



South Pacific- Buenaventura November 17, 2012

...The Misfortune of the Women of Buenaventura

*The women of Buenaventura are by nature cheerful, fighters, energetic, caring, warm, loving, and exotic; this benevolence combined with experience and wisdom gives birth to midwives, who are aware of the cultural role they play in their communities as guides, counselors and conciliators, managing the cultural power delegated to them to build and rebuild effective partnership ties and make familial relationships beyond kinship; a strategy that is a pillar of cultural values such as respect, mutual support and trust, essentials to living in harmony and addressing conflicts peacefully.*

*A midwife is an important mother figure, the head of the pack, a friend, sister, aunt, cousin, grandmother, godmother, a leader who is known and recognized by their wisdom and values.*

As contemporary women from Buenaventura, we express our belief, that given the cruelty, the injustice, the aggression and the violence to which we are subjected to, we are denied the right to be women and midwives.

The armed forces of Buenaventura and the District Mayor emphatically maintain that the homicides and femicides that systematically occur in the city are “*isolated incidents, that violence perpetuated against women in Buenaventura is linked to domestic situations, or in other words is domestic violence which makes it merely a crime of passion. With this approach they pretend to say that femicide is not correlated to the armed conflict and therefore they do not attribute political reasons.*” **The pattern for murdering women in the last three years in Buenaventura consists of perpetuating the practices of torture and brutality, butchering women alive, tearing limbs of their bodies one by one, beheading them, tearing off their breasts and buttocks and then displaying them or leaving them in trash bags, raping them and leaving pieces of wood in their vaginas.** /Strength is needed to describe the merciless, atrocious manner in which they treat women, they say one needs to turn gruesomeness into fortitude in order to smile, dress up, go out on the streets and even to fall in love given that we may be sleeping with the enemy; strength is needed to fill ourselves with love and intelligence in order to confront the sexist jokes in public service vehicles, on the street corners and even at cultural events where they so naturally recreate the patterns of extreme violence already established against women. *Don't say anything to me because I will strike back, don't be a know-it-all because they will strike you, women better behave because they are striking women. Insulting remarks such as these, are heard daily.*



As a tribute to all our sisters that have been victims of the violent people and especially the 13 year old little girl, Leydi Yasuri Sinisterra, who was killed in the middle of a shootout last November 14 in a neighborhood near Santa Cruz, Immaculada, district five of this city, we want to affirm why the femicide in Buenaventura is indeed due to political reasons, and how they are closely linked to the internal armed conflict that exists in this city, located in the territory-region of the Colombian South Pacific:

- For the social and communal role that the women have played and the role played by midwives in the neighborhoods, streets, and sidewalks.
- Because after more than a decade of systematic assassinations of productive men in Buenaventura, where the armed conflict has robbed us of more than 2,500 men (fathers, brothers, husbands, boyfriends, sons, nephews) the women are assuming distinct roles: single mother, head of the house, student, worker, activist. The women, today, are the social base of Buenaventura.
- Because femicides are used as examples and are becoming part of the means used by armed actors to incite collective panic and establish the social control that they seek
- Because the violence against women is a social health problem, because in the absence of governance that prevails in Buenaventura, the women victims of violence that continue to survive (like the 45-year-old woman who on November 15<sup>th</sup> was shot eleven times because she refused to accompany a man to a spa; or the multitudes of women who have been sexually abused or physically or verbally battered) don't receive any type of psychological or psychosocial attention much less clinical. Additionally, considering that clinics do not accept those who are direct victims, they likewise do not receive the indirect victims, i.e. families (mothers, daughters, sisters, nieces) that accompany them in the process of physical and emotional recuperation. This situation prolongs grief and ruins the self-esteem of these women.
- Because violence against women has become normal and you therefore hear sexist comments in the public service vehicles, street corners, and roads. It's inexplicable how an act so heinous, so inhumane like torture can be converted into a common joke! But maybe it is because we are diving deeper into a collective dementia, another example of this collective psychological syndrome is seen in the newscasts, better known as "news-dead, (*noti-muerto*)" at the end of the news you hear comments like: "today's news was bad, as there was only one dead; yesterday's news was better, there were seven."
- Because more than half of the femicides were perpetrated by men associated with armed groups.

