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Women, Feminism, and the Construction of Collective Memory: Community-Based Memory Projects in Postconflict Colombia: The Case of Medellín

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Abstract

The women who have participated in memory-building projects in Colombia have shaped the formation of collective memory in important ways in official and informal projects. They have emphasized and highlighted their gendered experiences of the Colombian conflict and gained valuable experience working with and inside organizations. These experiences have provided women with a sense of feminist empowerment. The case of Medellín is particularly interesting because the city's women have been engaged in constructing collective memory for decades, long before the ratification of the 2016 Peace Accord. As such, these women had a valuable skill set that they were able to employ in collaboration with the official transitional justice mechanisms supported by the state after 2016. The experience of having their voices recognized and acknowledged has raised the feminist consciousness of the women of Medellín involved with these projects. The Medellín case is somewhat distinct from other Latin American cases of women peace and human rights activists because Colombian women have had several decades to learn the importance of including and even centering their intersectional gendered perspectives. The women of Medellín are not unique among Latin American women, but they have had a significant head start.

Keywords: Colombia; collective memory; feminisms; social movements; transitional justice

Resumen

Las mujeres que han participado en proyectos de construcción de memoria en Colombia han influenciado significativamente en la formación de la memoria colectiva, tanto en proyectos oficiales como informales. En esta construcción, las mujeres han enfatizado y resaltado sus singulares experiencias de género en el conflicto colombiano y han adquirido una valiosa experiencia en las organizaciones con las que trabajan. Estas experiencias han generado un sentido de conciencia feminista. El caso de Medellín es particularmente interesante porque allí las mujeres han participado en la construcción de la memoria colectiva durante décadas, mucho antes de la firma del Acuerdo de Paz del 2016. Por ello, estas mujeres ya contaban con valiosas habilidades que pudieron emplear en colaboración con los mecanismos oficiales de justicia transicional apoyados por el Estado después del 2016. El reconocimiento de sus voces ha aumentado la conciencia feminista de las mujeres de Medellín que participan en estos proyectos. Este caso es único y distinto de otros casos latinoamericanos de mujeres activistas por la paz y los derechos humanos, ya que las mujeres colombianas han tenido varias décadas para aprender la importancia de incluir, e incluso centrar, la perspectiva interseccional de género en los procesos comunitarios.

Palabras claves: Colombia; memoria colectiva; feminismos; movimientos sociales; justicia transicional

The construction of collective memory intersects with many aspects of the processes that form part of the transitional justice "toolbox" (e.g., truth commissions, trials, reparations, memorialization). Scholars have focused on the ways that the construction of collective memory can contribute to healing and reconciliation in the aftermath of war or atrocity. Many researchers have also analyzed the ways that divided societies need to (and in some cases have failed to) take into account the diversity of postconflict memory (Chirwa 1997; Karstedt 2009; Brown 2012; Brants and Klep 2013; Rincón Rubio et al. 2022). Transitional justice in Colombia is an interesting and important case study because, like the conflict itself, the process of transitional justice is comparatively prolonged and open ended. The construction of collective memory has been taking place at the local and national level and both formally and informally since the 1990s. Hundreds of these memory-building projects are still ongoing, now more than eight years after the 2016 peace accord between the government and the FARC.

The case of Medellín is particularly important because of the intensity of conflict there and the city's very high level of social mobilization. Women, in particular, have a long history of both human rights and feminist activism in Medellín (González-Malabet 2022).

Women around the world are usually at the center of memory-building projects. Women are often "left behind" in political conflicts, and they have taken up the responsibility of "searching for the disappeared" since the 1970s and 1980s with the advent of organizations like the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and CONAVIGUA in Guatemala. Mothers and widows were nontraditional political actors as they began searching for their missing relatives in the hope of finding them alive and uncovering secret information. Movements dedicated to finding answers and protesting political violence have become commonplace in Latin America and elsewhere. Now there are "relatives of the disappeared" movements all over the world, and women have become the traditional activists in these kinds of organizations. In the aftermath of state-sponsored violence and conflict, many women's organizations transitioned their political work to transitional justice, particularly memorialization and truth-gathering projects (Zubrzycki and Woźny 2020). Women's participation in memorialization often has a gendered influence on collective memory in the aftermath of war and atrocity (Jacobs 2017). This is not unique to Colombia, but because Colombian women have decades of experience with memory projects, it is worth examining the effects of their work. Although human rights activism is not necessarily explicitly "feminist" in Latin America, this kind of advocacy work led by women—especially the reflective work involved for the women who lead these memory-building projects—can become both self-proclaimed and implicit "feminist work" over time. Sonia Alvarez (1990), among others (Bueno-Hansen 2015; Rubio-Marin and de Grieff 2007; Bueno-Hansen 2015; Theidon 2024), has previously examined how women's participation in resistance movements created the conditions for a feminist consciousness. She specifically notes that feminist activism in Brazil came about because of the gendered nature of the "process" of engaging in social activism. Participation in collective-memory projects contributes to a feminist consciousness by restoring women's voices and providing them with a sense of agency. These activists' feelings of empowerment can motivate their resistance to patriarchal oppression. This phenomenon exemplifies Latin American and decolonial or popular feminism.

The purpose of this interdisciplinary research is to describe the experiences of women who are engaged in collective memory projects in Medellín and to consider the question of how these experiences have influenced their feminist consciousness. That is, how has the (largely unpaid) work of these women influenced their sense of themselves as women in a patriarchal society? We posit that this work has provided the opportunity for them to shape the official narratives in a way that is gendered, and that in having their work and their voices recognized by authoritative institutions, they have developed a more "feminist" consciousness. Many of these women have committed themselves to working in

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ways that seek to dismantle misogyny and patriarchy. Although some women choose to describe themselves as feminists, some do not self-describe as feminists, even though they are consciously working for gender equality in their public and private lives. Their reasons for *not* self-describing as feminist vary, but for the purposes of this study, we broadly define a "feminist consciousness" as the struggle against the oppression of women. We are using the term, as well as the theories of decolonial and Latin American/popular feminism, to describe the ways memory work has led to women's resisting and dismantling of gender-based oppression. The women engaged in memory work in Medellín have been able to influence and even control the unofficial and official narratives about the conflict. We maintain that this power and influence have significant ramifications for the feminist project.

Collective memory, women, and transitional justice in Colombia

Many scholars have considered the ways that women use innovative techniques to construct collective memory differently. Claudia Bacci (2020) has noted the importance of collective historical (intergenerational) memory to the feminist project in Latin America, particularly in Argentina, where there was an effort to construct an official collective memory. Elizabeth Jelin has particularly considered the ways men and women (as victims) differ in their constructions of memory for official collective-memory projects such as truth commissions. She notes that women's testimonials tend to be more personal, and they have traditionally focused on their domestic roles. The testimonials of women who testified for truth commissions in the 1980s and 1990s were more attuned to the personal and emotional details of their experiences; however, they often did not discuss themselves as the protagonists of their own stories. Jelin (2011, 564) observed that in these early testimonies, women tended to "narrar al otro." They did not center themselves or their experiences in their testimonies. Jelin (2011) also observed that the truth commissions of the 1980s and 1990s had comparatively few women's testimonials, and this is significant because women accounted for roughly 50 percent of militants in Argentina and a high percentage of those who were disappeared. In Peru, the Peruvian Commission (2000–2003) made a point to include the voices of women and to acknowledge violence against women. Nevertheless, the final report indicates that the Peruvian women still presented their own experiences in the context of the suffering of the family and community (when they were interviewed), and they avoided discussing themselves as protagonists. They also avoided discussing sexual violence, or when they did, they discussed it as something that happened to "other women" (Jelin 2011, 565). Jelin (2017) also noted that, historically, collective memory has not considered the intersectional memories of women and/or ethnic and racial minorities. She further explains that the collective memory of class struggle is often limited, particularly in Latin America, because it does not include the experiences of ethnic minorities or women. We hope to demonstrate here that women in Colombia have developed a new consciousness of their own positions as women and that their collaboration with official truth telling has created the conditions for them to understand and center their own intersectional experiences in the construction of collective memory.

