Paramilitaries and Sexual Violence Along Colombia’s Caribbean Coast

#GenderandCrime #HernanGiraldo
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April 2022

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It was 7:00 at night. Carolina was lying on the bed and turned on the TV just as a reporter on one of the national news programs announced: “One of the most bloodthirsty paramilitary leaders of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta arrived, deported from the United States. He just finished serving a 12-year prison sentence for drug trafficking.”

Carolina was paralyzed. Her heart raced. She wanted to scream but she couldn’t. She put her hands on her mouth to hold back her tears. She could not scream, as just a few meters from her, in the room next door, separated only by a curtain serving as a door, was her daughter putting on her pajamas.
She didn’t want to scare her. She didn’t know how to explain why she was terrified.

While covering her mouth, she saw the image on the TV of a skinny old man with very gray hair. His figure was lost under a bulletproof vest and a protective helmet. He looked at the cameras with hollow eyes, as two Colombian Migration Officers escorted him off of the plane.

Carolina recognized him immediately. He was the man who had sexually abused her several years earlier. Hernán Giraldo Serna, the former paramilitary commander, alias “El Patrón” of the Sierra Nevada, had returned to Colombia.

Although he was in Bogotá and she was hundreds of miles away in Santa Marta, a city on Colombia’s north coast, the fear still gripped her.

She regretted turning on the TV. The news set off memories and anxieties that have led her to lose sleep, leading to her take pills on occasion to rest.
A few miles from Carolina’s house, Karen was preparing dinner for her family. One of her children was looking for his favorite cartoon program. As he changed channels, Karen asked her son to hold on when she saw the same image that had terrified Carolina. She wanted to make sure that what she was seeing was real.

The emotions were the same: fear, terror, pain. Both were living their worst nightmares.

For Carolina and Karen, the image brought back not only the painful memories of the violence against their bodies, but also the anger, impotence, and frustration hidden somewhere in their memories.

Carolina and Karen were connected through life experiences; both were victims of the armed conflict in the department of Magdalena, in northern Colombia, and were sexually abused by the same man. The two share stories, pain and victimizers.

That night, they both turned off their televisions, but neither could sleep.

A Paradisiacal, But Bloody Mountain Range

Located in Northern Colombia, on the Caribbean Coast, is the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the highest coastal mountain range in the world. Now it’s mostly known for white sand beaches, rivers of cold water descending from mountaintops, and a range of wildlife and fauna. Tourists have flocked to the region for years.

Unfortunately, these natural characteristics also attract criminal groups.

Its rugged mountains shelter marijuana and coca crops, and connect the Caribbean Sea with coca growing enclaves, such as the Catatumbo subregion, in the department of Norte de Santander.

From its beaches, large quantities of cocaine are sent in boats and ships to Central America and the United States. Meanwhile, in many of the municipalities along the mountain range, the State has been conspicuously absent and its coexistence and collusion with criminal groups has attracted attention.

Source: Vanexa Romero/ El Tiempo.
Hernán Giraldo arrived in the city of Santa Marta at the end of the 1960s, accompanied by his parents and siblings. They came from the department of Caldas, in the central western part of the country.

Like many others, they were fleeing the political violence which had been sweeping the country for two decades, sparked by clashes between supporters of Colombia’s two traditional parties, conservatives and liberals.

At that time, Colombia was living through a convulsive political situation. Left-wing minority political factions had been suppressed in the democratic arena. Their discontent was manifested in the emergence of two guerrilla movements: The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN).

In this context, and unlike other places, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta was still considered to be a place with good living conditions. The political violence was not extreme and land prices were low, attracting migration from the center of the country.

Giraldo, then 23 years old, found work collecting coffee and later planting trees for the sale of wood, while his father set up a business in the public market of Santa Marta. There, Giraldo spent his free time observing what was happening.

“Giraldo sold himself as a person who could initially offer a mechanism of care and security for [marijuana] crops belonging to some politicians.”

The public market was an important meeting point at the time. Peasants, laborers, merchants and marijuana growers were there to sell, stock up on food, and do business. If you wanted to know what was happening in any of the territories of the Sierra, that was the place to find answers.

