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To cite this article: Louis Monroy-Santander & Germán Otálora-Gallego (26 Feb 2024):
Disrupting the Transitional Justice Circuit: Everyday Transformative Gender Justice in Colombia,
Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, DOI: [10.1080/17502977.2024.2314239](https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2314239)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2314239>



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Published online: 26 Feb 2024.



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Disrupting the Transitional Justice Circuit: Everyday Transformative Gender Justice in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

There is abundant criticism towards mainstream transitional justice (TJ) scholarship and practice. As an alternative, we propose an everyday transformative gender justice framework that brings socioeconomic, transformative gender, and the everyday to the centre of TJ. Using empirical data gathered in Colombia we make two arguments. First, women-led activism privileges an everyday, localised, transformative, and gender transformative understanding of TJ. Second, they interact with local, national, and international actors, which enhances their transformative potential to disrupt broader peace and justice circuits. Our findings suggest that part of the transformative potential of TJ lies in the work of localised emancipatory initiatives.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 March 2023
Accepted 31 January 2024

KEYWORDS

Transitional justice;
transformative justice;
gender; everyday peace;
Colombia

Introduction

Colombia's 2016 Havana agreement is considered one of the most comprehensive peace accords in history, incorporating a Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition (CEV), a Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), a Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons (UBPD), a reparations system, coupled with official remembrance and reconciliation initiatives, as well as gender and ethnic perspectives cutting through its text. While the accord put the protracted conflict between state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels to an end, other armed actors – insurgencies, FARC dissident groups, paramilitaries, and state forces – continue waging war. Additionally, a lack of political will to implement the agreement's provisions, weak institutional capacity needed to foster socio-economic transformations, and ongoing assassinations of former combatants and social activists¹ challenge prospects for peace.

In view of those obstacles, critical questions arise about Colombia's transitional justice (TJ) framework for sustainable peace. The study of these obstacles and how to address them can further the existing literature on the limitations of liberal peace, which privileges top-down institutional approaches with a focus on political and market liberalisation as solutions to the complexities of conflict-affected societies (Andrieu 2010; Kappler and

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Lemay-Hébert 2015). Such limitations of state-centric approaches guide us to an interest in locality and the emancipatory potential of grassroots movements. We investigate the interactions between local, national, and international actors in TJ premised on the understanding that social change needed for sustainable peace is largely determined by those interactions.²

This article focuses on localised gender-transformative activism of women in Colombia, and how their work provides insights to broader transitional and transformative justice debates. The 2016 accords' TJ framework has been applauded for its comprehensive gender approach (Phelan and True 2022), which came out of the advocacy of women's and LGBTIQ+ organisations that demanded that gendered effects of the armed conflict and the needs of women and LGBTIQ+ communities in a post-conflict scenario were included in the agreement (Fajardo 2021). Nonetheless, these advancements for a transformative gender justice have met a sluggish implementation of gender-specific commitments of the agreement and its TJ institutions (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies 2020).

Drawing on field research in Colombia, we make two arguments. First, Colombian women-led activism engages in what we call everyday transformative gender justice, privileging: (i) the need to incorporate socioeconomic transformations in TJ, (ii) a transformative gender approach that challenges structural gender inequalities, and (iii) attention to how TJ issues are experienced in the everyday lives of local populations. Second, using the concept of circuits (Mac Ginty 2021) we argue that the work of these activists scale out – horizontally, to other individuals, organisations – , and scale up – vertically, to interact with top-down processes – disrupting broader peace and justice dynamics. Our findings suggest that TJ can realise its transformational potential when actors such as the women activists we interviewed are understood as being part of broader TJ circuits, where disruptions at local levels can lead to disruptions at national and international levels. Our article contributes to the transformative justice and gender justice literature by pointing to a concrete way in which TJ can tap its transformational potential: by bringing to its core localised initiatives for socioeconomic and gender justice as experienced in the everyday.

The article begins showing how the paradigmatic TJ model ignores the complexity of transitional settings and victims' needs, hence the need for an everyday transformative gender justice approach. Second, we present our data collection methods and ethics, focusing on our positionality. Third, we analyse our empirical data to show how localised initiatives led by Colombian women engage in everyday transformative gender justice with potential to disrupt broader peacebuilding and TJ circuits.

From transitional to everyday transformative gender justice

The exact context where TJ emerged as a field³ is disputed, but we side with Arthur (2009), who points to the 1970s and 1980s democratic transitions in Latin America and Eastern Europe – Teitel's (2003) second wave of TJ – as its origins. TJ is now a consolidated field (de Greiff 2020), and the context where it emerged has deeply shaped its boundaries and scope (Sharp 2015). A particular notion of democratisation and liberalisation defined the *transitional* component of TJ; while the dual goal of delivering justice for victims and guaranteeing stability for emerging democracies defined its *justice* component (Teitel 2003). TJ was defined as a special kind of justice for societies to deal with past wrongdoing, while ensuring accountability, reconciliation, and sustainable peace (Sandoval

2017; UNSC 2004). To achieve such goals, TJ uses judicial and non-judicial mechanisms, including criminal tribunals and prosecutions, amnesties, truth commissions, institutional reforms, reparations for victims, and reconciliation projects (Fischer 2011).

