



# Colonial Legacies in Colombia

## Impact on Indigenous, Afro- descendant, and Black Women and Pathways to Change

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This policy paper identifies how the legacies of historical colonialism continue to affect the lives of indigenous, black, and Afro descendant women in Colombia. At the same time, the document indicates how women have approached these obstacles and offers three policy recommendations in the field of education.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper results from a collaboration between Corporación Alianza Iniciativa Mujeres Colombianas por la Paz – IMP and the research project *Addressing Postcolonial Legacies in Transitional Justice*, which forms part of the UKRI Gender, Justice and Security Hub. The report has three main aims:

First, to analyse the colonial origins of the contemporary inequalities that affect, particularly, women who belong to ethnic groups in Colombia;

Second, to identify the ways in which indigenous, Afro-descendant and black women have been able to tackle these obstacles individually and collectively;

Third, to offer some specific policy recommendations:

**Proposal 1:** Include the issue of colonialism and its legacies in educational curriculums, from a critical perspective.

**Proposal 2:** Strengthen the Ethno-education programme.

**Proposal 3:** Develop educational programmes from an intercultural perspective for all Colombians.

It is important to note that any proposal that can affect the lives and experiences of ethnic groups in Colombia must be the product of a co-design with the different actors involved, but above all with representatives from the ethnic peoples themselves. It may also be submitted to a process of prior consultation with the aim of obtaining free, prior and informed consent, in accordance with the relevant national legislation. In the same way, proposals for change should be approached from a gender mainstreaming and intersectional perspective, that is to say by taking into account the lived realities of indigenous, black and Afro-descendant women.

While there has been a general silence over the colonial past in Colombia, recent years have seen some emerging discussions on the persistence of the legacies of historical colonialism. For that reason and starting from the premise that it is necessary to undo the colonial structures that continue to restrict opportunities for many Colombian women in the present, we believe that the current political and social circumstances are particularly favourable for the implementation of the three policy recommendations advanced here.

# Introduction

This policy document seeks to uncover the historical roots of structures of inequality that continue to affect indigenous, Afro-descendant, and black women in Colombia, and to identify concrete pathways to change. According to the most recent census (DANE, 2018), there are approximately 1.9 million indigenous persons<sup>1</sup> in Colombia, corresponding to 3.4% of the total population. For their part, there are approximately 4.7 million people of black, Afro-descendant, *raizal* and *palenquera* (NARP<sup>2</sup>) origin, making up 9.34% of the total Colombian population. There is also presence of another ethnic group, Romani (*rrom*)/gypsy (*gitano*) people<sup>3</sup>, totalling 2,649. According to the same census (DANE, 2018), Colombia's total population amounts to 48.3 million people, just over half of which are women.

Together with the general, ongoing situation of inequality which women suffer due to their gender status, those who belong to ethnic communities suffer compounded discrimination, and notoriously, continue to experience unprecedented levels of sexual violence and harm (Comisión de la Verdad, 2020; DeJusticia, 2020). While their situation might place these women in a situation of “vulnerability”, the Report also highlights the ways in which they have been able to tackle these barriers for themselves, with sustained effort, dedication to study, and solidarity.

1 There is considerable diversity among Colombia's indigenous population, with a total of 115 different peoples being recognised. See further, IWGIA (2019)

2 “NARP” is an umbrella term referring to different Afro-descendant communities. According to their preference, people of black ancestry in Colombia might refer to themselves as black (*negros*), afro-Colombian (*afrocolombianos*) or Afro-descendant (*afrodescendientes*). The *raizal* population hails from the Islands of San Andrés, Providencia y Santa Catalina. Finally, the *palenqueros* are descendants of slaves who fled and formed their own communities or *palenques*. For more information on these categories, see <https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/grupos-etnicos/presentacion-grupos-etnicos-poblacion-NARP-2019.pdf>

3 While the population is relatively small, it is understood that the first Romani/gypsy people went to Colombia in the 17th Century. The State moved to protect their rights as an Ethnic Group with Decree 2957 in 2010. For further information, see <https://web.comisiondelaverdad.co/actualidad/noticias/dia-pueblo-rrom-gitano-colombia-llamado-comision-proteccion>

The results presented in this policy document emanate from 16 interviews carried out with indigenous, Afro-descendant, black, mestiza, and gypsy women between the months of July and December 2021. Acknowledging that ethnicity is a complex construct, the interviewees themselves identified their ethnic group and, in the report, we refer to them based on the preferences they expressed. The women whose voices are at the core of this policy document live in different territories, representing the rich cultural and social diversity of Colombia (see Figure 1). The interviews were carried out online due to the difficulties of conducting research with the then challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, and duly transcribed and coded for the purposes of analysis. More specifically, the conversations revolved around a series of pre-established topics, including personal experience, the specific challenges for different groups of women, the impact of colonialism in the present day, the armed conflict, the peace process, and priorities for change. The interviews provided opportunities to introduce new topics and questions, based on the preferences expressed by the interviewees and the natural flow of the conversation.