Father and son continued to work, getting to know their surroundings and looking for ways to make money.

Meanwhile, in 1975, US citizens began to arrive in the Sierra Nevada’s territories through the Peace Corps, a project designed by US President John F. Kennedy that consisted of sending volunteers to assist rural communities with agricultural development, construction, education and health projects.
Ironically, it was the Americans, who arrived in Colombia to help, who saw the economic opportunity in the marijuana crops that had been planted in different places around the Sierra since the mid-1950s. Some of the Peace Corps volunteers discovered the properties of marijuana and began trafficking it from northern Colombia to the United States.

US dollars started to enter Magdalena, and the growers, transporters and public officials in the region started to receive their payments.

By that time, Hernan Giraldo had already bought a plot of land in the Sierra and, attracted by the large amount of money changing hands, began to plant marijuana and transport it to Colombia’s Caribbean Coast. From there, the Americans sent it to the United States.

With the rise of marijuana, violence in the area also increased. In 1977, common criminals murdered one of Giraldo’s brothers near the market in Santa Marta. Tired of the threats against his family and his businesses, Giraldo formed a protection group.

Giraldo created “Los Chamizos,” a protection group for politicians, merchants and mafiosos or “marimberos” – as marijuana growers were known in the region. The group was so effective, that in addition to safeguarding businesses, it began to eliminate existing gangs. In just two years, Giraldo became the only person that bought marijuana in the whole region, according to a former member of the Tayrona Resistance Bloc, commanded by Hernán Giraldo, who spoke with InSight Crime under the condition of anonymity.

“Giraldo sold himself as a person who could initially offer a mechanism of care and security for [marijuana] crops belonging to some politicians, as well as businessman that have businesses there in the public market. So, they sponsored it,” assured the former member of the Bloc.

Giraldo’s power started to consolidate, he recruited more men and took over the business almost entirely. But then other armed actors began to arrive in the territory to dispute control.
At the beginning of the 1980s, in the framework of the FARC’s Seventh Conference, the expansion of this guerrilla group to the Colombian Caribbean was proposed. The FARC’s 19th and the 59th Fronts were established in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. This brought problems to Giraldo and his businesses.

Territorial Presence of the Tayrona Resistance Bloc
In the mid-1980s, the FARC tried to kill Giraldo on several occasions. In response, Giraldo expanded Los Chamizos and formed a kind of paramilitary group to defend himself against the guerrillas. He called them the “Self Defense Forces of Mamey,” one of the villages of Magdalena where Giraldo had influence. Giraldo wanted to expand his criminal networks beyond the department of Magdalena, and violence became his main tool to achieve this. Meanwhile, the FARC remained in the territory but failed to wrest influence from “El Patrón.”

At the end of the 1980s, when he had more territory and power, Giraldo renamed his group the Campesino Self Defense Forces of Magdalena and La Guajira (Autodefensas Campesinas del Magdalena y La Guajira - ACMG).

By the start of the 1990s, Giraldo and his Self Defense Forces had managed to establish a presence in Magdalena and La Guajira, a department bordering Venezuela, through violent territorial expansion and alliances with local clans.

It was in those conflictive territories of Magdalena where the stories of Carolina, Karen and their families intersected with Hernán Giraldo and his paramilitary group. They found themselves at the same place, at the same time, where the fight against the guerrillas was used to justify the worst barbarities.

When Stories Crossed

Carolina and Karen met almost ten years ago at a foundation that accompanied female survivors of the armed conflict in northern Colombia. They have remained close ever since.

Carolina is about 40 years old. She speaks slowly but firmly. Her story is impactful, and she has been a voice of support for other women to feel confident enough to tell their stories. For several years, she has accompanied dozens of female victims of sexual violence, forced displacement and disappearances in their processes of seeking justice. Every day, she tries to transform the scars the violence left on her body and soul, by helping her group of women.