Criticism towards this ‘paradigmatic transitional justice’ (Ní Aoláin and Campbell 2005) comes from two different but intertwined perspectives. First, the problematization of the field’s legalism, which reduces our understanding of justice to legal responses to violations of political and civil rights, while side-lining issues like structural violence, socio-economic inequality, and gender (Mani 2002; Nagy 2008). Second, a denunciation of TJ’s absorption by the liberal peace project, which equates transition with a moment requiring interventions, often state-centric or externally imposed (McEvoy 2008), where predetermined tools are applied with little attention to local contexts (Eastmond 2010). This is admittedly a broad overview of a wider critical scholarship, examined in depth by others (Sharp 2019; Vieille 2020). While that critique is rich, alternatives to the paradigmatic model are scarce (Gready 2019).

Here, we propose an everyday transformative gender justice framework, which rests on three pillars: (i) a transformative justice approach that urges TJ to tackle structural socio-economic inequalities, (ii) a transformative gender approach that calls on TJ to challenge structural gender inequalities, and (iii) the everyday peace literature, which brings attention to how peace and justice are experienced in the everyday lives of local populations. Further, we take from the everyday peace literature the concept of circuits to understand how local actors can disrupt wider peace and justice dynamics. By putting together this framework we contribute to a concrete way in which TJ can tap its transformational potential: by taking gender justice seriously while also responding to the everyday needs and resources of local populations. The following sections develop such framing.

Transformative justice

Daly (2002) proposed a shift to transformative justice, arguing that TJ institutions should aim for social change that address the root causes of armed conflict. Lambourne (2008) then devised a transformative justice model, incorporating political, economic, psychosocial, and legal elements. Lambourne’s model integrates retributive and restorative notions of justice and understands transitions as long-term processes where social, economic, and political relationships and structures are transformed, while prioritising local ownership and effective participation during all stages of TJ (2008, 30,47).

After Lambourne, Gready and Robins defined transformative justice as ‘change that emphasises local agency and resources, the prioritisation of process rather than preconceived outcomes, and the challenging of unequal and intersecting power relationships and structures of exclusion at both local and global levels’ (2019, 32). Others have operationalised transformative justice, a model which remains largely normative (Friedman 2018). For some, transformative justice can help identify root-causes of violence in transitional settings, empowering local communities, and producing policies for social change (McGill 2019). Others focus on the potential of former combatants and survivors for transformation (Friedman 2018), and the role of local elites as enablers or spoilers of transformative justice (McAuliffe 2019). Another approach turns to NGOs and social movements’ agendas to inform how transformative justice can work in practice (Evans 2016) and highlights the transformative potential of grassroots movements in TJ (Lai and Bonora 2019).

Further, authors who are not necessarily aligned with the transformative model have explored the transformative potential of certain mechanisms. Sandoval (2017) and Roht-Arriaza (2019) argue that non-repetition measures can be transformative when they have a collective focus that tackles root-causes of conflict. Similarly, Uprimny (2009) calls for transformative reparations, linking development efforts to distributive justice.

Despite the compelling alternative that transformative justice presents to the paradigmatic model, how exactly to bring about transformation with TJ has not been sufficiently explored. We argue that part of the transformative potential of TJ lies in considering how local actors interact with other local, international, and institutional actors to produce change. Further, recognising that the transformative justice literature has not fully incorporated gender justice, we engage with feminist scholarship in the following section for our framework's second pillar.

Gender justice

Feminist scholars have challenged the 'gender blindness' of mainstream TJ (Buckley-Zistel and Zolkos 2012); along with the superficial treatment of gender in the transformative justice approach (Ní Aoláin 2019). Feminist approaches in the field are not homogenous, as is the case in peace and conflict studies (Sjoberg 2013). O'Rourke (2015) identifies three streams of feminist TJ scholarship: one focused on the exclusion of women and gender issues in mechanisms and peace-making efforts (Bell 2009; Gray and Coonan 2013; Kostovicova and Paskhalis 2021); another focusing on wartime gendered harms, particularly sexual violence (Franke 2006; Henry 2014; Rosser 2007); while more radical approaches advocate for change in structural gendered power relations (Bell and O'Rourke 2007; Lambourne and Rodriguez Carreon 2016; Rubio-Marín 2009).

This latter stream points to the limits of participation discourses, which assume that including more women in TJ by itself leads to gender equality and to a genuine inclusion of gender issues (Boesten and Wilding 2015; Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011). This literature questions the very notion of *transition* and what *justice* should look like in transitional contexts. From this perspective, justice during transition entails tackling gendered power relations and intersecting social, economic, and political structures that underpin violent conflict (Fiske and Shackel 2015; Rooney 2007). *Transition* is also radically challenged from this perspective: a neat distinction between conflict and post-conflict is questioned, as war-time gendered harms are seen as a manifestation of gendered power relations operating before, during, and after war. Key here are contributions arguing for the private and the everyday to be included in the scope of TJ (Dunn 2017) to expose the structural conditions that produce a continuum of gendered violence (Cockburn 2004) in war and 'peaceful' times (Valji 2009).

Also, this perspective challenges the tendency to equate 'gender' with 'women' in the field, which results in losing opportunities for re-examining the social roles of women, men, and LGBTIQ+ communities in transitional contexts (Ní Aoláin 2019; O'Rourke 2015). Hence, scholars have focused on notions of femininities and masculinities and opportunities for transformation of societal-level gendered roles and power relations in TJ (Hamber 2016; Theidon 2009).

