2020, 2) calls “disabling silences,” which “are imposed on the agent, sometimes over the longue durée, and attempt to erase events and agents from memory and discourse, or relegate victims to constrained subject positions.” The above discussion illustrates the erasure of perpetrators from discourses by placing blame on the victims, who additionally self-silence to avoid stigmatization. This constrains the victim's agency, her recognition as a victim, and her rights, while invisibilizing the very crime itself.

As several activists noted, victims are also often pressured actively into silence by family members concerned about negative social repercussions. Moreover, several interviewees reported, partners may either abandon women who have been raped or exert violence against them, as “punishment” for their sexual violence victimization—again evocative of victim-blaming—because they cannot cope with having failed to protect them. A recent study shows that social and family rejection exacerbates post-traumatic stress disorder for sexual violence victims (González-Castro et al. 2021). Similar patterns of increased stigmatization, suspicion, hostility, rejection, and violence against victims, from the social environment as well as intimate partners, have likewise been observed in other contexts (Kelly et al. 2011; Verelst et al. 2014; Ba and Bhopal 2017; Østby, Leiby, and Nordås 2019). In sum, patriarchal norms and practices shape responses to CRSV, which are multidimensionally detrimental for the victims and constitute a major obstacle for a meaningful confrontation of sexual violence as a crime with significant physical and psychological consequences.

Evoking the notion of a continuum of violence that transcends war and peace, activists discussed the origins of these patriarchal norms and practices in what they called the “normalization” of sexual violence in society. This process, they suggest, originates in families and intimate relationships, but colors also how victims of CRSV are perceived. In 2011, 18 percent of women in conflict-affected settings in Colombia reported having experienced sexual violence, most of it not conflict-related (Sanchez et al. 2011). Given common underreporting of sexual violence, the actual rate is likely even higher. Being (violently) coerced into sexual acts is often conceptualized as part of the woman’s experience and misconstrued as a normal part of conjugal life, to the extent that many women do not perceive intimate partner rape as sexual violence at all. Echoing similar findings by Davies and True (2017b, 12–13) in Myanmar, one activist put it thus:

We are all exposed to the risk of being victims of sexual violence in the sense that we never say how we are victims of sexual violence by the husband. For example, I told one woman “you are a victim of sexual violence”—“no, he is my husband and I am at his service. Since I was little they told me that at home the husband can do what he wants,” she responded. This means it’s about the construction of the imaginaries of the masculine and the feminine, about the supremacy of the masculine.

Surveys have found that a majority of Colombian men, but also many women, uphold the patriarchal notion of men’s entitlement to women’s bodies (Ruiz and Sobrino 2018). In further illustration of the normalization of sexual violence, many victims do not classify acts such as regulation of social life (73 percent), forced sterilization (59 percent), sexual harassment (44 percent),

forced pregnancy (19 percent), or forced abortion (12 percent) as violence at all (Sanchez et al. 2011, 14–15).

Intergenerational transmission, especially by women, plays an important role in perpetuating such patriarchal norms. Several interviewees mentioned, for example, that many mothers tell their daughters (and sons) that it is a woman's duty to always be sexually available to her romantic partner, they may blame their daughters when they are raped, or they may discourage their daughters from reporting sexual violence because this will cause harm to the family. Economic dependence on the perpetrator and fear of a further escalation of violence—gendered power imbalances and their violent manifestations, in short—were moreover mentioned as drivers that facilitate women's conscious toleration of sexual violence even when they recognize it as such.

A societal context in which sexual violence in the personal sphere is in these ways legitimized but simultaneously hidden facilitates similar processes in the case of CRSV. The entitlement to women's bodies and the objectification of women has thus been discussed also as a factor in CRSV (Kreft 2020), while approximately 23 percent of rapes but also 16 percent of women's social life regulation in Colombia are perpetrated by armed actors (Sanchez et al. 2011, 26–27). This once again points to notable continuities between patriarchal norms and practices in the everyday and in the armed conflict, in public and in private (Swaine 2015; Boesten 2017; Gray 2018). This extends also to the responses to CRSV—anchored as they are in simultaneous misogynist processes of the normalization of sexual violence and its stigmatization—which transcend the victim's social environment and state institutions.