Collective memory exists between "truth gathering," as in truth commissions, and memorialization, and it serves as an important tool for reconciliation and peace in the aftermath of war and atrocity.[1] According to Halbwachs (1951), collective memory is shared memory that becomes reified as part of the collective identity. It goes beyond memory that is explicitly shared by two or more people who have experienced something together. It also

[1] Memorialization includes all the ways that communities attempt to promote the memories of the conflict and those who were lost, including museums, educational curricula, public art, literature, and film.

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applies to memories held by a group with a common identity. A person can hold a collective memory regardless of whether they personally experienced what is being remembered. Moreover, collective memories—like personal memories—are subjective and may or may not be accurate. Moreover, we *define ourselves* through our relationships to communities and their histories. For these reasons, collective memory is important. In a postconflict situation, there is often some confusion and disagreement about what actually transpired and the normative implications of the experience (May 2013). The question of who gets to decide what the collective narrative will be matters because it can define individual and collective identities over time in a community. For the women in this study, it is important to them that their experiences become a part of the collective understanding of the ongoing political conflict in Colombia. In addition to the fundamental need to define the collective memory vis-à-vis what a community experienced together, the process of constructing collective memory *can* help both victims and communities heal. The likelihood of this happening increases when traditionally subordinated communities (like women, poor people, and ethnic minorities) are fully included and represented. These processes can restore the voices of the silenced and provide a sense of solidarity. Sometimes, truth-gathering processes allow the protagonists of complex conflicts to understand the experiences of former adversaries more clearly. In addition, because collective memory is subjective, personal, and often traumatic, there is often contestation. The construction of memory after atrocity or civil conflict is an existentially important project for victims of violence and war; however, it is rare for the process of constructing collective memory to be easy. This is particularly true for societies like Colombia, where the actual conflict transcends the boundaries of the terms of the negotiated peace settlement.

Colombian society remains deeply divided, even after the official conflict ended. This is why local community-based projects are essential to official truth commissions' goal of creating a unifying narrative. With the diverse input of many locally based groups, the official narratives can do a better job of representing the diversity of the national narrative. In the case of official and national memory projects in Colombia, local organizations—often led by women—have formed partnerships with the national projects authorized to define Colombia's "official" collective memory of armed conflict.[2]

There are many other models for the construction and establishment of collective memory. In Colombia, there are websites full of stories and art. School- and community-based educational curricula are widespread. Monuments have been constructed—traditional statues or sculptures in public places, and other kinds of monuments to memory, such as gardens, murals, and nontraditional sculpture or other installations. States and other authoritative bodies, as well as grassroots community collectives, also explore alternative artistic forms and venues. In the case of Medellín, there are "memory museums," graffiti art and murals, music videos, public art created by well-known artists, plays and concerts, and memorial gardens. Collective memory, by definition, is a living thing that is never "fixed." Collective memory is distinct from history and even historiography. Collective memory is about how people *understand* their experiences and histories in the context of a community.

Despite the fact that women are disproportionately involved in much of the work of truth-gathering projects, in recent years, scholars have faulted transitional justice programs—and truth commissions in particular—for failing to understand the outsized influence of political elites and other powerful actors in constructing these official narratives of collective memory.[3] As early as 2007, Fionnuala Ni Aoláin pointed out that

[2] The Colombian Truth Commission (CEV, Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición) and the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH, Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica).

[3] Stefan Peters (2021) has critiqued this idea that remembering war and human rights violations is always preferable to forgetting. He points out that memory projects often privilege voices of elites at the expense of

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transitional justice mechanisms tend to minimize the "transformational effects for women." They demonstrated that these processes also failed to apply theories of intersectionality, leading to the persistence of unequal power structures in postconflict societies (Ni Aoláin 2007). R. Aída Hernández Castillo (2022) has argued that women-led community-based memory projects have more recently challenged the patriarchal hegemony of official transitional justice projects in Mexico. And Mexico has a similarly long and gendered history with memory projects (Délano Alonso and Nienass Benjamin 2021). In response to the demands of the women activists in Colombia, the methodologies of the "official" truth commission there have become highly sensitive to inequalities and the complicated vulnerabilities of different actors and victims with intersectional identities. Moreover, in doing so, they have corrected some of the flaws that were evident in previous truth commission exercises.

War and memory in Colombia

The 2016 Peace Accords formally ended the conflict between the Cold War–era Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the anticommunist counterinsurgency efforts of the Colombian military. The accord marked the beginning of the period that Colombians optimistically referred to as "postconflict." Nevertheless, the postaccord period did *not* end violent political conflict in Colombia. It is also important to understand how different the actual conflict in Colombia was from other conflicts in the region that were rooted in the Cold War. The Colombian conflict predates the Cold War; it has also lasted more than thirty years past the fall of the Berlin Wall. Therefore, memory takes on a very different meaning; for example, there are hardly any Colombians alive today who remember Colombia "before" the conflict, and by most measures, the conflict continues without pause. Transitional justice in Colombia is also taking place in a context where there has been *no* clear political transition. The government maintained the institutionality of democracy throughout the entire period of conflict with Leftist guerrillas, so there has been no "transition to democracy." Transitional justice has therefore been complicated by the fact that the current government has no incentive to castigate the ancien régime.

The Colombian conflict is especially sensitive to positionality. Millions of Colombians have experienced significant loss from the actions of guerrillas, the (right-wing) paramilitaries, the military, criminal gangs, and/or the police. These personal losses have a powerful influence over how people remember, and these memories are often starkly different from one another depending on who the victims believe the perpetrators to be. A common and authoritative, yet nuanced narrative (reflecting the diversity of experience) may be the only way to achieve any kind of reconciliation and a path forward. Colombia's experience is a perfect example of what Primo Levi (1986) called the "gray zone," in reference to the fact that the line between victim and perpetrator was not always clear. In the case of Colombia, the gray zone represents a much larger proportion of the Colombian experience. The existence of a gray zone also does not preclude criminals who are unequivocally guilty or victims who are blameless. Nevertheless, there are many, especially among combatants on every side, who are complicit as perpetrators but also victims themselves.

The Colombian conflict involves many kinds of political actors, and the social fabric of the nation is deeply ingrained with violence. The only real road to peace is to make peace with conflicting memories. Women are at the heart of the memory projects in Colombia,

subaltern voices. Mneesha Gellman (2019) reviewed six recent books about transitional justice, primarily in Guatemala and Peru. According to Gellman, the common theme of this recent scholarship on memory and transitional justice is that truth commissions can be shaped to satisfy state agendas.

