

Emergency in Catatumbo: Women and Girls Deprived of Their Rights in North Santander

- *The Committee of Experts of MESECVI-OAS concludes technical assistance visit with an urgent call for measures by the Colombian State to protect the rights of women and girls.*
- *Experts identified a pattern of systematic human rights violations amid a fragile institutional response and weak coordination among State institutions.*
- *The delegation documented an increase in the recruitment of women and girls, as well as the persistence of trafficking, sexual violence, and attacks against women leaders, aggravated by the use of new technologies.*

Cúcuta, February 12, 2026 — A delegation of the Committee of Experts of the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI), a body of the Organization of American States (OAS), concluded a visit to Colombia aimed at assessing the human rights situation of women and girls in the Catatumbo subregion in the context of an escalation of armed conflict and a humanitarian crisis.

From February 9 to 13, the delegation held meetings and interviews in Bogotá and Cúcuta with women from Catatumbo, victims and survivors of multiple forms of violence; women leaders and human rights defenders; women’s organizations; national, departmental, and local authorities; as well as representatives of the Public Ministry, the Ombudsperson’s Office, and the Office of the Inspector General of Colombia. The delegation also met with institutions from the justice, health, and protection sectors, in addition to international organizations and humanitarian and cooperation agencies.

Based on the testimonies gathered, the Committee of Experts documented a critical situation marked by lack of protection and systematic human rights violations, with violence reproduced across generations and once again exacerbated by the escalation of the armed conflict and the use of new technologies by illegal armed groups.

The delegation also assessed the institutional response in light of the obligations established under the [Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women \(Belém do Pará Convention\)](#), to which Colombia is a State Party. Persistent challenges were identified in the coordination and institutional articulation of State entities responsible for assistance, protection, and access to justice for women and girls. Based on these findings, the Committee presents a series of preliminary recommendations aimed at strengthening the State response.

The delegation was led by the Vice Presidents of the Committee of Experts (CEVI), Mónica Maureira (Chile) and Yildalina Tatem Brache (Dominican Republic), together with

MESECVI Technical Secretary Luz Patricia Mejía Guerrero, Communications Officer Tatiana Bensa, and Adriana Benjumea, Colombia's Expert before the Committee.

The mission was carried out following a request by women and women leaders from Catatumbo, formalized through an invitation from the Ombudsperson's Office of Colombia and the civil society coalition *Las Mujeres Abrazamos el Catatumbo*.

The delegation also received permanent support from the OAS Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OAS) and the Ombudsperson's Office, and the visit was made possible thanks to the support of the ACT to End Violence against Women programme, a joint initiative of UN Women and the European Union.

Violence against women and the State's international obligations

Colombia is one of the 32 States Parties to the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Belém do Pará Convention). Through this instrument, the Colombian State has committed to guaranteeing the full exercise of women's human rights, particularly their right to live free from violence and discrimination.

Under the Convention, the State has the obligation to prevent, assist, investigate, punish, and repair violence against women in both the public and private spheres, including in situations of armed conflict and other crises, recognizing that women face specific and heightened risks.

The structural and aggravated violence experienced by women in Catatumbo, both in peacetime and in the current armed conflict, constitutes a violation of the human rights of women and girls that must be addressed urgently and as a priority by the Colombian State. Failure to act could engage the State's international responsibility.

Preliminary findings of the visit

Based on information gathered through individual interviews and collective meetings with approximately 40 women from different municipalities in Catatumbo, as well as exchanges with national and territorial authorities and humanitarian agencies working in the region, the delegation concluded that violence against women in Catatumbo is not an isolated or occasional phenomenon, but rather a structural and systematic manifestation of gender-based violence. This violence is intensified by the armed conflict, forced displacement, territorial control, institutional weakness, and the deep-rooted tolerance and normalization of violence, including within institutions responsible for guaranteeing women's and girls' access to justice.