In sum, TJ cannot be transformative if it is not committed to producing change in the structures that produce a continuum of gendered violence in transitional contexts. That is

why we take transformative gender justice, following Ní Aoláin (2019), as another pillar of our theoretical base to understand lessons learned from social leaders and their organisations in Colombia. As we argue later in the article, the transformative gender work that these activists engage with is enhanced when they interact with other actors at in a TJ circuit. To make sense of those interactions, we turn to the everyday peace literature as third pillar in our framework.

Everyday peace and justice

Transformative justice literature recommends including local perspectives, resources, and agency as focal to TJ. However, there is not much detail about how to account for these within the transformative justice approach. Further, the ‘local turn’ in TJ has so far de-politicised and romanticised locally-driven processes (Kochanski 2020).

We draw from authors examining how peace and justice are experienced in the everyday. As Firchow (2018) demonstrates, priorities and needs regarding peace vary in time, and from town to town, but also from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, and accounting for those nuances is vital for peacebuilding. This literature stresses how localised everyday actions can promote both negative peace – absence of physical violence – and positive peace – socioeconomic conditions needed for a sustainable peace (Galtung 1969) – outside official top-down processes (Autesserre 2021).

Further, Mac Ginty’s concept of circuitry explains how hyper-local actions can connect to broader peace and power dynamics. Disruptions in the circuit, as isolated and localised as they appear, can alter how international, state-centric, and institutional power is exerted. Circuits operate at different levels of power but interact as an assemblage where power relations flow, allowing local actors to horizontally scale-out to connect with other local actors, but also to scale-up to exert influence over institutional peacebuilding (Mac Ginty 2021).

Summing up our argument, we need to consider not only a transformational understanding of TJ, but also a deeper commitment from the field to gender transformative justice, and a detailed attention to localised dynamics if we want to make sense of how TJ can work better for the populations it claims to serve. Our theoretical proposal has three pillars. First, we take the transformative justice approach as an alternative to the paradigmatic model, which brings socioeconomic and gender issues to the core of TJ. Second, we include a transformative gender lens and its focus on the full spectrum of gender-based violence as a locus where change can and should occur if TJ wants to be transformative. Third, we use the everyday peace literature’s concept of circuitry to make sense of how local actors interact at different levels to produce the kinds of socioeconomic and structural gender transformations that they advocate for. Taken together, our transformative everyday gender justice framework allows us to put the kind of work that Colombian women activists engage with at the centre of transformative and TJ.

Methods and ethics

Our analysis derives from a qualitative study with women-led organisations working on gender activism and TJ in Colombia. The original project was funded by INGO Impunity Watch and implemented by Bogotá-based NGO BSocial. It ran from December 2020 to

June 2021, involving the article authors as Coordinator and Research Assistant, respectively. Our research question sought to understand how victim engagement in informal TJ processes re-shapes justice towards the needs of victims and communities, with a focus on gender and political agency. For this article we revisited the data with attention to what participants perceived as drivers and obstacles to the transformations they were working for.

The research team carried out semi-structured interviews and focus groups between March and May 2021. As Colombia struggles with violence involving various armed groups – the National Liberation Army (ELN), FARC dissident groups, and renewed paramilitary structures – security concerns, added to the COVID19 situation, led to choosing virtual and telephone interviews and focus groups for this study. As others have found, distanced research presents challenges for building trust and engaging with participants and communities (Mwambari, Purdeková, and Bisoka 2022). However, it also provided the opportunity to reach a more diverse group of participants that we would have been able to do in-person. Additionally, May 2021 saw widespread anti-government protests, representing another obstacle to data collection due to an increased sense of insecurity.

We engaged with fifty-four participants through six focus groups – five online and one in person – , and eighteen online semi-structured interviews. The in-person focus group was carried out in Bogotá once COVID19 restrictions eased. We opted for online focus groups when internet connection issues made individual interviews impractical, and participants could safely gather at a place where internet connection was reliable and local COVID19 restrictions permitted to do so. Further, combining individual and group interviews allowed for a balance between in-depth personal accounts with collective meaning-making (Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls 2014). Individual interviews provided insights into individual trajectories and perceptions of participants, while interactions between participants during focus groups tended to prioritise collective narratives.

Fifty-two participants were women, and two of them were men. One participant identified as a transgender woman, and four as lesbian women. Participants came from various Colombian territories to account for as much diversity of conflict dynamics, ethnic identities, and socioeconomic needs as possible.⁴ All participants were victims or survivors⁵ of the armed conflict and were involved in activism or social leadership. We took individual participants and their organisations as our units of analysis.

We used an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), to identify topics, ideas, and patterns within the data, which resulted in the following codes: (1) gender perspectives within activists' work, (2) motivations behind activism, (3) obstacles to victims organisations' work, (4) impact of informal transitional justice, (5) socio-political risk, (6) interactions with institutional TJ, (7) capacity for political action, and (8) restorative justice practices.

While the project's research team was composed of women and men, the authors of this article identify as cisgender heterosexual men. This can be problematic for various reasons. Among them is the displacement of women from feminist and gender agendas (Connell 2005, xvii); the risk of appropriation of women's and LGBTIQ+ voices by cisgender heterosexual men (Taylor 1998); and the question *if* men can engage in feminist research and practice in the first place (Giri 2022).