*Figure 1 Geographical location of interviewees*



Below, we offer a summary of the activities and areas of work of the three parties involved in the study and this policy paper.

La Corporación Alianza Iniciativa de Mujeres Colombianas por la Paz-IMP brings together 246 organisations – of both women, and men and women - at the national, regional, and local level, and was constituted politically in 2001. It currently operates in 70 Colombian municipalities (Colombia has 1,100 municipalities) and bases its political advocacy on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. From the outset, it has counted on support from Swedish International Aid and the Swedish Union of Civil Servants-ST. The political remit of Alianza-IMP is to work to defend human rights from a gender perspective, with a focus on women, through the creation, development, and promotion of the political and citizen participation of women, through its incidence in peacebuilding efforts, including the current process of transitional justice.

The UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice, and Security Hub is a collective project of five years duration, working at the intersection of the United Nations Sustainable Development Objective 5 on gender equality; Objective 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions; and the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, particularly Resolution 1325. The Hub is based at the London School of Economics and Political Science in the UK and works with institutions throughout the world to carry out interdisciplinary research and engage in advocacy for gender justice. More information on the Hub can be found at [www.thegenderhub.com](http://www.thegenderhub.com).

Within the scope of the Hub, Professor Fionnuala Ní Aoláin (Queen's University Belfast), Professor Bill Rolston (Ulster University) and Dr Claire Wright (Queen's University Belfast) are carrying out the project *Addressing post-colonial legacies in transitional justice*. The study focuses on the need to deal with the colonial past when considering transitional justice mechanisms, both from an academic perspective and when engaging in peacebuilding efforts. In a previous phase of the project, gender structures and social hierarchies based on ethnicity were identified as two key colonial legacies to be further explored, which led to the collaboration with Alianza-IMP, the study, and this policy paper<sup>4</sup>. More information on the project can be found at the following website: <https://thegenderhub.com/projects/addressing-post-colonial-legacies-in-transitional-justice/>

4 The results of the first phase of the study were published in an academic article: Wright, Rolston & Ní Aoláin (2023).

This document is organised as follows: in the first part, we offer an analysis of the historical roots of the inequalities experienced by women who belong to different ethnic groups in Colombia, emphasising the contemporary legacies of historical colonialism; in the second part, we identify some pathways to change, which indigenous, Afro-descendant, and black women have already trodden, in order to tackle the barriers created by these profound and persistent historical structures; and in the third part, we make three policy recommendations in the field of education. At the end of the report, some reflections are offered regarding the current political and social context as a favourable moment for promoting change.



# 1. The Historical Roots of Contemporary Inequalities: Colonialism under Scrutiny

From the outset, it is necessary to highlight the achievements made by women's movements and organisations in Colombia. Both in the public sphere and everyday life, to a large extent it is women that consistently move society forward in search of a more peaceful future.<sup>5</sup> With regard to changes in legislation and policy that are more favourable for gender equality, Francisca Álvarez Pretelt clarified that "The State has not done it by itself. It is basically due to the pressure that has been exerted by the women's social movement, over different periods of time; those transformations are due to that pressure." (Personal interview, 2nd August 2021)

Having said that, women continue to suffer from a generalised situation of disadvantage compared to men in important areas, including their representation in politics and opportunities for employment (ONU Mujeres Colombia n/d). In that sense, various women interviewed spoke of **patriarchy** as a system of male privilege which has a firm hold in Colombia, as is true in various parts of the world. As Francisca noted: "...the patriarchy applies to all women. You can't say that the patriarchy has only affected dark-skinned women but not *mestizas*; it's like an umbrella that covered us all." (Personal interview, 2nd August 2021). While it is true that many societies are patriarchal in structure, the colonial project of the Spanish Crown was decisive in shaping gender concepts and the relationships between genders in Colombia. María Jessica Choles Toro expressed the situation in the following terms: "It's rooted in history, what's happening with women every day, it's rooted in history" (Personal interview, 26th October 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Three texts which analyse the history and impact of the women's movement in Colombia which are recommended: a volume compiled by Gil-Hernández and Pérez Bustos (2018); an article written by Gómez Correal (2017) and a book chapter co-authored by Rodríguez Rodríguez and Vidal Charris (2017).

