

PTSD in survivors of violence or sexual abuse in the Colombian armed conflict

TEPT en sobrevivientes de violencia o abuso sexual en el conflicto armado colombiano

Laura Juliana Barchelot Aceros* 

Universidad de Investigación y Desarrollo, Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia (lbarchelot1@udi.edu.co)

Daysy Katherine Pabón Poches 

Universidad de Investigación y Desarrollo, Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia, (dpabon1@udi.edu.co)

Ismael Leonardo Mieles Toloza 

Universidad de Investigación y Desarrollo, Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia, (imieles1@udi.edu.co)

Gonzalo Daniel Galván Patrignani 

Universidad de Córdoba, Montería, Colombia (galvan.patrignani@gmail.com)

*Corresponding author.

Received: April 28, 2023

Accepted: October 18, 2023

Published: November 15, 2023

Recommended citation: Barchelot Aceros, L. J., Pabón Poches, D. K., Mieles Toloza, I. L., & Galván Patrignani G. D. (2023). TEPT en sobrevivientes de violencia o abuso sexual en el conflicto armado colombiano. *Psicoperspectivas*, 22(3).

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5027/psicoperspectivas-vol22-issue3-fulltext-2967>

Background

The armed conflict in Colombia has unfolded in different phases, shaped by the prevailing social, political, and economic frameworks of each period, equally threatening the integrity and lives of approximately 12.483.457 individuals through various forms of violence expressed in the war. It is estimated that survivors of the Colombian armed conflict have experienced different forms of violence within this context, leading them to be recognized as individuals suffering from poly victimization due to the exposure to multiple potentially traumatic events. Trauma is understood as an event of such magnitude that it resembles a continuous hole inherent in the individual's psychic structure, accompanied by emotional suffering, depression, chronic anxiety, dissociation, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with the latter being the most prevalent and impactful for the affected individuals. This event violates the rights of both the civilian population and its combatants. The Unique Victims Registry estimates that there are around 32.446 victims of these types of attacks, including sexual harassment, violence, and torture, among others. Research indicates that survivors of such events may develop mental and neurological disorders, as well as sexually transmitted diseases, risky behaviors, and sexual dysfunctions, among other considerations. Regarding mental health impacts, the clinical diagnosis of PTSD is the most common, recognized as a chronic mental condition that is accompanied by a range of symptoms related to mood, activity, and reactivity, even potentially triggering dissociative symptoms. In the case of women, these impacts have been more extensively studied than in men, presenting a challenge for the latter group to seek and receive comprehensive care in the face of such events. It is estimated that women are more affected by these experiences than men.

Aims

Estimate the prevalence of PTSD and its symptomatic expression in survivors of violence or sexual abuse in the Colombian armed conflict, considering gender differences.

Method & procedures

This research is based on a quantitative, non-experimental, and descriptive study. The study sample is part of a larger project that involved approximately 1368 survivors of the Colombian armed conflict, from which 111 participants were selected (women=80.2%; men=19.8%) who experienced rape, abuse, or sexual assault; 57.7% resided in the city of Montería and 42.3% in Bucaramanga. The selected instruments for gathering information included the EGEP-5, aimed at identifying and evaluating symptoms of post-traumatic stress through recognition of the traumatic event experienced, the presence of symptoms (intrusive, avoidant, cognitive and mood alterations, dissociative symptoms, and temporality), and the areas of functioning affected by the traumatic event. Regarding the procedure, as previously mentioned, this project is derived from a larger project that has been ongoing since 2019 in collaboration

with the Universidad de Investigación y Desarrollo - UDI and the Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia - UCC. The goal was to obtain a representative sample of victims of the Colombian armed conflict in a condition of forced displacement to validate an evaluation instrument of trauma in the Colombian population, the Trauma Impact Questionnaire (CIT). This process involved field visits to various sectors of the cities where the victims were relocated. Victims were invited to participate in the study through the presidents of the Community Action Boards. The instruments were administered after verifying the study's inclusion criteria, validating their victim status, and signing informed consent.