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and although women are historically less responsible for violence and conflict in Colombia, women and their voices are key to establishing a lasting peace in Colombia. The story of the women in Medellín elucidates the roles of women and the ways collective memory projects have contributed to feminist objectives.

Medellín's importance in the context of violence and memory projects

Medellín and the department where it is located (Antioquia) have been at the epicenter of the Colombian conflict, with a high overall percentage of the conflict's killings, massacres, and kidnappings. In the rural areas of Antioquia, there have been consistent attacks from the FARC and paramilitaries, and the urban areas were home to the first drug-trafficking cartels. The violent situation reached its nadir in 1991, with 6,500 homicides. Medellín was, for a time, the most dangerous city in the world (Baracaldo-Morato 2014).

One of the most horrifying aspects of the violence in Medellín during this period was that many of the perpetrators were young men from the poorest neighborhoods in the city. Drug traffickers and paramilitaries used boys and young men to kill other boys and young men. This created a generational cycle of violence with a marked absence of governmental intervention. Nevertheless, there was an interesting dynamic between this violence and grassroots movements. Because civil society was in the middle of the war, people from groups targeted by violence also attempted to create peaceful alternatives for their communities. Paradoxically, social movements experienced growth and empowerment during this time; they embodied the public disagreement between civil society and the "establishment" and between the government and violent actors. Civil society could and did question publicly the actions and decisions of the dominant actors (Castells 2009).

During these times, human rights movements consolidated themselves. As was the case in the rest of Latin America, human rights organizations emerged in response to the need for some kind of communal response (defense) to the danger of escalating violence. Consequently, the liberal values of the growing human rights movement contributed to the democratization of the city (May 2016). There was also institutional support from the national government that provided resources for different initiatives, including human rights groups in Medellín.

In addition to national programs that provided resources for civil society, the municipal government created the Program of Attention to Victims of the Armed Conflict in 2004. This program included (among other things) the task of establishing historical memory. Pilar Riaño-Alcalá explored the "politics of memory" in her seminal 2006 work *Dwellers of Memory*. Her ethnographic study of memory and her "memory workshops" conducted with young people in Medellín document the history of the ways that (mostly poor young people) have been dealing with the idea of memory and collective memory for decades, and also the ways that women and girls embody their memories of suffering (Riaño-Alcalá 2006). Because of these women and their decades-long attention to collective memory, the people and grassroots community groups of Medellín, and especially the women's groups, already have significant experience in generating spaces that enable the reconstruction and dissemination of historical (collective) memory of the armed conflict.

Women have been at the center of these human rights projects in Medellín, but they have not usually been motivated to activism by an overt commitment to feminism. Nevertheless, the centrality of women to human rights activism and memory projects has had important implications for Colombian and Latin American feminism. Moreover, the leadership and involvement of women in these projects in Medellín have created the conditions for many women to adopt a feminist worldview.

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Latin American feminism

Latin Americans have a complex relationship to gender, and North American and European feminists have historically misunderstood and homogenized Latin American women. Latin America is a heterogeneous region in terms of ethnicity, culture, and race. Nevertheless, the region shares a history of colonization, military dictatorships, and political and economic intervention from the United States. There is also commonality around the regional problems of civil wars, guerrilla movements, and high levels of poverty and inequality. For this reason, Latin American feminism *is* always bounded differently than decolonial feminism, communal feminism, popular feminism, and Indigenous feminism. (Cobo-Bedia 2014).

Notwithstanding the conceptual and academic labeling, Latin American feminism has a history of encounters and constructions between feminists and other women's movements (de Aragão-Ballestrin 2017). The history and chronology of growing women's agency in Latin America did not begin intrinsically with feminist movements or perspectives. Around 1970, women and women's movements were engaged in intense social justice activism in response to the political repression and dictatorships of the Cold War era. Women were important allies with men, and they made socialist-inspired demands for things such as land, fair wages, health, food, and other basic needs. In addition, women's movements were important for the defense of human rights. Latin American women organized the first organizations for relatives of the disappeared. The Argentine Mothers and Grandmothers of la Plaza de Mayo, the Bolivian Housewives Committee, and the Confederation of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA) organized themselves without any reference to a feminist ideology.

"Decolonial" feminist scholars have problematized questions raised by contemporary decolonial studies in Latin America. Decolonial studies scholars, centered in Latin America, posit the idea that the project of modernity is rooted in colonial logics, with ethnic and racial classifications and capitalist exploitation as its basis. This has generated intense inequalities in the region (Lugones 2008, 2014; Segato 2012). Decolonial scholars have traditionally overlooked gender as a fundamental category of study. María Lugones proposes the expanded notion of a world-colonial *and gender* system. She explains how the imposition of a binary gender system in the colonies established an additional way to exercise power, and that this is the origin of the modern system of gender construction. Lugones (2008) claims that both gender and race are inseparable categories for understanding the construction of oppression in the larger "modernity project."[4]

The most important branch of decolonial feminism for the purposes of this study is popular feminism. According to Claudia Korol, popular feminism is a revolutionary practice born from the struggles and the organization of women in response to the oppressions generated by the patriarchal system and colonial capitalism. Therefore, popular feminism highlights the need for a feminist pedagogy that emphasizes collectivity, where the victims of structural violence can learn to join with one another in shared pain (Korol 2016). Mary Roldan (2014) pointed out that rural and Indigenous women in Colombia had an early start with social activism in the 1960s and 1970s because of their participation in Christian (Catholic) social activism that supported women's access to education and their active role in household decision-making. Additionally, in Colombia,

[4] Many authors use the terms *decolonial* and *descolonial* interchangeably (Villarroel Peña 2018). Nevertheless, there are authors (Meschini and Porta 2020) that explicitly remind us that, as *decolonial* is an English-language term and *descolonial* is Spanish, it can be a political statement to use the term *descolonial*. According to Catherine Walsh (2009, 15–16), it is preferable to suppress the *s* to distinguish it from the Spanish meaning *des*, as the aim is not to *overcome* the colonial but to *transcend* it. In this research, we use the term *decolonial feminism* to understand the diversity of ways of thinking about women with a feminist consciousness and to *transcend* of the colonial dynamics of the conflict.

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some initiatives have proposed alternatives for peace based on a popular feminist perspective. For example, the organization Confluencia de Mujeres refers in its name to a public mobilization of women, making visible the bodies of women who experienced the war; it also calls for the construction of a collective memory from women who resisted the effects of the armed conflict (Solano and Giomara Farfán 2020). Similarly, movements such as La Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, together with the Red de Mujeres de Negro Contra la Guerra, recognize the importance of building collective memory in the streets, which is why they organize sit-ins with cultural demonstrations. These groups have commissioned artists who use their bodies through painting and dance to remember the massacres and rapes of women in the poor and affected neighborhoods and semiurban communities on the outskirts of the city (Badillo Ramírez 2011).