Incomplete Justice: Response of State Institutions

Colombia has in place remarkably gender-sensitive and victim-centered legislation that criminalizes (conflict-related) sexual violence, acknowledges its basis in structural gender inequalities, and notes the differential impact of the armed conflict on women (e.g. Auto 092/2008, law 1257, law 1448).⁵ Yet, the interviewees noted severe shortcomings in the implementation of these, resulting from lacking gender awareness and sensitivity.

CRSV is today adjudicated in the transitional justice mechanism, *Justicia Especial para la Paz* (JEP), i.e. the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, in an expedited process. Prior to the establishment of the JEP in March 2017 (the interviews were carried out in early 2018), the regular court system had jurisdiction over CRSV. The interviewees' accounts of the Colombian justice system's response to (conflict-related) sexual violence thus relate primarily to the regular court system.

The activists agreed on the importance of achieving justice through court proceedings, but several emphasized that justice must also be understood in a broader perspective, comprising inter alia reparations, access to medical and psychological care, as well recognition and truth (McEvoy and McGregor

2008; Rubio-Marín 2012). In this section, I illustrate the major challenges the activists identified pertaining to the pursuit of justice broadly conceived, linking them explicitly to patriarchal structures and unequal power relations. In broad strokes, the challenges comprise lacking political will; lacking gender sensitivity; dismissal of victims; revictimization processes in state institutions; and the state's role in the perpetration of CRSV. Jointly, these encompass the notion of "the state as a responsible party [in violence against women], whether by commission, toleration, or omission" (Sanford 2008, 113). This has considerable socio-political implications: it undermines the pursuit of retributive justice, it cements a neglect of women victims in medical and psychological care, and it distorts the truth about the scope of CRSV and its perpetrators.

Based on their extensive work providing psycho-legal support to victims of CRSV, many activists lamented a lack of political will to confront sexual violence and prosecute sexual violence crimes. Highlighting the patriarchal underpinnings of this neglect, one interviewee pointed to the state's indifference towards a type of violence that primarily affects women by pointedly asking "what do they care what happens to women?" A dismissal of violence against women is not unique to Colombia but ails other Latin American states well. The Peruvian state has on numerous occasions refused to acknowledge that violence against women is occurring, dismissed cases of CRSV, and occasionally even destroyed evidence or sided with perpetrators (Boesten 2010, 2012). In Guatemala, the state has likewise failed to acknowledge the structural (patriarchal) roots of feminicides by insisting that the killing of women coincides with violent crime generally and therefore merits no differential examination or response (Sanford 2008). While Colombia does have, as mentioned, gender-sensitive laws in place that acknowledge the unique experiences of women with respect to violence and the armed conflict, the interviews suggest that patterns of victim-blaming, dismissal of women victims, and lacking gender-sensitivity in general remain institutionally entrenched.

First, several activists expressed their frustration that state agencies and officials often fail to see the magnitude of this violence in the lives of victims. Unlike homicides, burglaries, or robberies, sexual violence is often not taken seriously as a crime. As one activist said: "In Colombia, a woman is raped every two or three hours, but nothing happens." Indeed, the *Centro de Memoria Histórica* (2017, 391) reported an impunity rate of 92 percent for cases of CRSV, leading many interviewees to conclude that there is no de facto justice in Colombia. Criticism of the state's inadequate response to CRSV has not abated since the JEP entered into force. Victims have criticized it for treating them like second-class citizens by neglecting CRSV as a focus in itself (Bermúdez Liévano 2019) and considering sexual violence crimes—which have affected primarily women—only as they occur alongside what the court

identified as the main conflict-related crimes, such as abductions (Emblin 2021).

Even in cases where sexual violence crimes go to court, the interviewees noted severe shortcomings in judicial proceedings. They reported persistent problems with officials, prosecutors, and judges doubting or dismissing the testimony of victims and engaging in victim-blaming, and with revictimization in various stages of the legal process. These challenges were frequently attributed, again, to lack of political will, but also to insufficient institutional capacity, to the design of legal proceedings requiring countless rounds of questioning of the victims, and to lacking training and sensitivity of staff, prosecutors, and judges:

Why does there need to be psycho-legal assistance [to victims in the justice system]? Because that is where the patriarchal system is most reinforced, because the word of the other is violated, revictimization occurs, this person who goes there to report a crime doesn't have validity because—and in particular when she has a lower socio-economic status—they can do what they want with her.