Karen is 35 years old, gregarious and chatty. She speaks softly and slowly, and while doing so, her words reflect the courage of a woman who has taken on different roles within her family despite her challenging story. She enjoys recounting her memories, but avoids revisiting the difficult moments that marked her life. As she speaks of the war, her voice trembles and reflects wounds that have yet to heal.

The two were born in the city of Santa Marta, the capital of the department of Magdalena, in the 1980s. Although they didn’t yet know each other, their families lived in similar situations. Life in the city was complicated and their
parents earned little. Karen’s parents sold lottery tickets on the streets of Santa Marta, earning them little to support their children. Carolina’s father sold drinks, but the income was not enough to pay the rent and feed his family. Close friends or acquaintances offered work to both Carolina and Karen’s families in municipalities near the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, and they decided to move without hesitation.

Carolina does not remember the specific moment she arrived in the small town in the Sierra, but it was during the 1990s, when she was a teenager. When she arrived everything seemed calm. She and her family hoped to find a more inhabited place, but they found a small, poorly urbanized and rather silent town. Carolina remembers feeling disillusioned. She had hoped for a place with opportunities for herself, but embraced what her parents considered to be best.

“You would hear that the army arrived there, that the paracos arrived, that they were here.”

Carolina’s father decided to set up a restaurant, and he set up a deal with a friend where he could pay for a house with the profits generated by the restaurant. Having a house, even a small one, was a dream come true for the family.

Some 70 kilometers from where Carolina settled was a town nestled in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada where Karen’s family arrived in the mid-1990s, when she was eight years old. The town was lost among the lush vegetation, thick with different shades of green that emerged from the trees in the sunlight. The rivers that came down from the Sierra left behind natural pools as they continued on their way to the Caribbean Sea.

Karen remembers that land and her new home with a nostalgic smile. Her mother and father had agreed plant crops and take care of the owners’ animals in exchange for lodging. The house was humble, made of mud and wooden slabs, just like those of her neighbors. She does not remember the scarcity, but rather the abundance of animals and fun. The family was in charge of dogs, cows and chickens, and Karen loved to play with the smallest ones, with the chicks.

Every morning before going to study, Karen and her brothers helped their mother feed the animals and collect the eggs from the hens, while her father collected the wood for the fire.
When they arrived from school, children from the surrounding houses gathered to play football and checa, a local baseball-like game in which they had to hit drink lids with broom sticks.

On weekends they went to the river. Karen and her brothers and other children from the village enjoyed playing in the cold water that streamed down from the Sierra while their mothers washed their clothes on the shore, and their fathers talked about what had happened during the week.

Five years passed and the family managed to adapt to the countryside and live a quiet life. However, they began to perceive changes around them.

But such fun could be easily interrupted. “You would hear that the army arrived there, that the paracos arrived, that they were here,” Karen recalled, referring to the nickname used in Colombia to refer to the paramilitaries.

“At six o’clock we were already locked up, in bed, lying down, but awake,” Karen told us.

War Enters the Neighborhood

Like Karen, Carolina began to notice that the tranquility that existed when she first moved into town was fading rapidly.

In the 1990s, the village she describes as lonely and “full of mountains” began to fill with armed men, when Giraldo began to consolidate his territorial control along the Sierra Nevada.

Hernán Giraldo’s men sought to charge an extortion fee at her father’s restaurant. Carolina remembers they demanded between 20,000 to 50,000 Colombian pesos ($10 to $25) per house. Everyone who received some kind of income, whether from a shop, a trade, livestock, or a crop, had to pay a percentage of what they earned in exchange for “protection” from the guerrillas and other threats.

But the extortions, Carolina remembers bitterly, were just the beginning of other forms of social control. Pamphlets began to appear on the streets and at homes. Those named named on the pamphlets were to leave the area. Carolina remembers that they once woke up with white papers stuck on the door.

“They listed what the restrictions would be and who they were looking for. They said that those who did not stay inside were going to be tied up, massacred or something, and that they were looking for the snitches, gossips, who spent their time blabbering, that they were going to round them up,” she recalled.