Results & discussion

The results of this study revealed that survivors of rape, abuse, or sexual assault had experienced an average of up to 5 traumatic events, with physical violence (55.9%), sexual harassment (45%), and accidental or violent death of a person or loved one (43.2%) being the most prevalent. Regarding PTSD symptoms, the sample was characterized by the presence of 1 to 4 symptoms per category, with cognitive and mood alterations being the most representative ($\bar{x}=3.8$) and intrusive symptoms being the most common distress in the study sample. Participants also reported experiencing dissociative symptoms (from 1 to 3), with "feeling disconnected from surroundings" being the most experienced. It is estimated that 62.2% of the participants meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, distributed as follows based on gender: 18.8% men and 81.2% women. These results are consistent with other studies where women are found to be not only more vulnerable to experiencing such events but also to developing mental disorders, most commonly PTSD, depression, and anxiety. It has also been found that experiencing multiple potentially traumatic events exacerbates psychological distress. Regarding men, some authors agree that this gender not only has to face the complexity of the event but also the negligence and minimization of their experiences based on stereotypical notions that reinforce male invulnerability.

Conclusion

From this exercise, it is concluded that the studied sample has experienced various traumatic events; however, sexual violence is the event that caused the most distress among the participants. On the other hand, a high prevalence of PTSD is recognized, with a significant subgroup in the sample exhibiting subclinical symptoms related to this condition but not fulfilling all the criteria for PTSD.

Keywords: armed conflict, posttraumatic stress disorder, rape survivors, sexual abuse, symptoms PTSD

References

- Aristizábal, E. T., Palacio, J., Madariaga, C., Osman, H., Parra, L., Rodríguez, J., & López, G. (2012). Síntomas y traumatismo psíquico en víctimas y victimarios del conflicto armado desplegado en el Caribe. *Psicología Desde el Caribe*, 123-152. <https://rcientificas.uninorte.edu.co/index.php/psicologia/article/view/1550/9206>
- Barchelot-Aceros, L., Galván, G., Pabón-Poches, D. K., De la Hoz, F., Ramírez, P., Padilla, M. F., & Virnay, G. M. (2021). Situaciones traumáticas en víctimas de desplazamiento forzado en Colombia con diagnóstico de TEPT: Inicio, tipos, frecuencias, gravedad e impacto. *Revista Colombiana de Psiquiatría*, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rcp.2021.08.004>
- Campo-Arias, A., Sanabria, A. R., Ospino, A., Guerra, V. M., & Caamaño, B. H. (2017). Multiple-victimisation due to armed conflict and emotional distress in the state of Magdalena, Colombia. *Revista Colombiana de Psiquiatría (English ed.)*, 46(3), 147-153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rcpeng.2016.06.002>
- Corboz, J., Pasquero, L., Hogg, C. L., & Rasheed, A. (2023). Enhancing a survivor-centred approach to healthcare provision in Afghanistan: Understanding and addressing the barriers faced by male victims/survivors of sexual violence. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 142, 105854. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105854>
- Cudris Torres, L., Guzmán Maciel, C. G., González Mendoza, A. L., Silvera Torres, L., & Bolaño Acosta, L. (2021). Malestar psicológico en víctimas de violencia sexual, intrafamiliar y del conflicto armado. *Tempus Psicológico*, 3(1), 81-102. <https://doi.org/10.30554/tempuspsi.3.1.2878.2020>

Financial support: Universidad de Investigación y Desarrollo (UDI), Bucaramanga, Colombia.

Conflict of interests: The authors declare to have no conflict of interests.

Credit: Conceptualization: LJBA, DKPP, GDGP; Methodology: DKPP, GDGP; Validation: LJBA, DKPP, GDGP, ILMT; Formal Analysis: LJBA, DKPP, GDGP; Investigation: LJBA, DKPP, GDGP, ILMT; Resources: LJBA, DKPP; Data curation: LJBA, DKPP; Writing (original draft, revision and editing): LJBA, DKPP, GDGP, ILMT; Visualization: ILMT, GDGP; Supervision: LJBA, DKPP, GDGP; Funding acquisition: LJBA, DKPP, GDGP.



Published under [Creative Commons Attribution International 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)