There *is* a history of explicitly feminist activism in Medellín. However, women's activism in the human rights movement—and specifically in collective memory projects—has been more influential for the feminist cause. There are women, including some rural and Indigenous women, who dislike the term *feminist*, even though they are working for women's rights and have received support from feminist movements. For these cases, the decolonial feminist perspective has redefined the term *feminism* to describe the women from Latin America who feel detached from this colonial and distant concept promoted by white women from Europe or the United States. For Latin America decolonial feminists such as Julieta Paredes (2010, 76), feminism "is the struggle and political life proposal of any woman, anywhere in the world, at any stage in history who has rebelled against the patriarchy that oppresses her." Additionally, María Galindo (2018, 619) describes the idea of "intuitive feminism"—"the personal disobedience of each woman against patriarchal discipline, regardless of the culture, age, social class, or place to which she belongs." Personal disobedience emanates not from ideology, but from women and their existential decisions of daily life. Many of the women who are creating a woman-centered collective memory in Medellín demonstrate this "feminist intuition." They are working to overturn patriarchal structures in their communities. These activists are challenging and changing the public sphere by raising their gendered voices in public spaces.

Women's roles in the analysis of violence and memory projects

The role of women in memory projects has provided women with the possibility to assume leadership roles in public projects that can be of great importance in their communities and in larger political arenas in which they operate. These opportunities have emerged in the context of wars and postconflict or transitional justice scenarios all over the world, but Latin American women have had more experience leading human rights movements and memory projects than in other regions. Women have had a different reality from men's in the armed conflict in Colombia. They have tended to be the most "silenced" of victims. In addition, women and girls have suffered sexual violence from all the actors—the military, guerrillas, paramilitaries, gangs, and drug traffickers (Guisao 2011). Additionally, women bring the dynamic of intersectionality to the analysis of the conflict. Some women (depending on their race, sexuality, ethnicity, and class) are more vulnerable targets than others (Crenshaw 2017; Sánchez-Ayala and Arrango-López 2015). Thus, by seeking to understand the complex ways in which women's bodies have suffered, we can more clearly see the heteronormative, racist, xenophobic, and classist characteristics of the conflict (Gillooly 2022). Perhaps for the first time in the brief history of transitional justice, the official projects in Colombia are seemingly cognizant of the importance of intersectionality and women's bodies to the national project of "historical clarification."

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The Commission for the Clarification of the Truth (CEV)

The 2016 Peace Accord included a mandate for the creation of the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition. To fulfill the conditions of the mandate, the government promulgated the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, Coexistence and Non-Recurrence (CEV) in November 2018. The commission was able to navigate the political discord of the changing priorities of different presidential administrations under the broadly supported leadership of the respected social activist and Jesuit priest, Francisco de Roux. The commission published its report in June 2022. The excellent quality of the truth commission's report was due largely to the involvement of the women whose community-based memory projects constituted the main element of the CEV's research process. To understand how women's voices were privileged in the CEV project and other official truth-gathering projects, we have to understand how women *demanded* inclusion, starting with the peace process.

Women's involvement in the peace process and the official memory projects

La Ruta Pacífica, along with several other organizations—Casa de la Mujer, Red Nacional de Mujeres, Mujeres por la Paz, Colectivo de Pensamiento y Acción Mujeres, Paz y Seguridad, Grupo de Seguimiento de la Resolución 1325, Conferencia Nacional de Organizaciones Afrocolombianas (CNOA), Iniciativa de Mujeres Colombianas por la Paz (IMP), and the Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas, Negras e Indígenas de Colombia (ANMUCIC)—organized a summit in Bogotá in October 2013 to consider the problem of representation in the Havana Peace Talks.[5] At the time, the FARC had only one woman representative on the negotiating team, and the government had none. In response to the recommendations coming from this women's summit, the negotiating parties agreed to form a gender subcommission to advise the peace process. They also agreed to add women to the negotiating table for both the FARC and the government. This subcommission came directly from the grassroots women's organizations, including several groups from Medellín. They focused on "five key points," one of which was the guarantee that the truth commission would address gender inequality and gender-based violence. In the final draft of the accord, there *are* references to gender equality in every chapter. Moreover, the insistence of the subcommittee that the truth commission study gendered violence and the impacts of the conflict on various intersectional communities meant the commission's methodology and record appear to be superior to that of the negotiating body for the accord.

Methodology of CEV

In addition to the emphasis on gender, race, ethnicity, and LGBTQI+ populations, the truth commission also employed a new methodology to gather testimonies and other information. It established "listening spaces" in collaboration with grassroots organizations and local groups. These were public events at which Colombian civil society (including members of the armed groups involved in the conflict) could come together to talk about their experiences and listen to their former adversaries. In addition, more than 120 community-based organizations submitted "reports" that detailed the experiences of their communities and community members. Among the organizations that worked directly with the CEV were La Ruta Pacífica, Agroarte (Las Doñas), and Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad.[6]

[5] La Ruta Pacífica is one of the four organizations in Medellín discussed later in this article.
[6] All these organizations are included in this analysis.

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The final report of the CEV contains nineteen chapters, each of which is hundreds of pages long. The chapter entitled "My Body is the Truth" is entirely devoted to women and LGBTQI+ people. It is 644 pages in length. The report relies on interviews with 10,864 women, and it discusses the particular vulnerabilities of women in war, paying special attention to sexual assault and abuse. Unlike the Peruvian report noted earlier, the women who testified about sexual abuse in Colombia received therapeutic support, and they gained support by openly talking about what had happened to them *with* other women who had also experienced sexual violence (Restrepo 2021). The report also discusses the "militarization" of masculinity as a serious problem for both women and men. This chapter also explicitly discusses intersectionality and the disparate impact of violence on Indigenous and Afro-descendant women, as well as the LGBTQI+ community. This work came directly from the many community-based collective memory projects throughout the country, including numerous reports and testimonies from activist women in Medellín (Ruta de la Pacífica n.d.). The truth commission's final report is a testament to the growing and sophisticated feminist consciousness among women in grassroots human rights organizations who have been doing memory work in Colombia.

Methodology of this study

For this interdisciplinary study combining oral history, gender studies, and political science methods and analysis, we conducted seven open-ended interviews with several women who have participated in different organizations and movements that have as all or part of their mission to establish and preserve collective memory in their communities. We used snowball sampling to contact women from the different movements. We also researched the primary source material produced by the organizations (e.g., websites and web pages, social media presence, ephemera), and last, we analyzed the small amount of available secondary literature about these organizations and movements. We chose these particular women and movements because they are representative of the most significant women's movements and organizations that are engaged in memory work and have an established presence in the urban environment of Medellín. We also interviewed two other activists who work alongside the women who are doing memory work.

All the women and movements discussed here were directly involved in "memory work" for their organizations. We carried out these interviews between September 2021 and January 2023, and the interviews were conversational and informal. We also included some follow-up interviews in 2024. We recorded some of the interviews and not others. We documented unrecorded interviews with notes. For ethical reasons, we followed the criteria of cognitive empathy, heterogeneity, palpability, follow-up, and self-awareness (Small and McCrory Calarco 2022). We practiced cognitive empathy by tailoring our questions and conversations personally to each subject, posing follow-up questions that allowed them to clarify their ideas. When the interviewees had particularly emotional or sensitive stories to tell, we asked them if they wanted to stop. Generally, they wanted to continue. We implemented the palpability criteria by including the specific testimonies of our interviewees and the analysis of their context and experiences in each organization. As stated earlier, we had follow-up conversations with some interviewees to clarify information and to check that our interpretations were correct. The self-awareness criteria were particularly important to us. We tried to mitigate as much as possible the impact of our presence. We approached all subjects through contacts with trusted individuals and performed interviews in places where the subjects felt comfortable. The interviews were more conversational in nature, and we avoided asking for specific information about the subjects' personal experiences, allowing the subjects to volunteer personal information as they felt comfortable. The most difficult criterion to follow was

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heterogeneity, because the organizations in Medellín were not very racially or ethnically heterogeneous. The interviewees were racially homogeneous (*mestiza*), reflecting the general racial makeup of Medellín. All the interview subjects were heterosexual and between thirty and fifty years old. Some of the women were migrants, and some were native to urban Medellín.