These restrictions applied for men, women and children. Those who failed to comply with the orders risked being threatened, punished or killed. There were exemplary punishments just for women. Karen remembered seeing women sweeping the court or the village park on three occasions.
“So people knew that they were doing something wrong because they were sent to sweep,” she said.

Other people who lived in Sierra Nevada at the time corroborated Carolina and Karen’s recollections. Common criminals were dealt with by Giraldo’s men. Others simply were not to Giraldo’s liking, including prostitutes and women labelled as unfaithful or as “witches” for allegedly performing esoteric rituals. Others such as those believed to be leftist or homosexual were also targeted for punishment, the residents said.

Hernán Giraldo seemingly viewed anyone who behaved contrary to the orders he imposed or to what he considered good customs and morals as a threat.

But for Carolina and her family, the real terror came from the disappearances. Every time Carolina’s father returned from the market, he told them about what he had heard, that armed men came to houses at midnight. They knocked down doors, took young people off to war and left mothers inconsolable.

“They were always killing, always disappearing people. always. There wasn’t a day where nobody disappeared,” said Carolina.

Karen and her siblings heard similar stories. Their parents would lower their voices and send them to play, but she remembers the terror on their faces. They should have hidden but curiosity led the children to listen to those stories, happening around their homes.
“There was one man who was tortured and his arms and head were cut off,” Karen told InSight Crime, with her eyes wide open as if she were reliving it. “I heard my mom say that they shot him with a rifle and his head was like a punctured ball and that his head bore signs of torture. And his arms were destroyed, like when one carves up a chicken.”

Everything had changed for Carolina and Karen.

**Sexual Abuse as a Weapon of War**

By the late 1990s, when she was in her 20s, Carolina had become mother to her first daughter. Her days were spent caring for the baby and helping her dad at the restaurant.

It was important for her to help with the business and to contribute financially, despite her father insisting that it was not necessary. “My father said, ‘if women don’t work, why are you going to work?’”

I replied that “we all had to work because we were all one family, especially because I had a newborn baby. But he insisted I shouldn’t go, because paramilitaries used to come and look at me as if they wanted to devour me,” she remembered.
Deep down, Carolina was afraid. She feared what it might mean for her and her daughter to be the restaurant, when it seemed like the threat of violence was always around.

Her fear was well-founded as the town began to talk about women and girls being sexually abused by Giraldo and his men.

In some cases, Giraldo took girls out of their homes, snatched from the arms of their relatives. In others, he sent his subordinates to pick them up and take them to his estates. In all cases, a refusal meant death.

“There was a lot of rape, physical abuse, kidnappings,” commented a woman whose brother was killed by Hernán Giraldo, and whose identity has been protected for security reasons.

And this reality soon reached Carolina’s neighborhood. She remembers one day when she saw her neighbor crying inconsolably at the entrance of her house. She asked her mom what had happened. “They just took her daughter,” her mother told her.

“Afterwards they brought them back all battered, beaten, bruised, punched,” Carolina said.

Carolina did not want to fall into the hands of Giraldo and his men. She spent her days trying not to catch anyone’s attention. By then, it was already known what happened when a girl or woman caught the attention of “El Patrón.”

Unfortunately, Carolina was already on Giraldo’s radar.

The Sentence for Being a Woman

One night in 2000, Carolina and her family were in the restaurant preparing to close. She and her father were doing the accounting and organizing the tables, when Hernán Giraldo arrived, accompanied by two of his men.

Hours earlier, they had passed by to collect the extortion from Carolina’s father, but he didn’t have the money to pay it and had promised to collect the money to give it to them later.

Giraldo was angered at this promise. When they realized that Carolina and her dad were about to close the restaurant, one of them screamed: “You are not going to close anything here. We are the ones who rule. This closes when we say so.”

Carolina and her father looked at each other and were paralyzed. Neither of them knew what to do.

Then, one of the men went to Carolina and said: “You stay with me.”
Carolina was motionless. She couldn’t speak. She couldn’t move.

Her dad pleaded, repeatedly asking why she had to stay, but he was unable to prevent his daughter’s assault. Every plea from her father seemed to increase the rage of Giraldo and his henchmen.

