



Washington DC Working Group



Profiles in Locally Led Approaches to Thinking and Working Politically

Case Study 1: Advancing Pro-SGBV Survivor Reform: The case of Colectiva Justicia Mujer

Colectiva Justicia Mujer and Pact

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This is the first in a series of case studies aimed at documenting Thinking and Working Politically-aligned practices of country and regionally based organisations and activists. The case study series is sponsored by the DC Working Group of the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice, and it is meant to elevate the adaptive and politically-aware methods of diverse development actors operating across a range of contexts. This case study examines the legal and political advocacy of Colectiva Justicia Mujer, a feminist legal organisation in Medellín, Colombia. It was developed through a collaboration between [Colectiva Justicia Mujer](#) and [Pact](#). The global TWP CoP is delighted to support the publication of this and other case studies in the series as they make an important contribution to the body of evidence on politically aware and adaptive development efforts from the perspective of those at the frontline of such initiatives.

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Background

Colectiva Justicia Mujer is the first feminist legal organisation formed in the city of Medellín, Colombia focused on the promotion and defence of human rights and the needs and interests of women. Founded in 2015 on the *International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women*, [La Colectiva](#) works for the redress and prevention of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), while organising and seeking legal remedies for the restoration of women's rights and SGBV prevention. From its beginning, La Colectiva recognised that there were distinct opportunities to advance women's gender equality and rights in Medellín, a city known for its innovation and progressive development model.

Since its founding, La Colectiva has assisted female survivors of sexual violence within the context of armed conflict. Building from its core focus on the use of SGBV as a weapon of war, La Colectiva expanded its lines of intervention to support female survivors of diverse forms of violence, including those suffering from physical and psychological abuse stemming from interpersonal conflict. La Colectiva has provided specialised assistance to marginalised communities such as migrants and gender and sexual minorities.

La Colectiva employs multiple strategies and approaches to drive progressive, pro-women and pro-rights reforms.

Strategic litigation, or the use of carefully selected lawsuits to advance human rights reforms, sits at the centre of La Colectiva's social change model. However, strategic litigation

is underpinned and, in turn, supports a wider toolkit of approaches which include *advocacy*, *collaboration and network building*, and *public engagement*, all focused on shifting the behaviour of public institutions. La Colectiva understands its work as inherently political and employs a self-described "subversive approach" dedicated to disrupting and overturning existing power hierarchies to achieve human rights outcomes. To do this, La Colectiva uses a range of practices explicitly and implicitly aligned with Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) principles.

Problem Addressed

At the macro level, Colectiva Justicia Mujer is focused on promoting women and gender rights and transforming the issues of *exclusion, violence and discrimination suffered by women*. To address these systemic and politically entrenched challenges, it works on numerous problem sets, including:

- The absence of judicial representation for survivors of SGBV
- The lack of high-quality, standardised psycho-legal care for women in Medellín
- Limited access to legal rights for Venezuelan refugee-migrant women
- Access to fundamental human rights, including health, education, and sexual and reproductive health

Colectiva Justicia Mujer at a glance

La Colectiva is a civil society "organizational initiative" that emerged from the shared vision of a group of women – professional lawyers and friends who aspired to work towards the realisation of women's rights. Their starting point was the belief that in Medellín, a self-described progressive and innovative city, women should be free of exclusion, violence, and discrimination.

La Colectiva's working team includes four founders and 36 "collaborators" – all women! Since its founding it has worked with diverse donors and implementing partners, including UN Women, the UN High Commission for Refugees, Lawyers Without Borders, and USAID, to name a few.

A key achievement of La Colectiva and their allies was, in 2020, the formation of a Gender Sub-Committee that is part of the Traditional Justice Committee of the Mayor's Office of Medellín. In working to address the needs for services and support of five individual survivors, La Colectiva and other advocates of women's rights identified that there was no institution or forum that was comprehensively addressing conflict-driven SGBV in Medellín. While critical issues related to women's rights in conflict were the focus of various institutions such as the Health Secretariat and the Unit for the Attention and Reparation of Victims of the Armed Conflict, which leads the Transitional Justice Committee, no statutory body was equipped to focus intently on the issue of SGBV as a weapon of war. Importantly, this contributed to the lack of public attention to a critical human rights issue and a failure to ensure adequate legal and policy responses for SGBV survivors of conflict. The formation of the Gender Sub-Committee for the Transitional Justice Committee was an effort to resolve this gap.

Description of Programmatic Approach

Colectiva Justicia Mujer followed a multipronged strategy to push for the establishment of bureaucratic infrastructure in Medellín able to support and serve SGBV survivors of conflict. Notably, the methods and approaches La Colectiva used for the promotion of the Gender Sub Committee reflects wider institutional practices it has used on issues as diverse as migrant rights, LGBTI rights, access to sexual and reproductive health, and access to justice. These methods, for example, include layering legal actions with policy-focused advocacy while actively engaging wide networks of actors to place pressure on target institutions.