The historical relationship between contemporary inequalities and the invasion or conquest of the “Americas” can be seen most clearly in the **racial hierarchies** that were constructed centuries ago and which remain firmly in place up in the present day.<sup>6</sup> And while it is not spoken of very often in public, Alda Chindoy explained that “culturally, politically, our customs, everything – [colonialism] came to change everything” (Personal interview, 17th August, 2021). María Clemencia Herrera Nemerayema confirmed that the effects of colonialism have persisted up until the present day:

... ever since colonialism began, we have lost our culture, identity, collective forms of coming together or organising... that’s an after-effect of colonialism. And colonialism was not just in the past; colonialism still exists in a much stronger way today, with the issue of forced displacement due to violence, controlling women, and trafficking them ... The biggest [expression of contemporary] colonialism is discrimination on the part of the state, by the government, towards different sectors of society. (Personal interview, 24th July 2021)

Consequently, for the indigenous women we interviewed, colonialism continues to be relevant in the context of centuries of **resistance**. As Ligia Lupe Valenzuela Colimba commented, the invasion by the Spanish Crown is “...when all this thinking about fighting, resistance started ... even though [the colonists] want to impose their ways of thinking, of living, our resistance has been there, it’s been constant.” (Personal interview, 6th August, 2021)



For Afro-descendant and black interviewees, colonialism marks the beginning of their experience of slavery and exposure to violence which continues to the present day.

6 It is important to point out that, according to conversations with María Consuelo Parasco, in general gypsy women find themselves in a privileged position in Colombia. However, she criticised the lack of employment opportunities. María Consuelo discounted colonialism as a relevant process for her ethnic group in general (Personal interview, 1st November 2021).

For their part, for Afro-descendant and black interviewees, colonialism marks the beginning of their experience of **slavery** and exposure to violence which continues to the present day. María Jessica Choles Toro expressed the following opinion: “If we begin to use colonialism as a frame and [reflect on] how the Spanish came to our territory, raping indigenous women, mistreating black women, treating them as slaves and taking them as their sexual objects, the same thing has been repeated ever since then.” (Personal interview, 26th October 2021).

Moreover, the historical source of the contemporary **discrimination** experienced by indigenous and NARP women in Colombia is evidently the colonial project. Indeed, it is no coincidence that women who belong to an ethnic group suffer from greater discrimination than mestiza women. This was a point highlighted by María Cristina Lloreda Mena giving the example of an employer throwing a CV into the bin just because it included a photo of a black woman. She referred to discrimination in five ways:

... all women suffer from discrimination in one way or another, but the afro woman suffers from five [types of] discrimination, I mean the afro and indigenous woman: 1) discrimination due to ethnicity; 2) employment discrimination, in many cases; 3) gender discrimination; 4) discrimination whenever women aren't educated or don't have a profession; and 5) if they don't have a good physical appearance. We suffer many [forms of] discrimination due to our ethnicity, we afro and indigenous women, and these discriminations are really profound. (Personal interview, 3rd September, 2021).

As Yolanda Perea Mosquera affirmed, this discrimination has historical roots and is deeply embedded in culture: “it's like people are programmed to discriminate and this is linked to this [historical] context of slavery”. (Personal interview, 1st December 2021).

Alongside discrimination is the **stigmatisation** of women who belong to an ethnic group, which again finds its roots in colonial times. Ligia Lupe Valenzuela Colimba noted that “with the arrival of the conquest, in the times of the colony, there was a stigmatisation of wise women or the female leaders (*caciquas*) and so they [the colonisers] said you are not wise women, you are witches, sorceresses... so those are things which [continue to] affect life in our communities.” (Personal interview, 6th August 2021). Yolanda Perea Mosquera told us that in a professional meeting, due to her skin colour, people automatically thought she was a maid, although she noted that in the past working as a maid had been important for her and had helped her to raise her family (Personal interview, 1st December 2021).



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To a large extent, this stigmatisation is a result of **values learned at home**, as María Cristina Lloreda Mena commented, referring to an episode when a young girl saw her in the street, got scared, and called her a witch. María Cristina explained how she went up to the girl's father and asked him to explain to his daughter:

'...we are not bad, we are human beings, just because our skin is a darker colour, we haven't stolen any children' [and the Dad asked, who are you? To which she answered] 'I'm a human being and a woman who knows her obligations and rights that is why I am explaining this to the girl' and I said 'put your hand on mine and you will see that we are friends and I'm not going to do you harm' and the girl was shaking, really shaking... (Personal interview, 3rd September 2021)

Another challenge identified by the women who participated in the study concerns the **exclusion** of indigenous, Afro-descendant, and black women from educational and employment opportunities, and therefore from local, national, and relevant decision-making spaces. In the course of this study, it became clear that, in some cases, indigenous women were not supposed to have a voice *beyond* or even *within* some communities (as discussed in personal interviews with María Clemencia Herrera Nemerayema on the 24th July 2021 and with Ligia Lupe Valenzuela Colimba, on 6th August 2021). In the case of Afro-descendant and black women, they have faced difficulties trying to make their voice heard, even when they occupy positions of influence such as local councillor, as María Cristina Lloreda Mena explained (Personal interview 3rd September 2021). Yolanda Perea Mosquera summarised the situation in the following way:

For us as black women, for every time a *mestiza* woman asks to speak, we have to ask like seven times and yes, many times we *do* get to speak, but people don't really care so we have to make a difference and insist, but never desist (Personal interview 1st December 2021).