We recognise those and other problems arising when men engage in gender research. We believe that men should engage with gender issues, and that they should do so from a

radical feminist perspective as argued by hooks (2015). That involves seeing ourselves as gendered subjects while questioning our roles as beneficiaries of social patriarchal orders in academia (García-González, Forcén, and Jimenez-Sanchez 2019) and beyond. In other words, we believe that men can and should engage in feminist research and practice, but only if we are committed to challenge our masculine privilege at all levels. Such is the position we took for the research project and for writing this article.

Activism, gender, local agency, and the everyday in TJ

Using the everyday transformative gender justice framework presented above, we now turn to the analysis the data we gathered through interviews and focus groups with women activists who engage in informal TJ processes in Colombia. In what follows we first address how their work prioritises a transformative gender justice approach, which is both informed by and aimed at producing change to everyday gendered experiences. Second, we demonstrate that they also point to socioeconomic justice as one venue where transformation is needed to bring about justice in times of transition. Third, we show that part of the transformational potential of the work of these activists is enhanced through interactions with other actors – other activists, local elites, institutional mechanisms, and international actors – , which allows localised activism to disrupt a broader TJ circuit.

Activism and everyday gender justice

Participants in our research related the gendered harms suffered within violent contexts with gender stereotypes, discrimination and structural inequalities women and LGBTQ+ communities face in society. They link their activism to the recognition of war-time gender-based violence with a wider fight against patriarchal gender norms, and how they permeate everyday life. This is in line with findings from authors exploring women's activism in Colombia (Rocha Menocal 2022), and the transformative gender justice scholarship that claims that gender-based violence during violent conflict is connected to wider societal-wide gendered orders (Ní Aoláin 2019; Valji, 2009). As expressed by one participant:

Sexual violence was not invented by war. It comes from many years ago. Look at how sexual violence has increased during the pandemic.⁶ We are trying to break those obstacles. When I had my first son, I dressed him in blue because he was a boy ... Me, I played ball, I played spinning top, I played football because I liked it, and my mum called me a tomboy. We have made it possible for a boy to play with a doll, and a girl to play with a car. Blue and pink are genderless.

Further, activists made clear connections between gendered harms perpetrated by armed actors and the discriminatory reactions to those harms from families, local communities, state, and TJ institutions. We did not ask participants about harms that they suffered.. However, many spoke about them when talking about their work, generating a pattern in their stories. First, they were victims or survivors of sexual violence from an armed actor. Second, they suffered discrimination and stigma when they spoke about what happened to their families, partners, or communities. Third, they felt discriminated and

re-victimised when they decided to turn to the Prosecutor General's offices (*Fiscalía*) or TJ institutions.

One Afro-Colombian activist's story was illustrative of that continuum of gendered violence. She told us a FARC member raped her when she was 11. Her mother reported the case to local authorities and was later killed by FARC as a response. Later, after talking to her grandfather, 'The first thing my grandpa told me was "if you had kept your mouth shut, they would not have killed my daughter"'. Other interviewees mentioned how their partners reacted by saying 'you were having an affair, you were not raped' or neighbours saying victims were to blame 'for wearing such tiny shorts'. Thus, interviewees made clear that their activism in TJ was about making visible the gendered harms of the armed conflict, but they also connected it to the need to transform those patriarchal structures that revictimized them in their families and communities.

Further, when reporting before ordinary justice mechanisms, and to a lesser extent TJ institutions, victims and survivors faced questions about what they were wearing, if they had drunk alcohol, if they had their nails painted at the time, if they were *sure* they were raped, or if they fancied the perpetrator. An activist from La Guajira referred to the continuum of violence that victims and survivors of sexual violence experience, where public officials enforce dominant notions of femininities and masculinities:

When a victim reports their case, the first thing public officials ask is 'but you are a man and you were raped? You allowed that to happen?' and for women they ask 'are you sure you were raped or you consented and now say you were raped?' or 'if it happened so many years ago why report it now? Isn't it because you get certain benefits as a victim?'

Connected with this criticism, Colombian NGOs have denounced how the JEP has been slow in advancing investigations for violence against women and members of LGBTIQ+ communities. According to Fajardo (2021), there are no in-depth questioning procedures for these issues at the heart of the tribunal. What is more, the demand from victims, feminist, and LGBTIQ+ groups for the JEP to open a case that deals with gender-based violence (Cinco Claves 2020) had proven unsuccessful until 2022, when the transitional tribunal announced that it would open a new case on that matter.

The victim blaming and the stigma that victims and survivors of sexual violence endure during armed conflict has been well researched (Clark 2018; Koos and Lindsey 2022). What we learned from interviews is that activists take those obstacles as another manifestation of the continuum of gender-based violence that their activism aims to transform. As they explained, their work is about making their harms visible. But it is also about transforming misogynist societal-wide ideas that connect sexual violence during conflict, the traumatising treatment victims and survivors get from authorities and TJ institutions as well as and from their own communities and families.

The gender chapter of the Colombian Truth Commission final report echoed what participants said about the connections between gendered harms during conflict and gendered power relations in peacetime. The report documents the different kinds of gender-based violence, including reproductive violence, that all armed groups (paramilitaries, guerrillas, and state forces) have committed inside their ranks and towards civilians. It also argues that patriarchal notions about gender roles in Colombian society have produced a continuum of gender-based violence which has been exacerbated by the armed

conflict but is also present and reinforced by misogynistic and prejudiced attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ persons in civilian life (CEV 2022).