To document the plausibility of the research, we implemented open coding (Timmermans and Tavory 2022). We coded five interviews based on hermeneutic analysis and identified the most frequently repeated topics. We found three topics to be most salient in women's experiences: gender violence, traditional domestic roles and tasks, and feminist empowerment.

The interviews have provided some firsthand accounts of the experiences of specific women, but our overall findings are also evident in the historical record of the organizations of the subjects in this study (evidenced in the literature and web presence of the organizations themselves). The research question was "How has the 'memory work' of women in grassroots human rights organizations impacted their 'feminist consciousness'?" That is, how did the memory work of the women who participated and led these memory projects affect their awareness of, and resistance to gender oppression and patriarchy, and how did those personal changes affect their organizations? The answer to this question is evident in both explicit and subtle personal commentary from some of the women involved, and it is evident in the evolving ideologies that undergird the movements in question. This finding demonstrates the palpability criteria (Small and McCrory Calarco 2022).

We also found evidence to support our thesis in the work and report of the Colombian Truth Commission (CEV) and its interactions with women activists in Medellín. The report volume pertaining specifically to women draws on numerous interviews with women activists in Medellín (and elsewhere), as well as reports and appendixes created by the organizations themselves (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición 2022).

Women and the construction of collective memory in Medellín

The Colombian armed conflict in Medellín had dire consequences for women. Even though armed groups more heavily recruited and killed men, the women remained when their sons, husbands, or other relatives left or were killed. This generated an additional burden for women. They were often the sole heads of households, displaced, and responsible for the search for absent relatives. Thus, women have been the most significant actors in the aftermath of the conflict because they have been predominantly responsible for the processes of reconstruction and reconciliation of their families and of the social fabric of their communities. Moreover, the construction of collective memory—establishing a true and coherent narrative of what has happened—is a task that has fallen disproportionately to women. Women have also taken on most of the local (unpaid) leadership roles in peacebuilding projects across the country.

From the 1980s to the 2000s, women in Medellín initiated some of the most important initiatives to search for the missing victims of the conflict (*desaparecidos*) and to construct and maintain collective memory. These movements include La Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres por la Resolución del Conflicto Armado Colombiano, Madres de la Candelaria, Las Doñas, and Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad. These are the most important women's organizations engaged in the construction of collective memory in Medellín. These four organizations have provided material support for women and families affected by violence; they have created alternatives to crime and violence for youth; they have been instrumental in the construction and promotion of the memory of their murdered family

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members; and they have created spaces to share the pain of their losses. In this analysis, we specifically consider the impact of women's participation in these four organizations on the nurturing of a feminist consciousness.

La Ruta Pacífica

La Ruta Pacífica is a feminist movement specifically devoted to analyzing the conflict and to constructing collective memory in the service of peace and reconciliation. La Ruta is a national organization with a strong presence in Medellín that seeks to make visible the impact of the war on the lives and bodies of women (Ruta de la Pacífica de las Mujeres n.d.). La Ruta also aims to strengthen an explicitly feminist vision of pacifism and anti-militarism, and to build an ethic of nonviolence in which justice, peace, equity, autonomy, freedom, and the recognition of diversity are fundamental principles. It has more than three hundred affiliate organizations, and it includes groups of women from a range of social sectors: campesinas, workers, homemakers, indigenous women, Afro-descendant women, young women, professionals, intellectuals, and students (Ruta de la Pacífica de las Mujeres n.d.).

From its beginnings in 1996, La Ruta has been primarily concerned with "giving agency" to women in the process of reconciliation and peace building. Their purpose is to make sure that women have the opportunity to be protagonists of the peace process, and not just victims or subjects. For women to assert their agency, they must have space and opportunity to tell their stories and be authoritatively involved in the construction of collective memory. The idea of substituting agency for victimhood is central to La Ruta's mission and to a feminist vision for peace in Colombia. La Ruta's commitment to memory projects is at the forefront of Colombia's larger feminist movement (Ruta de la Pacfíica de las Mujeres n.d.).

In 2009, La Ruta Pacífica held a meeting in Bogotá with representatives of over three hundred Colombian human rights organizations from around the country. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the experiences of women in the Colombian conflict. Because of this meeting, the Colombian Women's Truth and Memory Commission was formed in 2010 to carry out a truth-seeking and collective-memory project that focused exclusively on women. La Ruta carried out the work of this commission with a "feminist methodology" that involved balancing the experiences of women in the civil war with the everyday violence that women experience in Colombia, including domestic violence. They trained community leaders to organize community-based forums of women where they would feel safe telling their stories. They interviewed over one thousand women for their report, *Memoria para la Vida*, published in 2013. The report emphasized that, although women had experienced a range of gender-specific violent abuse, they did not (in general) identify themselves as "victims." Instead, they saw themselves as relatives (mothers, daughters, sisters) of victims. Although this project predated the truth-gathering projects of the "postconflict" period, it was an important precursor. The work of this commission also led to the explicit participation of women members of civil society in the peace process in Havana. This in turn resulted in the instructions and outline of the framework in the peace accords that mandated the inclusion of the voices of women in the transitional justice process, including the truth commission. It established a community-based methodology for truth gathering; it established the importance of listening to women's voices in the process; and it set the stage for the CEV to consider intersectionality (Ruta de la Pacífica n.d.).

Additionally, La Ruta has developed schools for women. These schools have employed four distinct pedagogical modules: human rights and enforceability mechanisms; feminism, pacifism, and women's resistance; feminist work of the women in the organization; and protection and self-care for women. The women of La Ruta were very

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proud of the extensive work they had done with the schools. "We have been doing this school for eighteen years" (Interviewee 1 2022).

La Ruta is not the only feminist movement that is involved in the construction of peace and memory in Colombia, but it is the largest group that specifically identifies as "feminist." The group is explicitly committed to dismantling a patriarchal system (which it describes as having led to war and violence). According to a former director of La Ruta: "I am a feminist, pacifist, and antimilitarist, and I try to be in this journey of this peace movement at the national level" (Interviewee 1 2022). Additionally, this interviewee stated: "Women have a unique capacity for resistance—what today we call resilience . . . We [women] *resist*. We are part of a national movement, and it is not static. Our resistance moves, and it has a presence throughout the country. Our resistance has sustained a feminist political discourse for twenty-five years. I think that is important" (Interviewee 1 2022). The women of La Ruta want to replace the patriarchal system and the very language of Colombian politics with a feminist vision that emanates from the daily lives of ordinary (poor) women in Colombia:

> We ultimately tracked down around two thousand life stories or testimonies, and there are many elements of memory . . . these women's words . . . those most affected by this conflict within women's groups are Indigenous and Black women, because they are the ones in the territories where the conflict is most prevalent. Everything that is in the words of women here plays a very significant role. (Interviewee 1 2022)

La Ruta is a perfect example of both Latin American and decolonial or popular feminism. Providing opportunities for women to use their own voices in the construction of collective memory is the central focus of their mission.