Finally, it is important to highlight that indigenous, Afro-descendant and black women have suffered disproportionately from the impact of **violence**, both within and beyond the context of the armed conflict. First, they have been victims of sexual violence, given that their body is treated as an object, as Belia Alcira Bustamante Garzón pointed out (Personal interview 4th December 2021) and intra-family violence, as Dannys Mariela Vieco Jiménez noted (Personal interview 26th October 2021). Second, as Martha Cecilia Andrade and Luz Mila Benítez Acosta noted (Personal interviews held on 9th August and 8th September 2021, respectively), indigenous, Afro-descendant, and black women have also been victims of forced displacement and dispossession by armed groups, which constitutes a continuation of colonial dynamics up to the present day. The Victims' Unit and other governmental authorities in Colombia have acknowledged that, in the context of the armed conflict, ethnic groups have been affected in a disproportionate and differential way, and ethnic women have suffered from the consequences of violence to a greater extent than men (Unidad de Víctimas, 2017).



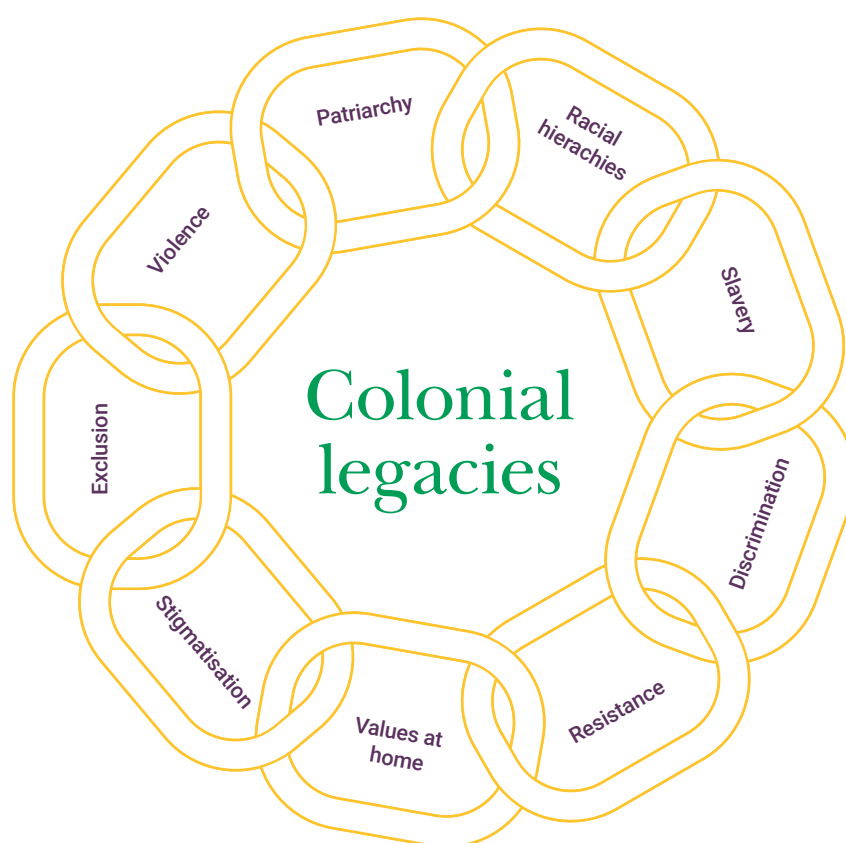
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The figure below represents the different dimensions of colonial legacy, according to the women interviewed in this study.

*Figure 2 Colonial legacy and its dimensions*



## 2. Pathways to Change

It is important to note that the progression and conclusion of the **Peace Process of Havana (2016)** breathed new life into discussions over the situation of women and ethnic peoples within the public agenda. Regarding the former, Colombian women achieved representation at the negotiating tables in Havana and gender was included as a transversal theme in the accord that was signed thereafter. Regarding the latter, an ethnic chapter was included in the accord, acknowledging the special situation of the ethnic groups – including indigenous peoples and NARP – although the inclusion of representatives from those ethnic groups only happened in the final months of the process.<sup>7</sup> Many interviewees acknowledged that some progress has been made from an intercultural perspective – particularly with the Special Jurisdiction for Peace<sup>8</sup> and the Truth Commission<sup>9</sup> – and even with regard to the recognition of ongoing colonial structures.<sup>10</sup> As Dannys Mariela Vieco Jiménez noted: “while the [colonial legacies] have not been completely dismantled, the [peace process] opened a window to take a better look at them” (Personal interview, 26th October, 2021).