Our findings resonate with the CEV report's findings. But we also emphasise that participants understand their activism as transforming their everyday lives and of those they work with as a response to obstacles in accessing institutional channels and the various expressions of the continuum of gendered violence. Some told us that they started gathering to stitch quilts to offer peer-to-peer psychosocial support, others decided to share the costs of a shop to sell their produce, while others set up a community-run bakery to generate income for themselves. Through those seemingly small steps and hyper-local interactions activists have made a transformational impact that links gender, socio-economic issues and the everyday.

Previous research has studied how everyday interactions between former combatants and victims facilitate reincorporation and reconciliation processes in Colombia and elsewhere (Gilmore and Moffett 2021; Nussio, Rettberg, and Ugarriza 2015). But beyond victim-perpetrator interactions, activists we interviewed understand their work as transforming everyday lives, albeit at a small scale, where the transformation of gender power relations are central. Participants mentioned that their role as women changed for the better in their communities and families through their activism. A member of an Afro-Colombian organisation said: 'I have empowered myself. I have been able to face societal obstacles and challenges about "women not being able to". All this [activism] process and sharing with others has transformed my life'.

It was clear that their localised work had a transformative impact for the women, men, and children they engaged with. A participant based in Cartagena mentioned how her work in schools changed how gendered relations play out at home:

We offered workshops in schools about sexual violence prevention, children's rights, and new masculinities (...) Some girls started saying to their mums that they have the same rights as their brothers, so if boys can stay outside until 11pm they can also do so. And if girls wash dishes, boys can also do it.

Activists from a nationwide network had similar experiences about working with local victims and survivors of gender-based violence from armed actors. Getting involved in activism and joining other victims makes a substantial difference in their everyday relationships with their communities, relatives, and partners. As expressed by an activist in the Caribbean region:

Their lives have changed after attending our workshops. Many women, after sexual violence situations, did not want relationships or a partner. Many husbands and partners left them, blaming women for what happened. Today, they can live with a man again. Others decided not to, others live with another woman, and all that is fine, I tell them that we have the right to enjoy our sexuality.

Evidence from our interviews indicate that research participants have a transformational agenda on gender which resonates with what transformative gender scholars advocate for: that TJ must tackle the full continuum of gender-based violence – beyond a legal response to sexual violence during armed conflict – for it to be truly transformative (Boesten and Wilding 2015; Ní Aoláin 2019). But a new dimension from our research also points to the local gender-transformative activism that women in Colombia already engage in, often in the face of extraordinary obstacles to their activism, including

those from institutional TJ mechanisms. As we will explore below, their work also prioritises socioeconomic and distributive justice, while the transformative potential of their activism is enhanced by the interactions they engage with in a wider TJ circuit.

Socioeconomic and distributive justice

Apart from connecting everyday localised gender dynamics with conflict harms, activists link their work on gender with demands for socioeconomic justice. The discourse about distributive issues from some participants supports transformative justice arguments for bringing distributive issues to the core of TJ (Greedy and Robins 2019; Lambourne 2008). As an activist from Tolima commented:

Expectations are not only about social but economic empowerment too: to have autonomy, to be able to do our work how we want. We want the freedom to meet, implement projects and not be constrained by corruption or people seeing us as political obstacles.

Interviewees repeatedly linked justice to socioeconomic needs that can have a tangible impact in the everyday lives of survivors and victims, as highlighted by scholars of feminist grassroots peace activism in Colombia (Lemaitre 2020; Paarlberg-Kvam 2019). An Afro-Colombian activist talked about the economic empowerment goals behind her organisation's work: 'Our objective is for women to have a better quality of life and for their work to become more technical (...) We want to strengthen women-led rural projects'. She further added:

Justice means paying fair wages to the few women who work. There are few of us who work and our wages are always below men's. This affects our autonomy, deepening our vulnerability because we do not earn what is fair.

Another participant made clear that harms suffered by Afro-Colombian women needed a differential approach to reparations. This resonates with Bell and O'Rourke (2007): for women in transitions, emphasis on restoration requires challenging uneven gender power relations; otherwise, it would risk returning home to other forms of abuse. But it also reminds us of the need to incorporate an intersectional approach that brings gender, race, and class to the theory and practice of TJ (Rooney 2013), particularly from a transformative justice approach. In one interviewee's words: 'Black women have suffered more severely the effects of conflict. Hence, the focus of our work is on opportunities for them: education, employment, housing, health services. That is our organisation's base'.

Regarding reparations and economic justice, participants were critical towards the limited impact of monetary reparations granted through the 2011 Victims and Land Restitution Law, which recognises the rights of victims of the armed conflict to assistance and reparations. This relates to Lai's (2016) idea of a socioeconomic dimension of TJ, which involves moving from monetary remedies to a focus on the structural socioeconomic causes of violence. More than money, interviewees insisted, what they need is access to psychosocial services in the immediate term, and the guarantee of economic and social rights as a long-term measure that can have a positive for them and their communities. This calls for forward-looking socioeconomic justice, transforming current conditions of deprivation suffered by victims (Weber 2018). A social leader in Valle del Cauca told us:

We need to debunk the economic compensation myth (...) What we get as compensation is negligible, what can we do with 1.5 million COP? With 5? With 7? With 14? That does not even buy a plot of land. What we need is to work on the social and psychosocial, but not as inconsistently as the state does (...) we need to focus on education, our wellbeing, the wellbeing of our families and surroundings, on building peaceful communities.