Studies from other contexts confirm that participation in court proceedings can be revictimizing and traumatizing for CRSV victims, in particular if investigators, prosecutors, and judges lack gender sensitivity (Henry 2009; Koomen 2013). The above quote further suggests that these detrimental effects are not uniform but hinge on intersecting power hierarchies: if a woman is, for example, poor or belongs to an ethnic minority, she experiences greater harms in the system. In the context of colonial legacies, Afro-Colombian women have thus been targeted in conflict violence, and face discrimination, with respect to both their gender *and* their ethnicity (Zulver 2021b).

Intersecting power hierarchies also play out in the way court proceedings are structured. Victims of sexual violence spend day after day engaging with different state institutions in repetitive interactions that one interviewee called a “millionaire’s circuit,” i.e. a resource-intensive process for which (i.e. for the economic losses the victims accrue by missing work while being in court) they receive no compensation. This economic dimension falls on top of the psychological and retraumatizing effects that repeated rounds of questioning about victimization experiences, often infused with victim-blaming, carry.

Another key problem that the activists identified is a lack of formal reporting of CRSV to state institutions. Anchored in the patriarchal norms that impose disabling silences, several activists noted a pattern where women are hesitant to report CRSV, even as they report other concurrent victimization acts such as displacement. A few of the victims confirmed this from their personal experiences, noting that they were not ready to disclose their sexual violence victimization immediately, out of fear, shame, or because of the psychological impact it has had on them. Disinterest and hostile attitudes of

many officials designated to handle formal declarations play a notable role in such skewed reporting practices. Referencing an investigation their civil society organization had carried out on underreporting of sexual violence acts, one interviewee noted that “social and cultural imageries and stereotypes” about sexual violence victimization and culpability remain salient among civil servants, which impedes their ability to carry out their duties with the requisite empathy and sensitivity. Illustrating this, another lamented:

I have heard many women victims of sexual violence say “I find it terrible that they still do not want to accept my declaration of sexual violence”—because the officials have to formally accept the declaration. But many don’t do it as it means more paperwork for them, and because they say “you already reported that you were displaced – don’t seek more [compensation]!”

Such dismissals reflect—as many activists noted—a lack of understanding of the severity of sexual violence, both as a crime and as a traumatic event in the lives of victims, most of whom in Colombia have been women. And power plays a central role in these dynamics: the victim is entirely dependent on the official to record her victimization in order to be acknowledged as a victim and receive the compensation to which she is legally entitled. Refusal to accept declarations of sexual violence or to prosecute perpetrators thus has both direct and indirect implications for the pursuit of justice. It immediately upholds a culture of impunity and inattention, but it also has a ripple effect. Echoing the detrimental effect of impunity on reports of sexual violence that has been observed in Myanmar (Davies and True 2017b), one activist expressed her frustration that of the 1,200 reports (*denuncias*) of CRSV their organizations had assisted victims in making, “nothing has happened,” which only deters further women from coming forward. In this sense, the state is indirectly complicit in the imposition of disabling silences (Mannergren Selimovic 2020), and hence in the perpetration of violence against women by “toleration of the perpetrators’ acts of violence, or omission of state responsibility to ensure the safety of its female citizens” (Sanford 2008, 113).

Further complicating these dynamics, a few activists pointed out, is that individuals in the employ of the state itself have perpetrated sexual violence, a fact the government has no incentive to publicize. Documentation efforts and awareness-raising campaigns by civil society organizations have been an important corrective: “if it weren’t for those civil society organizations that are beginning to raise their voice, the officially registered offenses would be much lower than they are. And we know that many are still absent [from the records].” The following experience of a victim-activist illustrates how victims of state-perpetrated CRSV have been dismissed and diminished:

This became one of the most bitter and grievous rapes, because afterwards they kicked me, they spat on me, they beat me, they did whatever

they wanted to me. The next day I went to report the crime at the military base, and it turns out that no, all the commanders and everyone there laughed at me.

The experience, she goes on to say, was so traumatic that she subsequently blocked it out for years, and the memories only returned when she reported another rape later in life. These accounts illustrate the revictimization caused by a refusal to acknowledge the violence the state has perpetrated, the active silencing of its victims, and the distortion of the truth about sexual violence in war.

