

## Gender-Based Violence, Organized Crime and Transitional Justice: A Comparative Roundtable on Colombia, Mexico, and Northern Ireland

*Wednesday, 18 June 2025 10:45 (1h 30m)*

**Objective:** This roundtable seeks to interrogate the complex intersection of gender-based violence, transitional justice, and organized crime, particularly (but not exclusively) drug trafficking, in three contexts where peacebuilding efforts coexist with ongoing armed violence: Colombia, Mexico, and Northern Ireland. Despite their different contexts, all three regions currently face a continuum of violence. The emergence of organized crime and organized criminal groups in these contexts disproportionately impacts women, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds such as Indigenous women, Afro-descendant women, LGBTQ+, migrant women, and rural and working-class women, amongst others.

By exploring these diverse cases, the discussion aims to:

1. Critically evaluate the limitations and shortcomings of traditional, “paradigmatic” frameworks of transitional justice in addressing gender-based violence linked to organized crime.
2. Examine how organized crime and the legacies of armed conflict exacerbate gender-based violence and perpetuate cycles of insecurity for women, particularly from marginalized backgrounds.
3. Critically discuss gender-sensitive peacebuilding and transformative justice approaches that address structural inequalities and prioritise women’s lived experiences, aiming for deeper, more inclusive, and sustainable solutions to gender-based violence and injustice

This roundtable brings together women scholars from diverse geographical, academic, and professional backgrounds to foster a comparative dialogue. The goal is to explore ways to bridge the gaps between transitional justice, gender-based violence, conflict studies, and organized crime studies, offering fresh perspectives and practical insights from each case study

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### **Contexts:**

- Colombia’s over six decades of armed conflict, driven by paramilitary groups, guerrillas, and drug cartels, has left a lasting legacy of violence and instability (Colombian Truth Commission, 2022). While the 2016 Peace Agreement marked a critical step towards peace, the persistence of drug trafficking and other illicit business such as illegal mining, human trafficking and human smuggling continues to fuel conflict, with devastating consequences for women and marginalized communities (Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia, 2024). Dissident guerrilla factions, remnants of paramilitary forces, and new organized crime groups wield sexual and gender-based violence as weapons of terror, control, and political suppression. Their primary targets? Women, particularly peasant, Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and LGBTQ+ individuals, who continue to face the compounded impacts of systemic inequality and organized crime violence (Sisma Mujer, 2021; Caribe Afirmativo, 2024; Stallone & Zulver, 2024). This stark reality underscores the urgent need for justice and inclusive strategies that address these interconnected forms of harm.
- Mexico’s “War on Drugs” began in 2006, when President Calderón initiated a militarized approach against drug cartels. Official sources state that the ‘War on Drugs’ has claimed the lives of about

350,000 people, while more than 72,000 are missing because of enforced disappearances. While reasons for the strategy's failure vary, its impact on Mexican lives, especially women, is profound, as Mexico remains engulfed in violence. Critics, including NGOs and international bodies, have condemned Mexico's human rights shortcomings (Anaya-Muñoz and Frey, 2019) and the ongoing "invisible wave" of violations against women (Tamés, 2019). Reports from the UN and Inter-American Commission highlight inadequate protections for women and urge comprehensive measures (CEDAW, 2012; CIDH, 2019).

- Northern Ireland has made important progress in peacebuilding since the Good Friday Agreement (1998), yet the legacy of The Troubles, particularly gender-based violence, remains unresolved. Paramilitary groups, though less visible, continue to exert control through coercion, fear, extortion, drug trafficking, and exploitation (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2024), with women in abusive relationships with paramilitary-affiliated men suffering the most (McAlister et al, 2021). These women face not only intimate partner violence but also the broader influence of paramilitary power, which limits their freedom and safety (Swaine, 2024; Hughes, 2022). The normalization of violence in paramilitary-controlled areas has pushed many young people, including women, into crime and sexual exploitation (Kelly, 2024; BBC, 2024; Walsh, 2022). In this sense, lasting peace in Northern Ireland has not been fully achieved, as paramilitary control and its gendered impact continue to fuel cycles of violence and fear.

Each region selected for this roundtable has faced unique challenges related to the legacies of armed conflict and organized crime. While we recognize the particularities of each case and how they are shaped by their unique contexts, we believe they share common challenges that are further exacerbated by the pervasive hyper-masculinization of violence, the devaluation of the feminine, entrenched cultures of silence within communities, and a significant absence of a gender-sensitive approach among authorities and judicial institutions. They, therefore, serve as important examples for exploring how to tackle the intricate continuums of violence within the contexts of transitional justice and peacebuilding.

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### **Key questions:**

#### *Transitional Justice and Definitions of Conflict*

- What are the limitations of paradigmatic definitions of "conflict"?
- Should transitional justice mechanisms apply in "non-paradigmatic" contexts, for example: context of ongoing conflict such as Mexico's "War on Drugs," and if so, how can they adapt to these situations?
- How might expanding this definition help capture the experiences of those affected by organized violence, particularly women?