Another activist seconded this scepticism towards monetary compensation: ‘We thought economic compensation was enough as a reparation. Through our activism, we have realised that reparations must go beyond and focus on physical and mental health, on education, and economic rights’.

One participant in Bogotá highlighted the importance of access to education for themselves and their relatives as a reparation measure with a long-lasting impact:

The reparation I got was not economic. After many obstacles, I managed to get an education for my daughter and for the Victim’s Fund to pay for her university. That is the best reparation I can get; I will have that for life.

Colombia’s reparation policy has been restitutive in spirit, offering compensations that can return individuals to a scenario prior to the violation of their rights. This can be problematic for women (Dejusticia 2010) and LGBTIQ+ populations, as recognised by the Truth Commission’s final report (CEV 2022, 224). A restitution focus entails taking victims and survivors back to the contexts that allowed for the violation of their rights in the first place, where the conditions that made them vulnerable to the effects of the armed conflict have not been addressed. Hence, as expressed by participants, reparations need to transform the exclusion and discrimination structures that permeate everyday lives and generate a continuum of gender violence.

In sum, a transformative-gender justice must engage with economic and distributive justice, and the intersecting inequalities that cut through distribution, if it is to be meaningful for the people that TJ claims to benefit. The next section turns to our findings regarding how those transformative efforts connect to broader peace and justice dynamics in a TJ circuit.

Disrupting transitional justice circuits: From localised to networked efforts

When we asked participants about their trajectories as activists, they consistently referred to how they connected with other localised movements. Those interactions have allowed victims and survivors to learn from others and unify positions to enhance their political agency in the face of local and national institutional mechanisms.

Our findings suggest that TJ and transformative justice could greatly benefit by incorporating a circuitry analytical approach to enhance its transformative potential. The everyday transformative work of activists, when connected to others, inserts them in a circuit that allows them to influence how official institutions work. That is, the women we interviewed and their organisations disrupt the wider TJ circuit in Colombia, challenging what they see as insufficient from official processes. The following subsections address how activists have created TJ disruptions with their work by, first, grounding their work with local legitimacy; second, by *scaling out* and *scaling up*; and third by connecting to international actors.

Local legitimacy

The long-term activism of participants permitted expansion from local to regional and national realms to the point where their initiatives have connected with broader dynamics, influencing top-down processes. To do so, interviewees consistently pointed out that the strength and legitimacy of their organisations comes from maintaining a long-term commitment with local populations. This was explained to us by an activist based in Cauca:

We have earned people's trust because they know us now. We have worked alongside them. We created a space with 30 victims of sexual violence and told our stories, motivating others to speak, getting support from local health authorities who signed agreements for us to operate locally.

The transformative gender activism our interviewees engage with is embedded in decades-long struggles from women's and feminist groups in Colombia (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres 2013). From the 1980s, the prevalence of violence, particularly forced displacement and sexual violence, influenced feminist activism in Colombia to denounce human rights violations and the disproportionate effects of the armed conflict on women (Wills Obregón 2007). With the backdrop of the progressive 1991 Colombian Constitution, their activism deployed various strategies: (a) strategic litigation, (b) use of media outlets to denounce injustices and consequences of displacement, and (c) sensitisation of the public about the nature of women's experience of gender-based discrimination (Domingo, Menocal, and Hinestroza 2015).

Here, localised interventions and micro-level interactions help bring legitimacy and genuine meaning for individuals and societies subject to transition by shifting the focus towards the socio-economic structures affecting the everyday (Lambourne 2004). We understand legitimacy in the lines of Suchman (1995): 'a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions' (574). Within our interviewees' context, *legitimacy* emerged when describing women's grassroots efforts where state provision was lacking. As expressed by one activist:

We try for the process to be continuous: I got into this and will keep on doing it. I have gone to the town of Florida four times, constantly asking people for what they need, seeing what they have been able to do [...] I keep going there.

What is more, they engage in long-term localised work as response to the lack of effectiveness of top-down processes. An activist in Nariño defined her organisation's work in opposition to legal measures:

Laws do not work. We wait to be repaired in a dignified way, to be listened by those who harmed us, face them and ask them 'why me?', 'why our colleagues, sisters, brothers?' (...) [we seek] women to be repaired, emotionally, legally, and by encountering perpetrators face to face.

Further, several participants expressed dissatisfaction with how institutions treat victims of gender-based harms, highlighting their own role as providers of peer-to-peer support amidst institutional failure. As victims of gender violence themselves, activists are sensitive to the difficulties of talking about past harms and the obstacles to report them before institutions. An Afro-Colombian activist in Antioquia said:

What we do differently is that we listen to [women's] stories with respect, transparency, and honesty. Unlike a disastrous sexual violence event from the Truth Commission in 2019 ... They started by asking them directly about their stories and lives. Many of them had a nervous crisis.

In sum, activists pointed to a lack of legitimacy of institutional TJ at a local level. Localised activists' efforts, on the other hand, have a legitimacy built on long-term engagement with communities and peer-to-peer interactions. Aware of the danger of romanticising local TJ initiatives (Kochanski 2020), we nonetheless found that activists ground their work with continued presence in local settings, which brings legitimacy to influence institutional TJ processes. This is not an idealised vision of local settings, where complicated circuits of power relations operate at different levels. As the next subsections show, localised efforts then scale-out and scale-up, often supported by international actors, to realise their transformative potential.