An inadequate state response, several activists noted, extends also to medical and psychological care. Interviewees lamented an underprovision of healthcare, especially in rural areas most strongly affected by the armed conflict, patterns that have been identified in other conflict-affected settings as well (Ba and Bhopal 2017). As one interviewee noted, lacking gender-sensitivity—as reflected in poor awareness of the multiple physical consequences that sexual violence can have on its victims, such as traumatic fistulae or injuries to the sphincter—is one driver of these patterns and a further source of revictimization:

[In many cases] there is no public health system that responds, ten years, fifteen years after the victimization, and that is a permanent and systematic revictimization. It is more torturous for the woman to live like this today than what she experienced during the rape itself.

Even where health services are available, many victims of CRSV are hesitant to disclose the severity of their injuries—including vaginal tears, problems with their uterus or abdomen, with cysts or mutilated breasts—to state medical services that are known for their lack of gender sensitivity. Relatedly, the “rhythms and timelines of the state with respect to victims of the conflict, do not correspond with the emotionality and the processing of such violence for the women.” There is no singular, linear timeline for victims to deal with sexual violence, one activist emphasized: some may feel comfortable reporting their victimization the next day, while others keep it inside for years. Women’s civil society organizations try to compensate for lacking gender sensitivity among medical providers and bureaucratic processes by accompanying victims, to ensure that public medical providers fulfill their obligations with the requisite diligence and empathy.

Overall, the tenor was that state institutions are often insufficiently responsive to victims, and to women who have been subjected to CRSV in particular. Nonetheless, the interviews with civil society activists as well as complementary interviews with bureaucrats and government officials working on gender and/or the armed conflict⁶ reveal that, of course, not all officials embody harmful behaviors, practices, and routines, and that state institutions take active measures to confront them. For example, the *Unidad para las Víctimas*,

the main institution responsible for registering, assisting and compensating victims of the armed conflict, has gender specialists in place, tasked with ensuring a gender approach, both centrally and in the “territories” where most declarations are made. In addition, the bureaucrats and state officials were very congruent with the civil society activists in their perceptions of the structural, patriarchal roots of (conflict-related) sexual violence and of the challenges in confronting this violence. Noteworthy here is, for example, that the President’s Office for Women’s Equality identified as the biggest challenge to confronting sexual violence:

... the normalization and naturalization of violence and of power relations in patriarchal culture and what these entail in terms of abuse, non-consent, intimidation, and inequality, which affect especially women, [and which are] the product of social, historical and cultural processes that have relegated [the woman] to a position of subordination, where her body is considered an object or a sexual instrument that belongs to men or serves to satisfy the sexual desires and dispositions of men.

The officials I spoke with were clearly passionate about supporting the victims of CRSV and improving state responses, while acutely aware of the salience of patriarchal culture. Ultimately, institutional norms and practices are slow to change even in the presence of a growing number of committed individuals or specialized experts, especially if these institutions operate in a societal context in which harmful patriarchal norms and stereotypes remain salient.

To conclude, both the civil society representatives and the bureaucrats and government officials noted a series of behaviors, practices, and routines of dismissing, overlooking, and retraumatizing victims. In part, these have their origins in the general sluggishness of the justice system and the reparations process, which has to handle over nine million victims in total (over 34,000 victims of sexual and gender-based violence). But the interviews also suggest that many of these responses are anchored in harmful patriarchal norms and ideas about sexual violence, culpability of the victims, the severity of this violence as a crime, and what victims should be legally entitled to. At the macro-level, this facilitates inattention to, and impunity for, (conflict-related) sexual violence.

Concluding Discussion: Patriarchy, Power and the Political

Jointly, the findings illustrate a continuum of patriarchal norms and practices that operate at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels, with a common basis in patriarchal structures (Moser 2001, 40). The simultaneous normalization and stigmatization of everyday sexual violence (e.g. in intimate

relationships and rape by acquaintances) extends also to CRSV. It finds expression in the dismissal and victim-blaming by both individuals in the victim's social environment (the private sphere) and by state officials (the public sphere). This further illustrates the feminist claim that a clear distinction between the public and the private is empirically impossible and therefore conceptually flawed (Swaine 2015; Gray 2018). Particularly illustrative of the blurred divisions between public and private are victims' emotions of guilt, fear, and shame in the face of their sexual victimization. Emotions are generally attributed to the private realm, but as the above analysis sought to illustrate, they are here also political because they simultaneously arise from hostile social and institutional responses to victims of sexual violence, and further reinforce the patriarchal logics and norms underlying these responses.