The Madres de la Candelaria

On March 17, 1999, the Madres de la Candelaria staged their first sit-in at the Cathedral of La Candelaria in Medellín. They gathered to protest the disappearances of their loved ones, and they modeled themselves on the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Family members brought photos of their missing loved ones with the date of the disappearance. They borrowed megaphones to attract attention. Like the Argentine Mothers, they have repeated this protest every week.

The Madres de la Candelaria formed a corporation for administrative and legal matters that functions through a board of directors with a legal representative who also acts as the spokesperson and president. Likewise, the corporation has a vice president, a secretary, a delegate for national organizations in which the mothers have a seat, and two external delegates. Twenty mothers in the management group support the board (Martinez 2010). Even though there is a minimal institutional framework, the informal structure of the corporation and the friendship between the mothers allow them to function as a strong network.

The organization broke into two separate groups in 2003. The NGO National Network of Initiatives for Peace and Against War (REDEPAZ) created the Caminos de Esperanza–Madres de La Candelaria Association. This faction is financed by international cooperation projects, a point of disagreement with the original movement, which is now called Madres de la Candelaria—Línea Fundadora.[7] Despite the disagreement between the two factions, the Organization of American States recognizes both groups as part of the same group of

[7] Linea Fundadora mirrors the language used by one of the two factions of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina when they suffered a similar schism.

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Madres de la Candelaria (Martinez 2010; Asociación Caminos de Esperanza Madres de la Candelaria n.d.; Madres de la Candelaria n.d.).

The Madres de la Candelaria—Línea Fundadora includes the mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, and friends of the victims of kidnapping, murder, and forced disappearance in Colombia. The movement has eight hundred members (mostly women) in the department of Antioquia (United Nations 2021). The movement has consistently denounced human rights violations, demanding truth, justice, comprehensive reparations, collective memory, and the guarantee of nonrepetition.

Madres de La Candelaria is a social movement that aims to make visible the situation of forced disappearance. Its members make use of symbols and symbolic actions. They march in front of the cathedral, wearing white T-shirts with the photos of their disappeared loved ones, and they bring flowers. The Madres exist to support women through the process of searching for their missing relatives, clarifying what has happened in Colombia during the war, and seeking reparations in coordination with government entities (Asociación Caminos de Esperanza Madres de la Candelaria n.d.; Madres de la Candelaria n.d.; Madres de la Candelaria—Línea Fundadora 2020).

The movement disseminates its message through weekly sit-ins at the Cathedral of la Candelaria. Their presence has made forced disappearance and kidnapping more visible. This has encouraged others to talk about their situations and to become a part of the organized resistance around the issue of forced disappearance. According to one of the leaders of Madres: "We are part of the Mesa de Desapariciones Forzadas [MOVISE] of the department of Antioquia. We are part of MOVISE because we feel that it is important to articulate our work with the work of others. We work with twenty different organizations and together we strengthen the cause of nonviolence and memory" (Interviewee 3 2022). MOVISE is also affiliated with official transitional justice efforts through the JEP and the truth commission.[8]

The Madres have several different methodologies for resistance, advocacy, and collective memory. One of the group's most interesting activities is its Weaving Memory project. One of the leaders of Las Madres remarked, "We have hundreds of quilts where we have woven the names of our loved ones" (Interviewee 3 2022). Between September and October 2022, the Madres inaugurated an exhibition that remained for more than one year in the Casa de la Memoria Museum in Medellín.[9] In addition, members are making memory murals in each of the neighborhoods where they have a presence.

The Madres have a strong positive presence in the public imagination, and they have participated in both major peace negotiations of the past twenty years—the negotiations surrounding the demobilization of paramilitarism in the 2007 and more recent peace negotiations between the government and the FARC. They see their role in these official processes as key to transparency and accountability—"we are like a guarantor in the JEP, in the truth commission and in the UBPD" (Interviewee 3, 2022). The Madres are especially involved with the Unidad de Busquédas de Personas Dadas por Desaparecidas (UBPD), the official transitional justice organization devoted to the victims and survivors of forced disappearance. One of the leaders of the Madres stated: "It used to be very difficult to get the justice system to respond to our need to locate the remains of our family members. Now they are receptive to our demands, and they take our information, and their professionals are often able to locate the bodies. For example . . . they gave to Doña Gloria her disappeared son. And they recognized and restored her dignity in the process" (Interviewee 3 2022). These women have explicitly recognized that, as women, they have

[8] The JEP, or Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, is the justice arm of transitional justice in Colombia. The JEP is responsible for charging and prosecuting those who have violated national and international law.

[9] The Casa de la Memoria museum in Medellín is one of the largest and most influential memory museums in the country.

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been ignored in. Only through their dedication and persistence have they recovered the recognition of their inherent dignity as women.

The women who have devoted themselves to this organization and the cause of memory have been empowered by the national and international respect they have earned. They have gained a sense of agency. They have claimed their own transformation from victims of the conflict to agents for peace building. This exemplifies the idea of popular feminism.

El Partido de Las Doñas (Agroarte)

Las Doñas is a group of approximately nine hundred women who work for the construction of collective memory. Most of these women have lost loved ones to violence.

Las Doñas started in 2018 as an alliance between community leaders in one of the most notorious urban zones in Medellín—Comuna 13. There is a long-standing nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Comuna 13 called Agroarte. Agroarte is a community-based organization dedicated to carrying out actions of memory and resistance through planting gardens, through murals and other public art, and through hip-hop workshops and other activities. Agroarte was a direct response to a military massacre (the Orion Project) that occurred in October 2002. The military occupied the neighborhood for one week, leaving hundreds of residents dead and disappeared and installing violent paramilitary forces that continued to occupy the neighborhood for more than a decade afterward. Community members gathered in the aftermath of the massacre and launched Agroarte. Luis Fernando Álvarez (now known as "Aka") was a teenager at the time, but he has come to be the leader of one of the most dynamic and interesting NGOs working for collective memory in Colombia.[10] Las Doñas is a newer initiative of Agroarte focused on women and their particular needs. Members of Las Doñas provide support for one another, and they express their own authoritative voices in the construction of Colombia's collective memory.

The name Las Doñas resonates: A *doña* is a well-respected woman or a head of household. A *doña* represents respect and authority. She negotiates the conflict inside and outside her own family. In addition to creating a space and precedent for the respect and dignity of older women in the community, this organization also seeks to influence the lives of its youngest members. Some of the neighborhood groups focus on providing spaces and opportunities for young girls to meet and express themselves, as well as to develop skills. Las Doñas have invested themselves and their organization in teaching girls that they can have economic and emotional independence. They are explicitly teaching girls how to defend their thoughts and to resist submission to violence (Interviewee 4 2021).