La Colectiva's method begins with careful *topic selection* to guide its investment in scarce organisational research. While intently focused on SGBV survivors of conflict, La Colectiva spent a year engaging a wide range of stakeholders in discussions around survivor needs and existing institutional responses and constraints. This included, for example, driving conversations with civil society, survivor-focused activists, and public institutions such as the Office of the Mayor of Medellín and public departments and ministries, including the Ministry of Health, Ombudsman's Office of Colombia, Office of the Attorney General of Colombia, and the Ministry of Justice of Colombia. These conversations helped La Colectiva and other actors determine that the establishment of the Gender Sub Committee was the right policy response to the challenge, thereby laying the ground work for ongoing advocacy.

While using roundtable discussions and continuous stakeholder engagement as a mode of supporting system actors to identify and explore the need for institutional reforms, La Colectiva also used *strategic litigation* to enforce legal and constitutional obligations on the part of state authorities. Specifically, La Colectiva moved forward with a case including five female SGBV survivors of armed conflict, eventually leading to a *tutela*

Use of Collaborative and Coercive Approaches

La Colectiva used a combination of collaborative and coercive approaches to prompt reform of the Municipal Government of Medellín. Roundtable discussions were used to expand support for developing an institutional mechanism like the Gender Sub-Committee, which could facilitate access to services and redress for SGBV survivors of conflict. Similarly, La Colectiva maintained ongoing relationships with key decision-makers and extended technical assistance and support to government agencies.

These collaborative approaches were supplemented by more coercive methods. Strategic litigation leveraged the judicial system to force compliance with legal and constitutional requirements to protect SGBV victims. Furthermore, La Colectiva mobilized external advocates to put pressure on key government institutions.

*action*¹ which set a judicial precedent for SGBV survivors to be recognised as rights holders, ensuring comprehensive psychosocial care by the municipality of Medellín, as well as the guarantee of at least 13 rights² through the adoption of a personalised intervention plan. The ruling had the effect of requiring that the municipality of Medellín form a mechanism able to coordinate with government agencies and departments to redress past harms and facilitate access to critical services for SGBV survivors of armed conflict.

La Colectiva pursued multiple strategies for ensuring the effectiveness of advocacy that preceded and followed the success of strategic litigation. Building on a tested organisational practice, La Colectiva used a stakeholder mapping process to identify “*authenticators*” who were able to serve as bridges or go-betweens for advocates and local decision-makers. Authenticators included academics, national and international experts and other stakeholders acknowledged by the Mayor of Medellín as valid interlocutors, who had established relationships with government bodies, including the mayor’s office and key departments, such as the Women’s Secretariat and Health Secretariat. These authenticators, therefore, were positioned to deliver key advocacy messages and bring decision-makers into multistakeholder dialogues.

Additionally, La Colectiva pursued *partnerships and collaborations* with other actors to make the case for the formation of the Gender Sub-Committee. This included, for example, working with local actors like *La Mesa por la Ley de la Salud de las Mujeres* in Bogotá to support advocacy efforts and provide the government with technical assistance regarding the design of a mechanism that meets the psychosocial needs of SGBV survivors. Additionally, La Colectiva used respected international partners such as Lawyers Without Borders Canada to participate in multistakeholder roundtable discussions. Most importantly, La Colectiva actively engaged with survivor groups who provided strong voices in support of the formation of the Gender Sub-Committee.

While La Colectiva employs a deliberate and multi-layered approach to promoting institutional reform, it also assumes that reform does not happen in a straight line and instead requires strategy adjustments. La Colectiva therefore uses multiple mechanisms for facilitating *adaptive management* while moving forward with activities focused on advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and strategic litigation. This includes conducting continuous context monitoring through weekly “worktables” where staff discuss relevant and emergent data and information that could affect the implementation of key activities. It also includes tracking formal and informal indicators of progress to determine whether activities under implementation are having the intended impact. Both the context and progress indicators are reviewed and discussed regularly by La Colectiva’s management team.

La Colectiva’s advocacy and mobilisation has not ended with the establishment of the Gender Sub-Committee. The Sub-Committee has played an important role in facilitating services and actions to support SGBV survivors of conflict. This has included formalising its governance framework through the development of regulations and decrees, fostering

¹ In Colombian jurisprudence, “*tutela action*” refers to “a protective mechanism that allows any person to approach the judicial authorities to obtain immediate protection of their fundamental rights when these are violated or threatened by the action or omission of any public authority or private individuals, in cases established by law.” Its normative framework is found in Article 86 of the Political Constitution of Colombia and in Decree Law 2591 of 1991.

² Rights addressed included sexual, physical, mental, social health, housing, education, reparation, humanitarian aid, justice, etc.

collaboration across 25 government and non-government entities, and producing a first-ever report on the status of women in the context of armed conflict and the “post-agreement” period.