In this context, the Experts observed that the dynamics of the conflict have incorporated new strategies and modalities of violence against women and girls. These practices, which combine traditional forms of violence with contemporary technological tools, have increased risks, expanded mechanisms of coercion, and aggravated the differentiated impacts faced by women in Catatumbo.

A. Specific patterns of violence in the Catatumbo context

The Committee of Experts' delegation identified alarming patterns of gender-based violence occurring in Catatumbo and in the cities receiving displaced populations from the subregion, particularly Cúcuta. These patterns have increased exponentially since the events of January 2025 amid a weakened State response specifically tailored to address such violence, including:

- The use of sexual violence as a mechanism of social and territorial control;
- The exploitation of women through forced caregiving roles for injured persons, burial of bodies, cleaning tasks, and servitude for armed groups;
- The increase in trafficking and sexual exploitation in contexts of displacement and migration;
- The proliferation of webcams used for the sexual exploitation of women, adolescent girls, and girls who are victims of trafficking, particularly those in situations of heightened vulnerability, including extortion by traffickers and exploiters who coerce or profit from these activities;
- The use of technological tools and digital platforms for surveillance, digital profiling, recruitment, threats, gender-based disinformation, and control;
- Revictimization and the lack of effective protection following complaints;
- The absence of assistance pathways adapted to contexts of armed conflict and humanitarian crisis, with procedures designed for peacetime still being applied;
- Insufficient financial and human resources to respond to the emergency;
- Institutional, symbolic, and social violence that continues to criminalize and discriminate against women for living in conflict-affected territories and/or for having relatives connected to armed actors involved in the confrontations;
- The absence of a cross-cutting gender and intersectional approach across the institutional response in the region, hindering the development of budgets and the prioritization of public investment aimed at preventing violence against women through gender-responsive allocation of resources.

B. Key human rights violations: sexual violence and exploitation, servile marriages, and trafficking of women and girls

The recruitment of girls and adolescent; trafficking and smuggling of displaced and migrant Colombian and Venezuelan women; the use of girls and adolescents by armed groups in

activities linked to illicit economies and territorial control; forced relationships and contemporary forms of domestic and sexual slavery; violence against children and family members; punishment, confinement, and physical and psychological violence perpetrated by partners and former partners; severe barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services and post-violence care; the lack of safe spaces and adequate shelters for women at extreme risk; structural barriers to justice and persistent impunity; as well as fragmented, delayed, or insufficient institutional responses amounting to forms of institutional violence, were among the recurring accounts shared by approximately 40 women and numerous public officials interviewed during the visit.

With deep concern, the Committee delegation received consistent and systematic information regarding persistent impunity within institutions responsible for investigating and prosecuting violence complaints, as well as within administrative protection mechanisms. These practices, described as routine, are linked to structural capacity limitations, lack of training and resources, and profound indifference toward the gravity and escalation of violence faced by women

Delays in processing complaints, difficulties in following up on cases when victims are displaced, and territorial barriers requiring cases to be referred to judicial offices outside municipalities were repeatedly identified. These obstacles increase costs, discourage women from continuing complaints, and deepen distrust in institutions. Serious coordination failures among prosecutors' offices, family police offices, the health sector, and other authorities were also reported, severely undermining response and protection mechanisms and increasing revictimization.

These shortcomings are particularly grave in contexts where alleged perpetrators belong to armed groups or criminal structures exercising territorial control. Combined with the limited institutional presence in rural areas, these conditions severely undermine the State's ability to guarantee a comprehensive, diligent, and gender-responsive response.

During the interviews, authorities themselves acknowledged the structural limitations that persist in providing timely and sufficient responses, highlighting both the urgent need to strengthen institutional capacities and the value of the work that continues to be carried out under extremely difficult conditions in the territory.

The delegation also wishes to recognize the efforts made by many public officials, particularly the gender teams of the Ombudsperson's Office, departmental and district women's secretariats, and women officers of the National Police, who demonstrated an unwavering commitment to responding to the scale and complexity of requests for assistance and complaints raised by victims and survivors despite severe security restrictions and limited resources.