Scaling-out and scaling-up

The perseverance of localised informal activities has allowed them to surpass the local level and 'scale-up' to reach institutional settings, like the JEP, the Truth Commission, and other mechanisms. To achieve that, participants said they had to connect horizontally with other leaders and organisations throughout the years. A consistent local presence along with the capacity to network with other local activists enhanced their political agency. A participant from the Caribbean region said: 'we were all working separately. One in Guajira, someone else in Cesar, Magdalena, in Atlántico (...) but with time, we all met up, and our coordinator had the idea of gathering up and working together'.

Building activist networks is motivated by the need for victims and survivors to support one another and for greater impact of their activism. They recognise opportunities created by institutional efforts – notably the 2011 Victims Law and the 2016 Havana peace agreements – while remaining critical about them. Both instruments established mechanisms that gave local leaders and organisations a voice before institutional mechanisms, enabling interactions between top-down and bottom-up processes. Such is the case of the PDETs (Development Plans with a Territorial Focus), one of the measures of the peace accord with the most transformative potential (Rodríguez Iglesias and Rosen 2022), as reflected by one activist:

The peace agreement gave us tools, such as the different participatory scenarios like the PDETs. In the PDETs we have tried to influence through our work, connecting and supporting other organisations seeking to participate and have a political voice in such spaces.

Several interviewees also mentioned the Roundtables for the Effective Participation of Victims, operating at local and national levels, created by the 2011 Victims Law,⁷ criticising their lack of effectiveness by excluding victims not part of any organisation. According to de Waardt and Weber (2019), their ineffectiveness is due to limited representation for victims, lack of institutional and financial support, and security risks for victims' representatives. While participants referred to those limitations, there was consensus on how such spaces provided platforms for victims to interact with regional and national networks. One participant who was forcibly displaced to a capital city said:

We work as a network, where we express our resistance from the cities; otherwise, we would not be able to do anything. Individually, it would be impossible, that is why we stick together as grassroots movements. We participated in the victims' roundtables locally, and from there we were able to have political impact for our rights as victims.

The value of the roundtables goes beyond what they offer institutionally, making them spaces to connect with other victims of conflict-based gender violence, and their organisations. Another interviewee told us: 'We learned a lot from other organisations' experiences. Sexual violence is not talked about much, but when you listen to other women's stories, it inspires you to talk. That is very important for women's organisations, it strengthens our struggle'.

A participant based in Chocó added: 'Almost all of us take part in roundtables, which has allowed us to get to know each other (...) Those institutions have served as a channel through which we connect with others'. The key point here is that the horizontal interactions has allowed activists to learn from the experiences of others and to join efforts which enhances their influence towards top-down TJ and political actors.

International actors and local TJ

Critical peacebuilding literature emphasises that due to the complexity of peacebuilding, actors at different levels need to integrate into organisational collaborative work (Duque and Casadiego 2021). Following this premise, research participants mentioned that they have not only connected horizontally to other activists, but also to wider peace and TJ dynamics that involves institutional TJ at a national level, but also international actors. As expressed by a transgender rights activist from Cundinamarca:

[Working with international actors] allowed for more participation and interest in working for peace within different territories, with the thematic roundtables initiated in Havana. The support we got from the UN and the ability to move between territories to address different issues was also helpful.

Further, when appraising international NGO legitimacy in local settings an activist based in Bogotá added:

[International actors] gave us opportunities to participate and have impact on many issues, getting opportunities for work. During the pandemic, there was a moment when we were left with nothing, as most of us were street vendors or worked in schools. Through these alliances we acquired money for food, or housing.

The literature has pointed to the problematic ways in which international actors interact with local populations in transitional settings, where power asymmetries can lead to internationals imposing agendas, producing a competition for scarce international aid resources, among other problems (Lundy and McGovern 2008). Interviewees clarified, however, that the simplistic dichotomy separating international actors that impose interventions and local actors that bear traditional, grounded, and locally pertinent notions of justice (An-Na'im 2013; Vieille 2020) is not helpful when analysing local realities. Scholarship on peacebuilding interactions solves this by looking at the inter-subjective relationships constructed between both realms rather than taking one and the other as a starting point (Hellmuller 2018).

Interviewees from five different organisations said that international actors positively affected their work. For instance, UN agencies provide aid, funding, and training; the Red Cross offers humanitarian assistance but also jobs in conflict-affected areas; while Dr Denis Mukwege Foundation provides an international platform for victims of gender-based violence. Speaking about how her organisation makes strategic alliances with international NGOs, one participant based in the Caribbean said:

We rely on support from those NGOs because we must protect ourselves due to the work we carry out. We have links with the Norwegian Council for Refugees, with the UNDP, with UN Women, as we live in a country where we must be prepared for the worse, especially here in my region.

Previous research has noted how international actors can foster local women's movements by providing international legal frameworks and learned lessons to advance feminist agendas (Céspedes-Báez and Ruiz 2018; Rocha Menocal 2022). But beyond providing an international perspective and a legal framework, a circuitry approach helps to consider the messy and non-linear ways in which local, national, and international interactions can influence and disrupt wider TJ dynamics. Colombian grassroots activists we interviewed view international as 'safeguards' against often-antagonistic national or local actors. The interactions between local and international actors allows activists to bypass local and national barriers to their work. This, in turn, leads to disruptions in the broader national TJ dynamics.

