

# Violent Conflicts Increase the Risk of Domestic Violence in Colombia

By Johannes Rieckmann

Over the past 50 years, Colombian society has experienced a violent conflict between government forces and right-wing paramilitary groups on the one hand, and left-wing guerrilla groups on the other. Moreover, a high proportion of women in Colombia are victims of domestic violence. The present study examines whether there is a correlation between the conflict and violence against women. The findings indicate that the more intense the conflict, the greater the risk of women falling prey to domestic violence.

Not only does war leave emotional scars in its wake, but it also changes the value systems of society at large and the behavioral patterns of individuals. This applies to violent cross-border conflicts as well as to civil war, traditional conflicts, and “low-intensity” asymmetric conflicts. The longer a conflict lasts, the more intense it becomes, and the closer it is to people’s homes, the more these effects can be seen.

## Domestic Violence Is a Sign of Psychological Effects

Beliefs, attitudes, and social norms—in other words, the culture within a society—are affected by the experiences people have in their day-to-day lives. Since changes here are difficult to quantify, changes in behavioral patterns were examined instead. These allow us, at least to a certain extent, to draw conclusions on changes in individual attitudes and social norms.

When selecting behavior-related aspects for analysis, there are two important points: the behavior-related aspect must not be a direct consequence of conflict or fighting, and the cause of changes in behavior must be transparent. These two conditions apply to both the inflection and the endurance of domestic violence.<sup>1</sup>

Theoretically, the causal relationship between these two factors may be inverse. In other words, domestic violence can create a violent climate, increasing the probability and intensity of fighting and conflict. In Colombia, however, this is highly unlikely. The Colombian guerrilla groups *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia,

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<sup>1</sup> The investigation into the underlying association between conflicts and domestic violence is described in the following paper by D. Noe and J. P. Rieckmann, “Violent Behaviour: The effect of civil conflict on domestic violence in Colombia,” Courant Research Centre “Poverty, Equity and Growth in Developing and Transition Countries: Statistical Methods and Empirical Analysis,” Discussion Paper (Universität Göttingen, 2013): 136.

FARC) and *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army, ELN) are excellently organized paramilitary groups who are generally highly strategic in their choice of conflict setting. This means the fighting does not take place primarily in areas where domestic violence might produce a good breeding ground for recruits into these groups.<sup>2</sup> Recruits on all sides of the conflict are often deployed far away from their homes. Whatever the location, the intensity of a conflict is essentially determined by military strategy considerations, which is why domestic violence cannot be assumed to affect conflict intensity.

Domestic violence can be expected to occur more often in connection with conflict for two main reasons. First, the more intense a conflict becomes, the greater the acceptance of violence within the society. Second, domestic violence is often a means of venting stress.

Here, it is not only about the survivors among those directly involved in fighting.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, repeated observations of violence and even indirect contact with it—for instance, hearing or reading news about violent conflicts in your home town or village—can lead to psychological effects.

Consequently, violence as a means of resolving private and social problems is tolerated all the more, silently accepted.<sup>4</sup> The force of habit and negative role models make it worse over time.<sup>5</sup> How domestic violence is perceived and viewed within a society has a huge effect on how frequently it occurs<sup>6</sup> as well as on the consequences for victims.<sup>7</sup> Financial dependence, which is more marked in times of conflict, can lead to greater accep-

tance of domestic violence.<sup>8</sup> Disassociation on the part of both those directly involved in and those on the sidelines of conflict can break down the psychological barriers that would normally stop people from resorting to or tolerating violence within the family. Violence becomes more “normal.” Under these circumstances, for the perpetrator, domestic violence can take on an instrumental function.<sup>9</sup> Violence then serves to influence the behavior of the victim and “discipline” them.

Violence can also have an expressive<sup>10</sup> function. In this case, the perpetrator uses violence as a release from emotional pressure to some extent as if venting stress. In a world that is dangerous and uncontrollable, violence gives the perpetrators reassurance of their ability to control their immediate environment as they see fit.

To show that violence experienced in the outside world can affect people psychologically, two data sources were used. We statistically exploit local differences in the intensity of fighting and differences in behavioral patterns with regard to domestic violence.