C. Women at heightened risk and vulnerability

Based on the information collected, the Committee identified at least four groups of women victims and survivors of violence in Catatumbo, defined both by the profile of the perpetrators and by the specific conditions of vulnerability they face:

- A first group includes women subjected to violence perpetrated by intimate partners or former partners in contexts of domestic violence and gender-based violence. Their vulnerability is aggravated by the constant tension created by the armed conflict and by structural conditions of inequality and discrimination. Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural women face additional barriers to accessing justice, economic dependency, territorial isolation, and protection and assistance services.
- A second group includes women who have suffered violence perpetrated by members of armed groups or organized criminal structures. These violations include sexual violence, trafficking and exploitation, forced prostitution, forced recruitment, servitude, threats, displacement, and exploitation for illicit or logistical activities. In these cases, fear and territorial control exercised by armed actors, combined with weak or absent State presence, create severe obstacles to reporting violence and accessing protection mechanisms.
- A third group includes women community leaders, human rights defenders, and grassroots representatives whose leadership and support for victims expose them to threats, harassment, stigmatization, forced displacement, and attacks against their lives, integrity, and those of their children. These attacks seek to silence and deter women leaders and defenders and often undermine women's participation in public and community life.
- Finally, the extreme vulnerability generated by migratory displacement exposes Venezuelan women and girls in particular to trafficking, exploitation, and sexual slavery. This absence of effective rights guarantees was repeatedly identified by authorities interviewed during the mission.

The Committee notes that these categories are not mutually exclusive and that many women are simultaneously exposed to several forms of violence and discrimination, reinforcing the urgent need for comprehensive, differentiated, and intersectional measures in line with the obligations established under the Belém do Pará Convention.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this visit, the Committee urges the State to adopt urgent, structural, and follow-up measures supported by the immediate allocation of sufficient, timely, and gender-responsive resources.

The Committee stresses that the situation requires a comprehensive, coordinated, and sustained State response with an effective territorial presence, including the implementation of the interoperability strategy proposed by the Colombian State; the strengthening of the national mechanism for the advancement of women represented by the Vice Ministry of Women, as well as departmental, district, and local mechanisms, including women's affairs offices and family police offices; and the strengthening of Territorial Transitional Justice Committees through the incorporation of gender and intersectional approaches into their decisions.

It is also essential to ensure the incorporation of a gender perspective into the planning, budgeting, indicators, and monitoring mechanisms of the Social Pact for Catatumbo; to guarantee the effective participation of women's organizations; and to strengthen institutional coordination for the timely implementation of preventive measures when early warnings and risk analyses are issued.

The Committee further emphasizes that the Colombian State's response must be coordinated, comprehensive, and sustained, and implemented in accordance with the Belém do Pará Convention, articulating existing national instruments such as the Feminist Foreign Policy and the National Action Plan for United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. All such efforts must be aimed at guaranteeing and recognizing, in all their diversity, the rights of women and girls in Catatumbo and the department of North Santander to peace, security — including the security of their families and communities — and a life free from violence.

The Committee also considers it necessary to establish mechanisms to verify compliance with Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, as well as measures ensuring transparency and due diligence in humanitarian assistance operations and the effective protection of women, girls, and adolescents.

In this regard, the Committee formulates the following recommendations:

A. Urgent Measures

The Committee urges the State to immediately adopt measures to guarantee the life, integrity, and effective access to rights of women and girls, in particular:

- Strengthen the Territorial Basic Teams Programme by expanding the Ministry of Health's mobile services in order to guarantee effective access to physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health services, as well as kits for responding to sexual violence adapted to territorial conditions. These programmes should include personnel trained in gender perspective and ensure the active participation of women leaders and local organizations in identifying territorial priorities and women's specific needs.
- Implement mobile justice mechanisms and review assistance pathways in cases of violence to ensure they respond to the context described above and urgently incorporate emergency mechanisms that guarantee the effective activation of response pathways in cases of gender-based violence and trafficking in persons.
- Urgently extend, before May 2026, access to Temporary Protection Permits for undocumented migrant women, particularly those at risk of trafficking or exploitation.
- Guarantee permanent communication channels between women leaders, women's organizations, and justice and protection authorities, as well as strengthen women's participation mechanisms that are still not functioning in all municipalities of Catatumbo, such as Women's Consultative Councils. This requires ensuring access to

mobile data and internet services to guarantee the rights to communication and information.

- Allocate immediate resources to strengthen the humanitarian response, expand shelters, and support productive projects and urgent socioeconomic stabilization measures for women through expedited procedures that reduce bureaucratic barriers and recognize the crisis conditions under which women, adolescent girls, and girls are surviving the conflict.
- Develop urgent training processes on gender, gender-sensitive justice, and human rights for public officials responsible for the administration of justice and implementation of the law.
- Immediately establish, together with Colombia's Ministry of Defense, a verification mechanism for compliance with International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights with a gender and intersectional approach, including training on gender-based violence and individual and collective protection pathways for women victims of organized crime in the department, as well as women in conflict with criminal law.
- Guarantee the effective inclusion of women in dialogue processes with armed groups and incorporate specific safeguards for women and girls into humanitarian measures and agreements adopted. It is imperative that all dialogue mechanisms with armed actors operating in Catatumbo reaffirm their commitments under International Humanitarian Law not to involve women and girls in the armed conflict through forced recruitment, domestic and sexual slavery, and servitude.
- Ensure that international entities such as the OAS Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OAS), which accompany these dialogue processes, can serve as guarantors of the immediate commitment by negotiating actors to eradicate discriminatory and violent practices against women, adolescent girls, and girls.
- Utilize existing State mechanisms in coordination with women leaders and human rights defenders by establishing periodic and urgent convening plans adapted to crisis contexts.
- Urgently convene the Regional Coordinating Mechanism, the Women's Security Council, and all competent territorial, justice, and Public Ministry entities to monitor the implementation and validity in Catatumbo of the Gender-Based Violence Emergency Declaration included in Colombia's 2022–2026 National Development Plan.

B. Structural Measures

The Committee recommends:

- Ensure the integration of gender and intersectional approaches throughout all areas of action of the Social Plan for Catatumbo, including planning, budgeting, indicators, implementation, and evaluation.
- Guarantee the effective participation of women in decision-making processes and advance toward mechanisms ensuring their direct representation in spaces where resources are managed and development projects assigned to Catatumbo are designed, evaluated, and monitored.
- Strengthen the National Mechanism for the Advancement of Women, led by the Vice Ministry of Women and the SALVIA programme, to expand its territorial reach in Catatumbo and other highly conflict-affected territories, as well as strengthen State and district mechanisms through sufficient budget allocations to fulfill obligations related to prevention, assistance, investigation, and punishment of violence against women, including protection mechanisms for women leaders and defenders.
- Strengthen Territorial Transitional Justice Committees by incorporating gender approaches into their decisions and plans.
- Establish or strengthen mechanisms to verify compliance with Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law.
- Promote reparations, socioeconomic stabilization measures, and the restoration of women's life projects.
- Establish a high-level accountability mechanism in the Catatumbo subregion that operates periodically throughout the humanitarian crisis and includes the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Equality - Vice Ministry of Women, and any other national gender mechanism.

C. Follow-up Measures

The Committee recommends:

- Conducting a second technical visit to present the final report and assess progress on the urgent measures.
- Establishing a national and regional coordination platform with a work plan, timeline, and defined indicators, with the participation of women's organizations, women leaders from the territory, the Ombudsperson's Office, MAPP/OAS, and relevant executive branch institutions.
- Establishing periodic monitoring and accountability mechanisms with gender and intersectional approaches.