Las Doñas is not an explicitly "feminist" organization, but the group's mission and objectives clearly align with feminist goals, and their members articulate a vision for Colombia that *is* feminist. The Doñas empower women and help women to manage their grief. As "popular" feminists, they share their pain. According to one longtime member and leader, the women have learned to stand up for themselves and use their voices in their intimate relationships, their families, and in their communities. One of the women we spoke to explicitly and repeatedly attributed her awareness of her experiences of discrimination and oppression to her work with the organization (Interviewee 4 2021). In addition to maintaining the memories of lost loved ones, the Doñas also address the needs of women and girls who are victims and survivors of gender-based violence and domestic violence. For the Doñas, healing and catharsis, demanding and reestablishing their rights, and telling their stories of survival are all a part of the same process. Establishing permanent reminders (mostly through art, music, and gardening) of their lost family members helps them manage their grief and suffering. They also use collective memory to

[10] Luis Fernando Álvarez (Aka), interview by Rachel A. May and Maria Auxiliadora González-Malabet, September 15, 2021.

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help girls and young women understand who they are and where they came from (Interviewee 4 2021). The fact that the organization has developed workshops and support groups for girls is evidence of its evolution from a strict focus on memorializing the dead to a forward-looking community-based organization committed to creating a better life for girls and young women by making them less susceptible to violence and patriarchy. The Doñas exemplify Latin American, decolonial, and popular feminism.

Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad

The Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad (MCV) organization, like Agroarte, was informally founded in 2002 in the urban zone of Comuna 13 in the aftermath of the Orion massacre. The women of the MCV consolidated their organization in 2006 as a rejection of the military actions that had been taking place since 2002. They peacefully demanded that the Colombian state allow them to return to their homes and search for their missing relatives (Restrepo Ochoa and Suárez Tangarife 2020). The women of MCV are specifically dedicated to the search for relatives and loved ones who disappeared from Comuna 13 in 2002 and afterward. In 2020, the organization included 180 women (Juárez Rodríguez et al. 2017). One of its principal goals has been the forensic excavation of the garbage dumps La Escombrera and La Arenera. Many believe that the bodies of the victims of the massacre are there. They established a permanent encampment in La Escombrera in 2015 to protect the site and to remind their fellow citizens that their loved ones are still missing. They were able to force an excavation of the dump in 2015, but it did not produce results. There was garbage from decades earlier found in the top layer of material, indicating that someone had tampered with the dump before the official excavation. The JEP and the Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas Dadas por Desaparecidas, in collaboration with the mayor's office in Medellín, formally promised that the site would be completely excavated in 2024 (Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad 2023). After holding a hearing in July 2024 to demand answers from the governor and mayor about progress on starting the excavations (Gómez 2024), new excavations began in earnest. In December 2024, the first human remains were excavated from La Escombrera. Estimates indicate that there may be as many as five thousand bodies in the site (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz 2024). It is entirely because of the work of the MCV that these bodies will be recovered and returned to their families

They also created a memory museum and community space called the Salón Tejiendo Memoria in the Convent of Madre Laura in Comuna 13. The Salón is a place to display artifacts and photos of the victims, but it also functions as a meeting place for victims and survivors to share their stories. According to Sister Rosa, the nun who maintains the space, it is through sharing stories and memories and *listening* to one another that Colombia can find true peace (Interviewee 5 2024; Restrepo Ochoa and Suárez Tangarife 2020; Hacemos Memoria n.d.; Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad 2023).

MCV received the National Human Rights Award in 2015. An important characteristic of MCV is its commitment to working with other organizations (Restrepo Ochoa and Suárez Tangarife 2020; Juárez Rodríguez et al. 2017). For example, with the Fundación Obra Social Santa Laura Montoya, the MCV created the workshop "Reading and Writing to Live and Dream." This workshop is a space for community integration and historical memory. The workshop has created a text that contains the life stories of many of the women from MCV Comuna 13. Through reading and writing, these women have strengthened their resistance and memory, and they are empowered by the writing. Additionally, MCV has promoted memory through public marches in Medellín, in collaboration with the Madres de la Candelaria.

In addition to their community work, they have worked with the Mayor's Office of Medellín to create the Victims Unit to enforce the public policy of care and reparations for

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victims. Both the MCV and the Madres de la Candelaria have explicitly sought to influence public policy, and they have successfully pressured public officials to take action, thanks to their political capital, their symbolic importance, and their sophisticated organization (Juárez Rodríguez et al. 2017; Restrepo Ochoa and Suárez Tangarife 2020).

Several women expressed how they gained awareness of gender oppression and patriarchy by working with the truth commission and the mayor's office. One woman said: "In the conflict . . . the perpetrator is almost always a man. They [the men] want to make us (women) weak. There is abuse" (Interviewee 2 2023). She continued to elaborate on how she gained agency through her work in transitional justice: "Suffering so much gender violence [in the conflict], I chose to remain silent. As a woman, I felt like I could not speak. I felt that I was not heard and that there was no one who believed me because I was a woman . . . . In this group [MCV], I learned to be strong and to speak up. At least my *voice* became strong, and this helped other women to feel strong. Now I say, "Wow, I achieved this?" . . . Because I was nobody, and my strength became big. Now I have a voice, and I feel big. I became important to someone . . . to many people."

The Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad has the construction of collective memory at the forefront of its mission. For most of these women, the solidarity that they find in the organization is empowering. One leader of the MCV (Interviewee5 2024) said: "In Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad, we are not just sad women expressing our pain for the loss we have suffered . . . we are an organization of memory, and of political struggle. We make demands, and we are the resistance." They have become a resistance movement, and they have developed agency in the struggle against violence and oppression. Although they rarely discuss overtly feminist ideals, activism and resistance to a militarized understanding of masculinity implicitly advance a feminist agenda. At least one of the women involved spoke about how the organization helped her to recover her dignity as a woman after both FARC militants and her husband had repeatedly abused and sexually assaulted her: "[I realized that] we do not have to show that we are fragile. We have to show that we are strong. We do not have to revictimize ourselves. Something bad happened to us . . . something happened to us that should not happen to anyone, absolutely no one. Nevertheless, we cannot live in that pain. We . . . cannot let it consume us. This is the support [from MCV] . . . we cannot be 'less than.' We cannot allow that conflict to . . . make us fragile" (Interviewee 2 2023). In addition, other members discussed their expanded understanding of how gender oppression has influenced their experiences. They have articulated their desire to resist gender-based violence and oppression both inside and outside the home (Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad 2023; Hacemos Memoria n.d.). Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad provides training and workshops for women with little prior experience in activism. They have also collaborated with the CEV, providing testimonies for both this official national collective memory project and others. Like Las Doñas, Mujeres Caminando por la Verdad is an example of both Latin American and decolonial and popular feminism.

Conclusions

Collective-memory projects are particularly important in the Colombian case because of the diversity and breadth of both victim and perpetrator experiences. Peace and reconciliation are dependent on Colombian citizens engaging in the hard task of understanding their experiences of war. Women's social movements in Medellín have been at the forefront of the construction of collective memory by providing spaces for speaking, listening, and understanding since the 1990s. The women in these movements already know how to construct collective memory and to promote reconciliation. This differentiates the memory projects that took place in the aftermath of the Cold War in

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other Latin American countries. The official transitional justice processes in Colombia came to rely on women in Medellín (and elsewhere) in defining and carrying out the official truth-gathering and memory projects.