How exactly does this activism disrupt the TJ circuit? Building on their long-term engagement with their communities, and the interactions they engage with other women, organisations, and international actors, these activists become political actors that cannot be ignored. The women we spoke to challenge institutional actors when needed and use institutional channels to push for their gender-transformative agenda when they can. That is, ultimately, how women's organisations achieved the inclusion of a gender perspective in the 2016 peace accords and its TJ framework. That is how a feminist leader ended up as a truth commissioner at the CEV,⁸ how gender working groups were created inside the JEP and the CEV, how a chapter of the final report of the CEV was dedicated to women and LGBTIQ+ communities, and how they pressured the JEP to open a gender-based violence case.

Conclusions

We began arguing that the paradigmatic TJ model is ill suited to envisage the transformative work of local actors, like that of Colombian activist women. That is why we propose an everyday transformative gender justice framework which brings to the centre of TJ local initiatives that advocate for socioeconomic and gender justice as experienced in the everyday. Based on our study, we show that Colombian women activists prioritise a transformative gender agenda that tackles the full spectrum of gender-based violence in society, while also privileging socioeconomic justice issues that impact their communities and everyday lives. Further, we demonstrate that the transformative potential of the work of these activists is enhanced by 'scaling out' with other activists and 'scaling up' by interacting with international and institutional actors. Those interactions allow their activism to disrupt a wider TJ circuit where power flows between local, national, and international

actors. The disruption leads to a more transformative and emancipatory TJ that works better for the people who need it the most.

Our article has focused on the experiences of localised TJ initiatives in Colombia. The ways in which the TJ circuits can be disrupted is necessarily context dependent, as social, economic, political, and cultural structures vary across time and place. Further research is also needed on how international actors and institutional TJ can be more transformative by incorporating a focus on the everyday, gender justice, and socio-economic issues.

Our findings suggest that the TJ field should devote more attention to the kinds of actors and interactions addressed in this article if it wants to address the needs and perspectives of local populations that it claims to serve. This requires not only scholarly attention to actors and issues side-lined by mainstream TJ processes, but also political will to genuinely put victims and survivors at the centre. Activists have accomplished transformative effects for themselves and their communities with little to no support from state and international donors. If equipped with proper resources, the kind of everyday transformative gender justice they carry out can bridge the gap between the big promises of TJ and the limitations of its institutions in Colombia and beyond.

Notes

1. Since the 2016 accord was signed, 1551 social leaders and human rights defenders, and 399 former FARC combatants have been murdered as of 27 October 2023 (INDEPAZ 2023).
2. See the Introduction to the Special Issue (XXXX 2024).
3. For a discussion on the ‘fieldhood’ of TJ see Bell (2009), Davidovic (2022).
4. See participant information in annex.
5. Most research participants identified as victims. Some used both ‘survivor’ and ‘victim’ to identify themselves. For a discussion on this see Hockett and Saucier (2015), Young and Maguire (2003).
6. NGO Sisma Mujer (2020) reported that from 25 March until 13 November 2020 calls to the national hotline for gender-based violence went up 96%. Calls for intrafamily violence went up 112%.
7. As defined by the Victim’s Unit, the roundtables are spaces for the participation of victims to enable discussion, representation, and follow-up of dispositions of the 2011 Victims law.
8. Alejandra Miller, truth commissioner at the CEV, was part of the feminist movement *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres*.

Acknowledgements

We thank the research team that worked with us in the data gathering phase of the Impunity Watch-funded project, the organisers and participants of the LSE workshop that preceded this special issue, and the guest editors. We specially thank research participants in Colombia who generously shared their knowledge with us.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Impunity Watch under a wider project titled ‘Promoting access to justice through victim participation: Foregrounding informal processes’ (funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands) and implemented in Colombia by BsocialCol.

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Appendix

Research participants

Organisation	Location of participant (Department)	Number of participants
<i>Arrápame con tu Esperanza</i> (Embrace me With Hope)	Antioquia, Bolívar, Cauca, Caldas, Chocó, Magdalena, Nariño, Sucre, Valle del Cauca	10 interviews
<i>Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral de las Mujeres Negras</i> -ASODEMUN (Association for Comprehensive Development of Black Women)	Bogotá	8 group participants (two sessions)
<i>Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral de las Mujeres Negras</i> -ASODEMUN (Association for Comprehensive Development of Black Women)	Chocó	8 group participants (two sessions)
<i>Asociación de Mujeres Rurales Víctimas de Vichada</i> -ASMURVIV (Association of Rural Women Victims of Vichada)	Vichada	1 interview
<i>Asociación de Productores Agropecuarios Líderes De La Vereda San Miguel Municipio De Planadas Tolima</i> – ASOPROSAM (Association of Agricultural Producers and Leaders of the San Miguel Municipality in Planadas, Tolima)	Tolima	9 group participants 3 interviews
<i>Unión de Costureras</i> (Quilter's Collective)	Bogotá	1 interview
<i>Memorias Colombia</i> (Memories Colombia)	Bogotá	3 interviews
<i>Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales</i> -RMVP (Victim and Professional Women's Network)	Antioquia, Bogotá, Cundinamarca, Bolívar, Caldas	11 group participants