At the same time, many interviewees also criticised the slow implementation of the agreement. Moreover, several women noted that the problems that affect them are historical in nature and go beyond the temporal frame of the conflict, as Ligia Lupe Valenzuela Colimba commented:

7 The text of the Havana Peace Accord is available at <https://www.jep.gov.co/Normativa/Paginas/Acuerdo-Final.aspx>

8 See Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz <https://www.jep.gov.co/Sala-de-Prensa/Documents/FOLLETO%20ENFOQUE%20C3%89TNICO-%C3%8DNDIGENA-VDIGITAL.pdf>

9 See Comisión de la Verdad n/d.

10 Izquierdo & Viane (2018) argue that the JEP specifically has a decolonial function

You see, [this is] our truth. People think that there has only been a conflict or war in Colombia in these past 60 years, but that's not the case. We as indigenous peoples have been victims of greater harms since [times of] colonisation and so the whole situation – looking at the issue of truth and justice – is much broader, it's much more extensive, it goes beyond recent times. In indigenous territories [the problem] goes far beyond the last few decades. (Personal interview, 6th August 2021).

Consequently, in order to undo the contemporary structures of inequality that are born out of historical colonialism, it is necessary to go beyond one particular process or agreement<sup>11</sup>, and look to make progress in other areas. This is precisely what the women we interviewed have been doing for years, often without formal recognition.

The first area pinpointed by the women we interviewed is **education**. Many interviewees noted that the primary route for indigenous, Afro-descendant, and black women to tackle multiple obstacles in their way is via education. As María Clemencia Herrera Nemerayema noted “We can do anything these days, because we have university degrees” (Personal interview, 24th July, 2021), and María Cristina Lloreda Mena echoed this idea as follows “education is vital, it's vital. If you are educated you are free, because you can talk to anyone” (Personal interview, 3rd September 2021). At the same time, access to education for indigenous, Afro-descendant, and black women depends to a large extent on governmental programmes to validate secondary school certificates (anonymous interviewee, personal interview 23rd August, 2021) and gain entry to university (as Luz Emma Tobar López noted in a personal interview on 9th September 2021). At the same time, improving their educational profile gives women access to different types of employment and, with that, greater independence. In turn, they develop greater confidence to face up to the different obstacles they find in their way to achieving their personal and collective goals.

11 It is interesting to note that in a very different context – Sierra Leone – Sesay (2022) reaches the same conclusion: transitional justice does not offer the necessary tools to approach colonial harms.



The second area which the interviewees referred to as crucial in this process is **participation**; in order to bring about change, it is important that they assume an active role in public decision-making. It was noted that, on some occasions, mestiza women have spoken on behalf of the women who belong to ethnic groups, or they have included them only when it is convenient for them and obviously this does little to empower black, Afro-descendant, and indigenous women. As Yolanda Perea Mosquera noted: “I’ve got a voice, I can defend myself, so I can speak, I won’t let anyone else speak for me, I can do it myself.” (Personal interview, 1st December 2021).

All of the women interviewed in this study are examples of personal triumph and active participation in public and social life, in many cases at the cost of personal sacrifices. It is particularly important to affirm the achievements of indigenous women who have become leaders (*gobernadoras*) in their territories, overcoming in that way the patriarchal structures both within and beyond their communities (as noted by Ligia Lupe Valenzuela Colimba, personal interview, 6th August 2021). An interviewee who became *gobernadora* (leader) of her indigenous community commented “it was an experience that helped me to grow as a person, but also contribute to the community” (anonymous interviewee, personal interview, 23rd August 2021). On the other hand, as has already been stressed above, women belonging to ethnic groups continue to face discrimination when they get involved in public



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decision-making and, consequently, they have to be particularly resilient. As Yolanda Perea Mosquera noted, “this whole process of including black women into society, it’s been a real fight, and we’ve taken it one step at a time to have the voice that we have today (Personal interview, 1st December 2021).

The last area for action that emerged in the interviews was a **favourable legal framework**. Several interviewees noted, above all, the impact of the Constitution of 1991 and the Law 70 of 1993 in the acknowledgement of the political rights of indigenous and NARP peoples and persons. They also pointed to the transcendence of the Victims’ Laws, with their corresponding acknowledgement of ethnic difference. Despite this, there was a general opinion among the interviewees that laws are simply not obeyed and therefore in practice they do not help to transform reality. Consequently, it is important to highlight that a favourable legal framework is a necessary but not sufficient condition to achieve long-lasting change.