Adjusting Approaches Along the Way

La Colectiva made important adjustments to its campaign to promote improved services and support for SGBV survivors of conflict. Early on, when representing the needs of five specific SGBV survivors, La Colectiva supported the creation of a case monitoring mechanism, termed the Case Monitoring Sub-Commission formed within the Municipal Government of Medellín. Later, as it became clear that a mechanism was required to facilitate broader interagency coordination, La Colectiva shifted to advocating for the formation of the Gender Sub-Committee.

Additionally, La Colectiva calibrated its legal strategy to support its political engagement and advocacy. La Colectiva was prepared to file a legal injunction in support of the five SGBV survivors early in the process, but decided to focus on political advocacy first. It then pressed ahead with the legal injunction, i.e. the prior mentioned *tutela action*, when it was clear that a positive legal ruling would support their institutional reform efforts. Importantly, La Colectiva had to maintain a balancing act as it took direct legal action against the very officials with whom they sought a constructive working relationship.

The Sub-Committee still faces remaining challenges and constraints. For example, the Sub-Committee was established to respond to women survivors, but now must adapt to include and serve the intersectional needs of diverse survivors. La Colectiva is supporting this broader focus for the Sub-Committee by employing the same strategies that it used to push for its creation. This includes, for example, promoting advocacy efforts led by Afro-Colombian, indigenous, LGBTI, and peasant communities. Furthermore, La Colectiva supports and pushes the Sub-Committee to develop mechanisms for effectively engaging these and other communities and incorporating intersectional perspectives in fulfilling its mandate.

Key Challenges and Lessons

Colectiva Justicia Mujer describes its success as stemming from its integration of social, legal, and political strategies for advancing institutional and policy reform. On diverse and overlapping social topics including SGBV, migrant rights, and transgendered rights, La Colectiva mobilises marginalised constituencies to advocate for their rights, and seeks direct legal remedies, while simultaneously building supportive relationships with state institutions to implement reforms. La Colectiva does this by deeply analysing key issues and challenges, while mapping the stakeholders that are positioned to act as enablers and spoilers of reform.

La Colectiva also credits other techniques as supporting their TWP-aligned practices. Building on legal methods which require careful documentation, *knowledge management* serves as one of their strategic pillars of action. La Colectiva, therefore, systematically records their actions, results, and learning, providing them with data and evidence they need to review and adapt their approaches (see text box).

Prioritising knowledge management and research

La Colectiva deploys a systematised, 9-step process to guide its teams in conducting effective and “responsible” political advocacy. This process prioritises deliberate research into social, economic, and legal issues to inform strategies in and out of the courtroom. As part of their campaigns focused on conflict-driven SGBV, La Colectiva conducted a research study on healthcare for SGBV survivors of armed conflict, which informed both its strategic litigation and public advocacy.

La Colectiva is emphatic in its belief that pursuing any of the above-mentioned approaches or strategies in isolation would be less effective. They report that they must constantly promote awareness of (and support for) their multifaceted approach for promoting human

rights and reform. For example, many donors and other actors view positive judicial rulings as an end destination. For La Colectiva, however, judicial decisions are merely a starting point for meeting the needs of survivors of violence, necessitating longer term focus on the mechanisms and policy infrastructure that make those decisions a reality.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Development Actors

It is perhaps unsurprising that a legal justice organisation like Colectiva Justicia Mujer, which pursues institutional reform on highly political and sensitive human rights issues, implements strategies that are grounded in a close understanding of the local political economy. La Colectiva understands that the exertion of pressure from the legal system and networks of civic advocates combined with direct collaboration with key decision-makers can contribute to outcomes for the survivors they serve.

The strategies employed by La Colectiva, however, are relevant to any development actor pursuing social change, including those who may be working on issues they deem as less sensitive or less “political.” Drawing from La Colectiva’s experience, those funding and pursuing any development outcome should consider the following questions:

- Are target issues fully understood and have they been carefully selected?
- Have key stakeholders been mapped, including to identify individuals and institutions who can enable or hinder reform?
- Does the project or organisation in question have relationships with and ability to assist decision-makers to implement reforms?
- Does the project or organisation in question similarly have a capacity to put external pressure (legal, political, social, economic) on decision-makers?
- Are there mechanisms in place for tracking progress and making adjustments to approaches over time?

La Colectiva’s success stems from its ability to understand and operate within the local system in Colombia and Medellín. La Colectiva recognises that it is by answering the above-mentioned questions and others that it not only achieves successes but avoids doing unintended harm to the marginalised communities it serves. However, it takes sufficient personnel with adequate skills, experience, and networks to do this analytical and stakeholder engagement-oriented work. To pursue complex change, therefore, donors and implementing partners must invest in the holistic capabilities of organisations like La Colectiva, which often complement and propel their core areas of technical impact.