These movements and organizations have been and continue to be a political venue for women, and this has generated a sense of political agency and strength among the members. In Medellín, women have participated in political and social spaces to confront injustice for many years (Bueno-Hansen 2015). The human rights NGOs that emerged during the worst years of conflict in Medellín led to a kind of "sisterhood." A network of solidarity developed in the 1970s and 1980s between feminist groups and other women-led organizations. This kind of relationship was not unique to Medellín or Colombia. As noted in the introduction, many scholars have previously described how women's social and political activism around class-based issues and human rights is connected to a more gendered consciousness (Alvarez 1990; Bueno-Hansen 2015; Rubio-Marin and de Grieff 2007). Particularly in the case of Brazil, Sonia Alvarez (1990) has described the complex interplay of feminist women's movements, human rights organizations, and broader social and political justice movements during the Cold War. Nevertheless, unlike these other Latin American cases, the sisterhood between feminist movements and other popular social movements lasted well beyond the 1990s in Colombia. This eventually created the conditions for these women to seek equality (with men) in their defense of human rights. One woman commented: "So this is what I say to all women. Do not let yourself be revictimized. I know it is hard . . . very, very hard, but you have survived so much . . . so much conflict . . . . And you have seen the different sides. Do not give bad men the privilege of telling you that you are weakened by it. You must remind yourself that what you have suffered has made you strong. You have to say to yourself, I am *not* less than . . . I can do this. I am strong" (Interviewee 2 2023).

Moreover, most of the explicitly feminist organizations in Medellín had some kind of commitment to the larger issues of peace and human rights throughout the past forty years, especially as the violent conflict escalated, and they transitioned this progressive ideology into the quest for collective memory. These human rights and feminist activists together insisted on including women in the peace process. They insisted that the transitional justice process would account for women's different experiences of conflict (Ruta de la Pacfíica de las Mujeres n.d.). They participated in truth gathering and the construction of collective memory with the truth commission, and they demanded that the truth commission pay attention to gendered violence and intersectionality (Ruta de la Pacífica n.d.): "We feel that we have to leave that (memory) because one day we will not be here, and we want them to remember some women who screamed like crazy" (Interviewee 3 2022).

The Colombian case is unique in Latin America because the end of the Cold War did not definitively end the civil war. This meant that Colombian "peace" activists (mostly women) had more than twenty years during which they were compelled to promote an end to the conflict. Therefore, the relationship between feminism, peace activism, human rights, and memory projects is also somewhat unique. Nevertheless, more recently, the #NiUnaMenos (NUM) movement, which originated in Argentina in 2015, has grown from a national movement protesting femicide and violence against women to a more broadly intersectional movement that seeks to find connections between poverty, social justice, and violence in Latin America and beyond (Medina 2023). NUM—a feminist movement opposing femicide in Argentina—has become an international intersectional peace movement. We can see the earlier peace promotion activities of Colombian women as a kind of precursor to this new paradigm for women's social movements.

Many of the women discussed the ways their activist work had influenced their feelings about their personal relationships. Most of the women interviewed here expressed some newly found awareness of how they had experienced gender-based oppression in both

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private and public spheres. One woman stated that she was married for more than twenty years in an abusive relationship, where she always had her head down and was submissive. She felt that her work with Las Doñas allowed her to "hold her head up and look in every direction." She eventually decided to separate from her husband (Interviewee 4 2021).

Among the women we interviewed, they discussed traditional gender roles and "women's work." They talked about sexual violence and violence against women even more frequently, and they brought up their own empowerment and agency as women repeatedly in almost every interview. We think this demonstrates that their participation in the organized memory work, and their collaboration with authoritative institutions affected their consciousness of themselves as women in a way that has led them to be more aware of patriarchal barriers and to want to overcome those barriers for themselves and for other women. In the 1970s and 1980s, many women became activists for the first time, and they were often quick to point out their alliances with men in promoting human rights or social justice in the context of class struggle. By the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and 1990s, many of these women had developed a more gendered consciousness of themselves as women in a fundamentally patriarchal society. Despite this progress, scholars observed a weakening of women's political activism as human rights and resistance movements were demobilized when many Latin American countries made a "transition to democracy" (Craske 1998; Jaquette 1989; Schild 1998). Because there was no political transition in Colombia after the Cold War, the demobilization of women's organizations did not occur. Our research proposes that the peace process and the transitional justice processes that have taken place since 2010 have actually reinvigorated these women's movements, and their experiences between 1989 and 2025 have had an even more marked impact on the feminist consciousness than had earlier women's mobilization in other countries.

The women in this article have developed programs for girls so that they will not only remember the dead but also have the tools to resist and prevent violence going forward. Focusing on memory has highlighted the need for future generations to understand their experiences so that they will not experience the same kinds of gender oppression. They want younger generations to have the resources necessary to resist sexual and partner violence and to find their own voices and sense of agency (Madres de la Candelaria n.d.; Interviewee 4 2021; Interviewee 1 2022; Interviewee 3 2022; Agroarte, Acción Política Organizativa: El Partido de las Doñas n.d.). Moreover, they have expanded the definitions and manifestations of collective memory to more accurately reflect the diverse experiences of the Colombian people. Even before the participation of these women in the official truth commission in Colombia, scholars noted the potential for Colombian women's participation in the peace process and the implementation of transitional justice in Colombia to significantly transform the understanding of collective memory in the context of transitional justice (Arias Cuentas 2018). The Colombian experience will have implications for how transitional justice is "done" in the future. This will be an iconic and relevant case study for transitional justice everywhere.

For the purposes of this analysis, we are particularly interested in the fact that these movements have become repositories for the testimonies of women. Some of the projects and activities they have promoted include communal gatherings with *sancocho*, knitting or artistic demonstrations, mural projects and other public art installations, community gardens, workshops for youth, mentoring programs, and so on (Asociación Caminos de Esperanza Madres de la Candelaria n.d.; Madres de la Candelaria—Línea Fundadora 2020; Agroarte, Acción Política Organizativa: El Partido de las Doñas n.d.). Memory building has been a *female* effort that explicitly opposes the patriarchal logic of violent political conflict. And as such, memory building has become a feminist act. That is, the work of these women has helped advance the cause of diminishing patriarchy and eliminating barriers to gender equality. The first transitional justice processes (Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile)

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did interview some women, but women's experiences were not centered in the reports. The Peruvian Commission explicitly interviewed more women than had previous commissions, but like the women in earlier Truth Commission projects, these women discussed their experiences almost entirely in the context of their families and communities (Jelin 2011, 2017). The Colombian women, and particularly the women of Medellín, have learned from this history, and they have completely transformed the idea of women's collective memory. Moreover, in recent years, they have done so in collaboration with the authority of state institutions.

Because women have mobilized themselves and have taken on the most important leadership roles in the construction of collective memory in Colombia, they have been in a position to define the historical conflict and to give voice to the victims of the conflict. As it turns out, this voice is gendered. Having women in positions to see and articulate the gendered nature of the conflict has revealed how violence in Colombia is rooted in patriarchy. Moreover, the experience of having their voices recognized and acknowledged has sparked a feminist consciousness in the women who are involved with these projects. These women have become political agents navigating interchangeably from the private sphere to the public sphere. Their popular feminism is something new and important. These women activists are the newest iteration of global feminism, and we all have much to learn from them.

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