At this stage, it is important to outline that the three pathways to change identified previously work as a matrix (see Figure 3). Only through **education** is it possible to increase the **participation** of indigenous, Afro-descendant, and black women, so that they can exert a positive influence over **the law**. At the same time, a good understanding of **the law**, achieved through **education**, opens the doors to the successful **participation** of indigenous, Afro descendant, and black women in the decisions that affect them. María Cristina Lloreda Mena referred to the inter-relation between the different aspects in the following way:

So, I decided to study, train, and understand all the legislation that was favourable to women, to black communities, to children. So, honestly, every time it was my turn to speak, the first thing I would do is refer to a law, to the legislation and discuss it. And that is when things began to change for me, because speaking at the council had been a problem, a difficulty, so when they saw that I was becoming increasingly well-educated, well things began to change. (Personal interview 3rd September, 2021)



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Throughout this process, and with a view to changing structural conditions, it is important to highlight the importance of **solidarity** among women in order to sustain the progress achieved. As Yolanda Perea Mosquera noted: “We have made progress, today people are increasingly calling upon women from our parts of society, but we have to look out, be alert; if someone is left out, if one of us is left out, we have to rally round. This [process] of personal inclusion and recognition has not been easy.” (Personal interview, 1st December 2021). An interviewee who became *gobernadora* of her indigenous community highlighted the importance of the fact that both men and women supported her in the process of political formation (anonymous interviewee, personal interview, 23rd August 2021). In the same way, Nidia Rosa Macea Márquez shared her immense satisfaction on seeing a new generation of women activists in her region:

It is so nice to see when the new generations are interested in the issue, [we can see that] we've opened the door, we are leaving a mark. We are seeing it here. A few days ago, I was talking to a colleague from Montes de María and she was seeing empowered young women, empowered young black women, doing wonderful work and she said, 'I feel satisfied. We did well.' Perhaps with some errors, some difficulties, but at least, we planted the seed." (Personal interview, 6th November 2021)

*Figure 3 Pathways to change*



### 3. Three Specific Proposals in the Area of Education

In the previous section, we identified several ways in which indigenous, Afro-descendant, and black women have been able to tackle the historical obstacles they face in different areas. However, it is important to return to the structural nature of the inequalities they suffer – in the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres – and go back to the historical roots of the problem. In this study, colonialism has been confirmed as a “catastrophic” process which left a set of vastly unjust social structures in its wake, sustained by a racial hierarchy. Nevertheless, **colonialism has become invisible in public discourse**<sup>12</sup>. As Miriam Murillo Martínez noted, “[Colonialism] is not named as such because we have not managed to identify all of the repercussions that it has had throughout history and up to the present day.” (Personal interview, 30th July 2021). While some interviewees acknowledged the importance of colonialism from the beginning of the conversation, others came to the conclusion after reflecting and discussing the issues. The comments made by Luz Mila Benítez Acosta shed light on this process of awakening:

I find this really interesting, [prior to the interview] I began to have a think and ask myself: what might colonialism have to do with the peace process? But now, after the interview, I understand, and I congratulate you and, in fact, I think that colonialism is really relevant. Look, it's not a short period of time – it's 300 years! It's like saying, keeping your son at home with you until he is 40, without him being able to make any decisions, without doing anything for himself. Poor thing – you wouldn't do that! The same thing happened with our country, its economy, its culture, its society, depending on another country for 300 years. So the [colonial period] was really long, really long, and it left a lot of after effects, so many consequences (Personal interview, 8th September 2021).

<sup>12</sup> As Betts (1998) notes, this invisibilisation of the colonial past is a frequent feature of “post colonial” States

For her part, Miriam Murillo Martínez explained that, even if the colonial past continues to make itself present today, people do not focus on it because it is very difficult to undo such powerful structures:

If we stop to think that that we were violated, let's say since in the past, [through] our ancestors, we were [also] violated because we were born as a result of that condition, that's why today we have fewer opportunities... But there is no way of making amends so why would we start to think about it? That's what I mean – why go into problems if there is no way of making amends? So I play dumb in a way, sort of understanding that it doesn't exist and I begin to think about what opportunities I have within my reach in the present day so I can work towards them. Can you imagine if we all agreed to do away with [the suffering that has been present] since our ancestors [but] we don't think of it like that. (Personal interview 30th July, 2021).

Certainly, stopping ongoing colonial harms is an extraordinarily difficult and complex task, but not impossible. Below, we make three very specific proposals regarding education in Colombia, which is a field that many interviewees pointed to as particularly important for social change. For instance, Belia Alcira Bustamente Garzón shared the view that: "I believe that in this country things will begin to change the day that high quality, free education is guaranteed..." (Personal interview, 4th December, 2021). As well as providing education for all Colombians, it is also necessary to work on the approaches, scope, and contents which are included, as we discuss further below.

## PROPOSAL 1: INCLUDE THE ISSUE OF COLONIALISM AND ITS LEGACIES IN EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUMS, FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE.