From this, the campaign "Not One More" (*Ni una mas*) continues to ask the state and armed groups:



Why do they kill us? For what purpose do they kill us?

Why do they rape us? For what purpose do they rape us?

Why do they torture us? For what purpose do they torture us?

Why do they displace us? For what purpose do they displace us?

The answers are clear to us. We know that they kill, violate, torture, displace, and forcibly disappear us because structural racism and racial discrimination are the ideologies that patriarchal and neoliberal powers have historically employed to decimate us and to curtail our lives' work as Afro-Colombian communities and our worldview as an ethnic group. Perpetuated ethnocide is part of the extermination plan. After more than 500 years of resistance, our African footprints continue in confrontation with the racist ideology that views African and indigenous communities as savages, brutes, illiterates, ugly, and backwards; because it was others that wanted to shape us and create a satirical stereotype, pseudo-human and animalistic, to justify the structural racism to which we are subjected. They kill us because we are against hegemonic development, they kill us because they want to convert Buenaventura into a port city and expel us from our neighborhoods to make them into tourist cities, piers, and hotel condominiums.



*Image of the development of the lower marine zone of the island of Buenaventura communities 2,3,4, and 5, taken from a calendar of Buenaventura with a new model of the city.*

The violence in Buenaventura is a merciless battle to rob us of our territory that we have populated, built on, and made our home, and like always we are disadvantaged, while the capitalists have firepower (armed groups, new paramilitary groups, or criminal bands), we have the blood.



*Image of island commune tide zone 3, the small beach area. PCN Photo Archives.*



For 10 years we have been mired in a war, that few understand; for 10 years we have been living in a humanitarian crisis; here those who don't die of bullets, die of hunger and anguish, as Aunt Emerita Angula, a 78 year old displaced woman from Rio Naya describes:

*"We came to Buenaventura after they killed our son, we fleeing and leaving everything: the cow, the house, the chickens, family, friends, and we came here and my father got sick, he can't walk and is extremely thin, because the only times we eat are when the neighbors give us little bites; in three years government aid only came twice: once we collected money, and the other, when we went to the bank, they told us that we had already collected and I walked and cried to God because they hadn't paid me because supposedly someone had already collected the money. I at least can move and hobble around and rummage for some money, but my poor father, he can't walk and I have to leave him by himself while I search for food. Sometimes I'm gone for days and I can't find anything, and we spend the whole day sleepless and restless. I ask: what is it that we have done, for them to treat us like an old rag?"* These painful words are just an example that shows the humanitarian tragedy that we live through in Buenaventura.

Since the October 6, the violence in Buenaventura has escalated. The fight for control of the neighborhoods, where they coincidentally are developing or are planning port expansion megaprojects, has generated more than 500,000 internal displacements, many who have left to protect their physical safety. The institutional capacity of Buenaventura to address these internal displacements has collapsed, and even though the situation has existed for over 10 years Buenaventura still has not built the first temporary shelter for those displaced. Some fortunate families have been housed in hotels in the city, but in very poor humanitarian conditions because they are in terraces where there are subject to rain and sun. In addition, they only house women and children and turn away men. This situation is alarming because the improvised attention mechanism of the Mayor's office and the Victims Unit breaks up the familial ties and demands that these psychologically affected mothers (who have been tormented by the victimizing events that provoked this forced displaced) are the sole caretakers of the children, putting even more stress on these women. In addition, these conditions lead to illnesses that are brought on by humidity and the crowded living situation in which many of these women and children find themselves.

...this and more happens here, the principal port of Colombia. In the words of Ruben Blades, "the corruption and the misrule of the government make my beautiful sea port pure hell."

**For our right to be women and midwives.**

**Not one more woman murdered, violated, maltreated, tortured, disappeared, or displaced.**



**Women continuing in the struggle, and singing in the sun like a cicada.**