Crucially, (gendered) power dynamics permeate the various relationships and contexts in which victims of CRSV are situated. These are most obvious in cases where state institutions, officials, or the judicial system fail victims of sexual violence. But also in those cases where intimate partners or other family members pressure the victim into silence, sometimes in direct opposition to her wishes, power relations are evident. In either case, the victim's silence must be understood as protective (Thomson 2013; Touquet and Schulz 2020, 9), but the self-protection function only acquires meaning in the context of patriarchy-infused power imbalances. The woman's decision to deploy protective silence, while an agentic act, is a strategic response to a restrictive and harmful social and institutional context steeped in victim-blaming and stigmatization. The victim's silence, ultimately, must therefore also be understood as an externally enforced disabling silence that reduces the victim to a "constrained subject position" (Mannergren Selimovic 2020, 2).

The consequences are, again, unambiguously political. They solidify a socio-political context in which sexual violence crimes can be easily overlooked, dismissed, and—as was long the case in Colombia and globally—obliterated as an issue of political significance. And the more marginalized a woman is in society, the more she is removed from the center of power, e.g. in socio-economic terms, by belonging to an ethnic minority or by having been displaced by conflict violence, the stronger are the agentic constraints and disabling silences that patriarchal power structures impose. What is needed is therefore not just a gender-sensitive legal framework and reparations, although these are fundamental. A transformation of socially entrenched power structures with "wider educational strategies eliciting reflection about the relationship between gender structures and sexual domination" (Rubio-Marín 2012, 100) is also essential.

In these processes, women's organizations and victims' associations in Colombia are fundamental. Women's collective civil society mobilization creates forums where women can (re)claim and assert power, by sharing with each other, discussing their victimization and how it affects their lives, by taking control over their experiences and their stories, by collectively challenging

patriarchal narratives and discourses, and thereby defying the status quo. The women's organizations and victims' associations whose representatives I interviewed organize workshops for victims, which focus on rights, empowerment, and capacity-building, they gather women in multiple-day events in which they can formally report and talk about their victimization, they provide psycho-social support and accompany women in court proceedings, they organize self-help and discussion groups, and they use art or poetry to collectively process experiences of sexual violence. Importantly, they fill the gaps created by harmful social environments, conflict conditions, and insufficiently responsive state institutions, as this interviewee says about their collective reporting events (*jornadas de denuncias colectivas*) in the rural areas:

The women come to us and they say "I want to report my victimization, and I have not yet reported because of fear, because the perpetrator is in the area, because the state official treats me very badly . . ."

This civil society activism transcends the private and the public spheres and is distinctly political. This is not just because many of the activities that civil society organizations pursue target the formal political sphere (e.g. participation in the peace process, formulation of position papers, political advocacy) but also because collective mobilization helps overcome the silence—both self-imposed and imposed by others—and thereby transforms the political emotions of guilt, shame, and fear. As one victim-activist, who had long remained silent about her victimization stated: "[organizing] allowed us to, let's say, throw off this burden that weighs on you when you are a victim of sexual violence, which is so many years of silence . . . and we always say crying heals, but talking does heal more." Similarly, other interviewees talked about the importance of sharing experiences collectively within the civil society spaces, both to relieve the mental and psychological burden of sexual violence and years of silence, but also to shed the fear: "we had become different people because we were now thinking differently, we were acting differently, we went outside without fear, yes? And for me this was beautiful."

Confronting and transforming the political emotions of guilt, shame, and fear reconfigures the way victims of CRSV interact with each other, towards the state and its institutions, and towards society at large. Civil society activism gives women a forum to raise their voice on an issue that society and armed actors (for different reasons) would prefer to keep quiet, an issue that oftentimes continues to be neglected by the state. By speaking up, the victims thus explicitly challenge the underlying patriarchal norms that seek to inflict disabling silences on them, in the private and the public spheres, thereby claiming a political status for themselves. Breaking the silence signifies what Di Lellio et al. (2019, 1550) in the case of Kosovo described as an "effective breach of the power dynamic of public secrecy" that shifted societal power relationships in favor of victims/survivors.