It is important to highlight that the silence on historical colonialism and its relationship with current inequalities extends to the **field of education**. Several women pointed out that, although the arrival of Christopher Columbus, Spanish dominium, and the processes of Independence that followed are dealt with, it is done so very superficially. María Clemencia Herrera Nemerayema criticised the fact that, in the classrooms “they don’t say what really happened. What they say is that Christopher Columbus discovered America. But they don’t talk about slavery... so they talk about the fact that he discovered [...but...] he was a discoverer and a murderer.” (Personal interview, 24th July 2021). Miriam Murillo Martínez also referred to the lack of attention to colonialism from a critical perspective in educational institutions (Personal interview, 30th July 2021).

As a result, the first and obvious proposal grounding this study is to incorporate colonialism as a fundamental issue in educational programmes in Colombia. Furthermore, the pedagogic and classroom approach should be critical, identifying the link between historical events and contemporary inequalities. As an interviewee who became gobernadora of her indigenous community commented:

I think we have to create a pedagogy, we have to begin to teach [...] our boys and girls the real story, [to say to them] this is what happened. As a result, together with the generation of young people that has learned about this history, we can generate awareness of the situation. (Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, 23rd August 2021).

In this effort, it would also be important to translate the term “colonialism” to local concepts so that it finds resonance among people who belong to ethnic groups. This is because ‘colonialism’ can be a very abstract concept as María Clemencia Herrera Nemerayema noted:

Yes, the issue of colonialism is very academic, you have got to bring it down to earth, bring it down to other terms or concepts, you have got to look at the issue in practice, you have to do it differently in conceptual terms: [you have to ask] who invented it, what for, why, and what does it mean? Because if you are going to talk about colonialism in an indigenous assembly for instance [...] the Abuelos won’t reply or perhaps they will do but they will talk about different issues with different terms: ‘yes, it was a huge blow, they threw us out of our territory’, that’s what they would say. (Personal interview, 24th July 2021).

## PROPOSAL 2: STRENGTHEN THE ETHNO-EDUCATION PROGRAMME

It is further necessary to address the transformative potential of **Ethno-education** (*etnoeducación*), an educational programme which has been established from the perspective of diversity. As a result of the legal transformations towards multiculturalism which arose at the start of the 1990s, the 1994 Law of Education establishes that “Ethno-education is offered to groups or communities that are part of Colombia and which have their own, autochthonous culture, language, tradition, and jurisdiction. This education must be linked to the environment, the productive process, and the social and cultural process, with due respect for their beliefs and traditions<sup>13</sup>.” We view this as an important and relevant proposal to bring about educational transformation from the ground up, centered in the lived experience of those who have suffered and continue to experience intersecting oppressions.

13 <https://www.mineduccion.gov.co/1621/article-82802.html>



María Cristina Lloreda Mena, who has made considerable contributions to the design and delivery of Ethno-education programmes, was very enthusiastic about its potential to deal with racism in the country. Moreover, she pointed out that the programme is being implemented in different territories within Colombia and there are specialist teachers – Ethno-educators (*etnoeducadores*) – who belong to ethnic groups in charge of its design (Personal interview, 3rd September 2021). Analysts including Licht (n/d) note that Ethno-education has offered indigenous communities the possibility of educating new generations from their own world views and with their own pedagogical tools. In some cases, this has led to a renewed appreciation of their own cultures and languages.

At the same time, Yolanda Perea Mosquera pointed out that the programme is being very slow in bringing about social change (Personal interview, 1st December 2021). For her part, Nidia Rosa Macea Márquez observed that the programme only covers part of the Colombian territory, given that it is implemented in areas where there is a greater concentration of indigenous and Afro descendant people (Personal interview 6th November, 2021). In that sense, it is difficult to gauge the degree to which the educational institutions throughout the country have taken on board the principles of Ethno-education or to identify classroom-level practices (Meneses Copete, 2016). A very specific controversy that has risen over the past years has been on the status of Ethno-educators. María Cristina Lloreda Meda pointed out that there has been a prior consultation space at the national level to draft and approve a statute of Ethno-educators working specifically with pupils belonging to NARP communities (Personal interview, 3rd September, 2021).

For this reason, this assessment posits that it would be important to properly audit and strengthen Ethno-education in Colombia, including the acknowledgement of Ethno-educators, given that the programme can contribute to the process to decolonise the educational system and the contents it teaches.

## PROPOSAL 3: DEVELOP EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES FROM AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE FOR ALL COLOMBIANS

Another criticism made about the Ethno-education programme discussed in the section above is due to the fact that, given that the programme is directed to students who belong to ethnic groups, the intercultural perspective is lost; that is to say, the *mestizo* students are not exposed to the ancestral knowledges, cultures, and history of the peoples and communities that live in Colombia, when it is precisely with those citizens that the change of mindset is most urgent. As Nidia Rosa Macea Márquez commented “I believe that... [the programme] should be directed to the [whole] population and all different parts of society.” (Personal interview, 6th November 2021). It is true that, for an educational project to be intercultural and transformative, it should be directed towards people from all communities that together form a society, not just cultural minorities (Schmelkes, 2004).