The data on conflict intensity were taken from Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario (DDHH and DIH) for the years 2003 and 2004, inter alia. The number of armed encounters between government forces and paramilitary groups per year and district was taken as a measure of conflict intensity.

In addition, survey data from the Colombian Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) for late 2004 and early 2005 was used. The DHS is conducted among more than 41,000 women aged between 13 and 49 from 230 Colombian administrative districts. In each district, up to 20 percent of women living in partnerships stated that they had been victims of domestic violence within the previous twelve months. These data allow both the time and place of domestic violence incidents to be determined, making it possible to measure the degree of association between the occurrence of domestic violence and the intensity of the fighting in the relevant district.

**2** E. A. Brett, “Participation and accountability in development management,” *Journal of Development Studies* 40 (2) (2003): 1-29.

**3** Veterans with post-traumatic stress symptoms are more likely to be perpetrators of domestic violence than average members of the public; see M. D. Sherman, F. Sautter, M. H. Jackson, J. A. Lyons, and X. Han, “Domestic violence in veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder who seek couples therapy,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 32 (4) (2006): 479-490.

**4** P. Waldmann, “Is there a Culture of Violence in Colombia?” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (4) (2007): 593-609.

**5** Social processes are subject to change as a result of conflict. See E.J. Wood, “The social processes of civil war: The wartime transformation of social networks,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 539-561.

**6** M. A. Koenig, R. Stephenson, S. Ahmed, S. J. Jejeebhoy, and J. Campbell, “Individual and contextual determinants of domestic violence in North India,” *American Journal of Public Health* 96 (1) (2006): 132-138.

**7** The majority of victims are female, while the perpetrators are predominantly male. See A. Aizer, “The gender wage gap and domestic violence,” *American Economic Review* 100 (4) (2010): 1847-1859. One conceivable consequence that is influenced by social norms is divorce. See also R. A. Pollak, “An intergenerational model of domestic violence,” *Journal of Population Economics* 17 (2) (2004): 311-329.

**8** See E. Karnofsky, “Familiäre Gewalt und Kindesmißbrauch in Kolumbien,” *Brennpunkt Lateinamerika* (4) (2005): 37-44; see also A. Farmer and J. Tiefenthaler, “An economic analysis of domestic violence,” *Review of Social Economy* 55 (3) (1997): 337-358.

**9** S. Long, H. Tauchen, and W.A. Dryden, “Domestic Violence: a Non-Random Affair,” National Bureau of Economic Research, NBER Working Paper Series (1991): 1665.

**10** F. W. Winkel, “Post traumatic anger. Missing link in the wheel of misfortune,” (Nijmegen: WLP, 2007).

Box

**Correlation Not Commensurate with Causality**

The statements made on the degree of association are based on statistical correlation. A statistically significant correlation coefficient means that there is a high probability of a correlation between two variables A (in this case, the conflict intensity, the explanatory variable) and B (in this case, the probability of being a victim of domestic violence, the dependent variable). This ideally remain true even if other important factors such as age, education, or income are taken into consideration. The data do not, however, provide enough information for a definitive statement as to the existence of a causal relationship, whatever the direction—A influences B, or B influences A. Besides the aforementioned inverse causality or indeed circular reciprocal causality (chicken or egg dilemma), other factors that may not have been included in the analysis may distort the results. To account for this, spatial identification and econometric methods are used here. To investigate the correlation between conflict intensity and the probability of becoming a victim of domestic violence, probit regressions and two-stage instrument variables methods based on least-squares and negative binomial probit were employed,<sup>1</sup> producing robust results. A causal correlation, while not verifiably proven to exist, was found to be very probable.

<sup>1</sup> Noe and Rieckmann, "The effect of civil conflict": 31-34.