#### *About organized violence and organized violence groups*

- Is there a correlation between the public violence perpetrated by organized criminal groups and the private violence experienced by women, such as conforming to traditional feminine roles in the household, intimate partner violence, and coercive control?
- To what extent are these forms of violence distinct, or are they interrelated in some way?
- How has the hypermasculinization of violence shaped responses to gender-based violence in Colombia, Mexico, and Northern Ireland, and what strategies can deconstruct these norms to promote inclusive transitional justice?

#### *Women's experiences of gender-based violence in conflict*

- How can transitional justice frameworks move beyond tokenistic inclusion of women to achieve feminist transformations in peacebuilding?
- What adaptations are needed to address structural violence, such as economic marginalization, political exclusion, and gender inequality, that exacerbate women's vulnerabilities during conflict?

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### ***Members of the roundtable***

The chair and discussants bring expertise closely aligned with the roundtable's themes: transitional justice, gender-based violence, and organized crime in conflict and post-conflict settings. Each participant offers a unique blend of academic and practical perspectives, creating a rich foundation for discussion. The group includes scholars at various stages - PhD candidates, early-career researchers, and established academics - with expertise in gender-based violence, human rights, transitional justice, feminism, international studies, political science, and Indigenous studies across the three focus regions: Colombia, Mexico, and Northern Ireland. Many also have hands-on experience in activism, public policy, civil society work, and litigation, grounding the discussion in real-world insights. This diverse and interdisciplinary team, which includes voices from the regions under study, provides an invaluable opportunity to share context-sensitive knowledge, analyze case-specific challenges, and explore comparative strategies for addressing these critical issues.

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#### ***Chair: Dr. Yassin Brunger (Queen's University Belfast)***

Dr. Yassin Brunger is a Lecturer in Human Rights Law and Co-Director of the Gender, Justice, and Society research network at Queen's University Belfast. For over a decade, Dr. Brunger has worked at the intersections of law and politics, conflict and peace and justice, and the rule of law. She is an expert on international criminal courts, sexual and gender-based violence, and feminist legal theory. Her published research explores gaps between international and comparative legal processes and the lived experiences of conflict-affected communities.

#### ***Discussants***

Dr Daniela Suárez Vargas (Queen's University Belfast)

Dr. Daniela Suárez Vargas is a Colombian lawyer and an ESRC postdoctoral fellow at Queen's University Belfast, specializing in victimhood, sexual and gender-based violence, and transitional justice in conflict settings. She holds a PhD in Law from Queen's University Belfast, where she was an AHRC Northern Bridge Consortium scholar, as well as an LLM in Human Rights and Criminology from the same university and a law degree from Universidad del Rosario in Colombia. Her research examines how victimhood narratives in Colombia's transitional justice process shape the recognition of sexual, reproductive, and gender-based violence experienced by combatants in guerrilla and paramilitary groups. Daniela has also worked as a lawyer and researcher in the areas of international criminal law, human rights, international humanitarian law, and the UN Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

*Diana Ortega Torres*

(Queen's University Belfast)

Diana Ortega Torres is a final-year PhD student at Queen's University Belfast, School of Law. She worked in the nonprofit sector and as a high school teacher for five years before transitioning into academia. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from her home country, Mexico, and an MA in Conflict Transformation from the Mitchell Institute at Queen's University. Diana currently teaches modules on communications, mass media, and contemporary conflicts at ITESO University in Mexico. Her PhD research examines transitional justice through an intersectional feminist lens, focusing on non-paradigmatic cases such as Mexico's ongoing conflict, the 'War on Drugs,' with fieldwork in two high-risk states with high levels of gender-based violence

*Monica Pitt*

(Queen's University Belfast)

Monica Pitt is a PhD student at Queens University School of Law, in a partnership between the university and the Committee for the Administration of Justice. She previously held an MA from the University of St. Andrews in history and social anthropology before obtaining her MLitt at the University of the Highlands and Islands. Through her work with CAJ, she worked on the Bitter Legacy: Impunity in Northern Ireland report, where she focused on gendered violence in interrogation. Her PhD research focuses on the use of oral history to generate a fuller understanding of sexual and gender-based violence during the Northern Irish conflict, particularly as weaponized by the state.

*Aoife Clements*

(50:50 NI & Queen's University Belfast)

Aoife Clements is the Founder of 50:50 NI and a PhD at Queens University School of Law. With a background in politics and women's rights, Aoife is committed to advancing gender equality and ensuring the inclusion of women in the legislative process. Aoife has earned her BA in Anthropology and Law from the London School of Economics and an MA in Socio-cultural Anthropology from Durham University. She is currently

researching the experiences of domestic abuse survivors in Northern Ireland as they navigate the criminal justice system in pursuit of redress.

*Dr Claire Wright*

(Ulster University)

Claire Wright is Lecturer in Politics and International Studies at Ulster University. She has also held academic positions at Queen's University Belfast, Universidad de Monterrey, and Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León. Claire holds a PhD in Contemporary Political Processes and a Masters in Latin American Studies from the Universidad de Salamanca. Her research focuses on politics in Latin America, including the participation of Indigenous and other ethnic peoples, peacebuilding, and emergency powers. Claire's research has been published widely in English and Spanish and she has also acted as a consultant for UNDP and Cooperación Española on the issue of extractive industries and prior consultation.

**Track Classification:** Peacekeeping, Peacebuilding and Human Rights Working Group