Bearing this in mind, it is important to acknowledge the existence of the Afro Colombian Studies Programme, which was established in Law 70 of 1993. This programme is conceived of as a “mechanism for the protection and development of the rights and cultural identity” of NARP communities “in order to make known and transmit the knowledge of the cultural practices of black communities and their contributions to Colombian history and culture” (Ministerio del Interior 2020). In the words of María Cristina Lloreda Mena, the efforts made by this programme have spilled over into other areas of life, helping to give people an idea of:

**...ancestral traditions, of what afros are like, of the contributions they have made to Colombia, to the whole world. And that is why you are now seeing little afro dolls, afro games, you couldn't see any of that before and it's not just about showing all this to afro children, but rather to other children so that they can learn about it, and also teachers themselves. (Personal interview 3rd September 2021).**

Despite this progress, the Ministerio del Interior (2020, p.7) has carried out a very complete diagnosis of Afro Colombian studies and acknowledged the “delayed task which as a State we have had for over 26 years” regarding the implementation of the programme.

The results of the report are disencouraging, given that indicators of the implementation of Afro Colombian studies are very low. For instance, only 6.6% of educational institutions in the country have taken steps to create appropriate contents, methodologies, and teaching methods. The Ministry itself (2020, p.81) proposes a series of strategies to advance in the implementation of the programme – including strengthening teachers’ profiles, technical assistance, and the assignation of resources, all of which we agree should be encouraged.

Furthering the Afro Colombian Studies Programme would be a very important step towards the realisation of intercultural education in Colombia, and from there addressing and re-organising the cultural hierarchy which historical colonialism left behind. Equally, it could also be important to extend the proposal for intercultural education to include other ethnic groups (e.g. indigenous and roma/gypsy), although this transformation would require political consensus and a legal framework to support it.

Figure 4 Recommendations



It is important to note that any proposal that can affect ethnic groups in Colombia must be the product of a co-design with the different actors involved, but above all with representatives from the ethnic peoples themselves. It may also be submitted to a process of **prior consultation** with the aim of obtaining free, prior and informed consent, in accordance with the relevant legislation. In the same way, proposals for change should be approached from a **gender and intersectional perspective**, that is to say by taking into account the realities of indigenous, black and Afro-descendant women.

# Conclusions

In order to transit towards a more equal and representative society, it is important to identify the deep structures that continue to perpetuate inequalities and develop the policy tools necessary to dismantle them, both individually and collectively. In this policy paper, we have brought together the testimonies of 16 indigenous, Afro-descendant, black, *mestiza* and gypsy women from different territories within Colombia. The study has aimed, specifically, to understand how legacies of historical colonialism continue to shape the lives of women who belong to different ethnic groups in Colombia. Furthermore, we have sought to identify the ways in which these women have managed to tackle different inter-generational obstacles and proposed different routes to change. In the end, everything comes back to the important issue of education, because only by changing – or *decolonising* – the way people think will it be possible to carry out a profound and long-lasting transformation.

Facing up to deep-rooted structures in the fields of politics, economy, society, and culture is an important task. But perhaps it is the right moment to do so. Several interviewees commented that, particularly over the past two or three years, while it has not formed part of the national conversation, colonialism has been called into question.<sup>14</sup> For example, Nidia Rosa Macea Márquez explained that, in her municipality, the 12th October was no longer celebrated as it traditionally had been; that is to say, representing the different ethnic groups almost like caricatures (Personal interview, 6th November 2021). It is also worth noting that this period coincides with the tumbling of statues of the *conquistadors* in different parts of the country, outrage over the murder of several young black men in Cali, and the global protests of #BlackLivesMatter, which also reached Colombia (Democracia Abierta, 2020). It is also important to underscore

14 See for instance Comisión de la Verdad (2020) and DeJusticia (2020).

that these context-specific developments are supported by long struggles of resistance by indigenous peoples in their ancestral territories and the incidence of Afro descendant organisations, which look to decolonise narratives about the past and exalt their own customs, as Yolanda Perea Mosquera noted (Personal interview, 1st December 2021). It seems that in the current context, a window of opportunity to deal with these historical structures is beginning to open.

To conclude this report, the reflection made by Alda Chindoy on the persistent effect of colonial legacies is particularly illustrative of the issues raised here.

**... if there were a means of reparation, a means of reconciliation, if things had stayed in the past [it might be different], but the fact is they keep happening, they keep happening. There are many recriminations about these issues, so we keep being violated. [Colonialism] has not stopped there, it was not just in that period and then it was all over. This [is a process] that has now been marked forever. (Personal interview, 17th August 2021)**

In this study, we have found that education can be a fertile area for policy initiatives to dismantle the colonial effect that continues to harm, above all, women belonging to ethnic groups in Colombia. As such it is critical to enhance, support, and deepen initiatives to address long-standing colonial legacies in Colombia.

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