**Fighting Increases Risk of Domestic Violence**

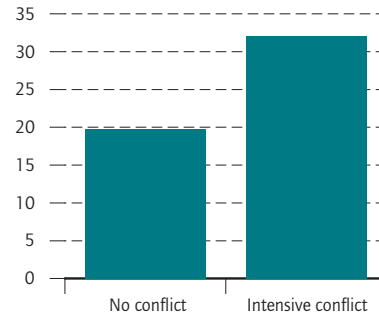
The results speak for themselves. The data used do not confirm that specific influence mechanisms are at play here but merely indicate the high probability of certain correlations (see Box). If a causal relationship is assumed, however, a one- to seven-percent higher risk of women falling prey to domestic violence can be seen between the most peaceful and conflict-ridden districts, depending on the given sample.<sup>11</sup> If the sample is lim-

<sup>11</sup> The analysis was conducted for women who were living in partnerships at the time of the survey (enabling data on the partner to be factored in) as well as for those who were not, meaning cases where women were separated from their partners for reasons of domestic violence could also be included.

Figure

**Conflict Intensity and Domestic Violence Victimization**

In percentage points<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Women in partnerships in districts that are smaller than 2500 km<sup>2</sup>. If women from peaceful districts were to live in the district with the highest level of conflict (33 incidents in two years) where other conditions remain constant, the risk of them becoming victims of domestic violence is 12.3 percentage points higher.

Source: Noe and Rieckmann, "The effect of civil conflict".

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In districts with high conflict intensity, the probability of becoming a victim of domestic violence is far greater than in districts where there is no conflict.

ited to districts that are smaller than 2,500 square kilometers in size and the fighting observed takes place in close proximity to the households in question, the risk increases by even more than 12 percentage points (see Figure). Even under consideration of control variables representing the individual characteristics of the persons and households under observation (e.g. age, education, number of children, place of residence), the results remain statistically significant.

In very small districts (some are smaller than 40 square kilometers in area) where there is no direct conflict within the district but rather beyond its borders, the correlation between conflict and domestic violence may be underestimated. If fighting and acts of warfare in neighboring districts are factored in, the statistical results are very similar. Looking at domestic violence in a broader sense, i.e., including threats, changes virtually nothing.

This analysis therefore paints a similar picture to a study on the same matter conducted for Colombia's southern neighbor, Peru.<sup>12</sup> The authors of this study reported that those who were exposed to fighting and conflict in their late childhood and adolescence were more likely to be victims of domestic violence in later life.

<sup>12</sup> J. Gallegos and I. Gutierrez, "The Effect of Civil Conflict on Domestic Violence: the Case of Peru," SSRN Working Paper Series (2011).

## Conclusion

The findings of the present study do not constitute a basis for straightforward policy recommendations. What this study can do, however, is provide a better understanding of the medium- and long-term consequences of violent conflicts. A comprehensive study<sup>13</sup> on civil war by Blattman and Miguel (2010) has shown that the question of how civil war affects the fundamental factors of long-term economic prosperity—institutions, technology, and culture—has barely been touched upon, either theoretically or empirically. Yet this information is crucial, since these three factors are indicative of whether a society will recover from civil war or whether it will stagnate or fall back into war and conflict.

Domestic violence is not only a direct problem for the victims, but also endangers long-term safety and security, as well as social cohesion. Where domestic violence is a widespread phenomenon, many children who witness or are victims of domestic violence have no example of peaceful conflict resolution to follow. Their ability to form relationships is dysfunctional. This increases the probability of them being violent themselves in later life.<sup>14</sup> Often the development of their personality is impaired.<sup>15</sup> Under unfavorable conditions, these deficits might result in a cycle of violence, where the tendency to be violent is passed from one generation to the next.<sup>16</sup> In the long-term, this will have ramifications for the economy—a problem that will ultimately affect each and every one in the given society.<sup>17</sup>

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**13** C. Blattman and E. Miguel, “Civil war,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 48 (1) (2010): 3–57.

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**15** P. Fonagy, “Male perpetrators of violence against women: An attachment theory perspective,” *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 1 (1) (1999): 7–27.

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**17** V. Calderón, M. Gáfaró, and A.M. Ibáñez, “Forced Migration, Female Labor Force Participation, and Intra-household Bargaining: Does Conflict Empower Women,” MICROCON, Research Working Paper 56 (2011).

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