Women's civil society activism in Colombia gives insight into what these shifting power relations may look like: women's organizations and victims' associations have, *inter alia*, made sexual violence more visible in public discourses, helped draft gender-sensitive legislation, and ensured the inclusion of sexual violence in the peace negotiations between the government and the FARC and its exemption from amnesty provisions in the peace agreement. In this way, women's civil society activism in Colombia aims to, as [Rubio-Marín \(2012, 76\)](#) puts it, "subvert the system of meanings underlying the stigmatization of victims of SRV [sexual and reproductive violence]," a process that is fundamental to achieving gender-sensitive justice.⁷

While this study focuses on Colombia, the insights and conclusions should have wider applicability. As discussed throughout, patterns of the stigmatization, marginalization, and dismissal of CRSV victims within families, communities, courts, and by state institutions and health providers are commonplace in war-affected societies. Further teasing out how these are anchored in patriarchal attitudes, norms, and practices is an important step in designing interventions that can help ensure justice broadly conceived. Women's civil society actors in particular play a central role in efforts to transform attitudes and norms, and to bring CRSV onto political agendas. Although the extent of women's civil society mobilization in Colombia is unusual, research shows similar mobilization processes in conflict settings around the world ([Tripp 2015](#); [Berry 2018](#); [Kreft 2019](#)). International support to women's organizations and victims' associations—also at the grassroots-level—is crucial to strengthening these efforts.

This support is important also because civil activism carried out under patriarchal backlash and ongoing conflict violence is both taxing and risky ([Zulver 2017, 2021a](#)). The activities of women's organizations and victims' associations, in particular events for the collective reporting of CRSV, are—as one activist noted—"also risky for us, for the leaders" because they cause concern to, and spark pushback from, armed actors. Women's civil society activism is a constant process of renegotiating power vis-à-vis the state, armed actors, and patriarchal structures—and often at great risk to the well-being and lives of the activists themselves.

Notes

1. Patriarchy intersects with other forces structuring hierarchies in society, such as racism or classism ([Walby 1989](#); [Hunnicutt 2009](#)). Some of these intersections came up in the interviews, but they are not a central focus of this study.
2. CRSV cannot be reduced to a simplistic male perpetrator–female victim dichotomy. Men and people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations too are targeted in sexual violence ([Amaya 2018](#); [Schulz 2020](#)), while women too are involved in the perpetration of CRSV ([Cohen](#)

2013b). Children born of CRSV should also be considered independent victims of armed conflict with specific needs (Theidon 2015; Sanchez Parra 2018). These important topics merit a distinct engagement that is beyond the scope of this paper.

3. Unlike women's organizations, victims' associations are composed exclusively (or primarily) of victims of the armed conflict, sometimes specifically of victims of CRSV, and their activities center on providing support to conflict victims (e.g. psycho-social support, self-help sessions, mutual economic support). The activities of women's organizations and victims' associations often overlap, e.g. work on transforming gender norms and stereotypes or victim support. In Colombia, the word "victim" rather than "survivor" is used, due to its political weight signifying entitlement to legal redress and reparations (Krystalli 2019).
4. Rape was, at the time the interviews were conducted, one of the conditions under which terminations were legal in Colombia's restrictive abortion laws, which were liberalized in 2022.
5. Auto 092/2008 of the Constitutional Court (*Adopción de medidas para la protección a mujeres víctimas del desplazamiento forzado por causa del conflicto armado*) and law 1257 (2008) are concerned with protecting women from violence, in the context of the armed conflict and beyond. Law 1448 (2011), the "victims' law," regulates services, assistance and reparations to victims of the armed conflict.
6. Ten interviews with representatives of national and regional (Bogotá, Antioquia, Valle del Cauca) state and government entities, primarily those dedicated to gender and the armed conflict; one email correspondence.
7. Insights from different postwar settings highlight the importance of tackling gender structures in intersection with other hierarchies and existing sources of violence, e.g. racism, the excesses of militarism, to not further cement existing inequalities (Berry and Lake 2021).

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Conflicts of interest

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