Giraldo’s men tied up Carolina’s dad and the restaurant staff. They beat and locked up her mother, who had heard the commotion and came to see what was happening.

Carolina was taken to the house, beaten and sexually abused by three men, including Giraldo. She was 21 years old.

Before leaving, they warned that if she or any of them told what had happened, they would be killed.

As soon as the men left, Carolina, her father and the rest of her family left town with just the clothes on their backs. They took no belongings and not even their shoes, for fear that Giraldo’s men would return.

Carolina took her daughter in her arms and they all began to go down the mountain towards the road that leads to Santa Marta. They ran and ran, for hours, in the middle of the night, through thick vegetation.

With blisters on their feet and wounds on their bodies, they arrived in Santa Marta to ask a family friend to provide them with a place to stay.

Three years later, in 2003, Karen would share the same fate as Carolina.

The paramilitaries went from time to time to the farm where she and her family lived. “They would arrive and say to my mom: ‘Old woman, wash our clothes or cook us something.’ Out of fear that they would harm her, she had to do their laundry, she had to kill an animal, make soups, cook for them. My dad would look for the supplies for her to cook. He would chase down a chicken, whatever,” recalled Karen.

Karen had never seen them. She knew they were men in camouflage and black rubber boots because of what their relatives and neighbors said. “They used to arrive and my mother would tell us to get into the house and not to come out.” And of course they obeyed her.

One afternoon, Karen was at the entrance of her house talking to her brothers when she saw men approaching. But they didn’t ask her mother to cook for them or for her dad to kill a chicken for them.
They pushed Karen into the house and threw out the rest of her family. Her mother screamed and refused to leave her daughter, while the men shoved her outside. Inside the house, Karen was raped. She was 15 years old.

When they left, they told the family to look away and not dare to follow them or else they would be killed.

The heartbroken family didn’t know what to do. Karen’s mom hugged her. Her dad shifted on the spot, not knowing what to do. They wanted to flee, but it was already dark. They waited for daylight but nobody could sleep.

In the next morning, they packed a suitcase and left with little else to take the bus to Santa Marta.

They never returned.
A Desperate Effort to Rebuild Lives

After running for hours, Carolina, 21, arrived in the city of Santa Marta with her family in 2000. Their feet were full of blisters and they had nothing but the clothes on their back.

One night, Hernán Giraldo, a feared paramilitary commander from northern Colombia, accompanied by armed men, had arrived at the family’s restaurant to collect extortion money. Carolina’s father had no money to pay. So, after beating and separating the family, they sexually abused her.

In 2003, Karen also arrived in Santa Marta, running from the paramilitaries after they broke into her house and abused her. She was only 15.
Both families arrived to Santa Marta without any money. They had to restart their lives from scratch. But Giraldo’s power stretched to Santa Marta as well, a coastal city and tourism jewel near the mountains.

From Marijuana to Cocaine – Following the Money

While Carolina and her family were rebuilding their life in the city, in the early 2000s, Hernán Giraldo was at the height of his criminal power.

Giraldo had moved from the marijuana business to cocaine. It made sense financially. He had about 300 people under his command, he ran extortion in Santa Marta, and he controlled the coca crops in the Sierra Nevada.

Fighting between Colombian armed forces and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) was at its peak. But war was business. Giraldo’s men protected the Sierra, its crops and the exit of drugs through the northern departments of Magdalena and La Guajira. The logistics networks and infrastructure Giraldo had set up in his marijuana business had allowed him to fully appropriate cocaine trafficking in the area.

But local residents lived in fear of violence and coercion. Girls and women were routinely raped, and sexual abuse in the region peaked during the 2000s.

Carolina and her family knew the power that man had. They prayed that the violence would not reach them in the city. In Santa Marta, they settled in a small and modest house. Seeing her father and her brothers, who witnessed her rape, was difficult for her. She felt a mixture of shame and guilt. Carolina couldn’t shake the idea she was to blame for her family having to leave everything they had built behind and start from scratch.

She wasn’t the only one. Her dad spent his days in sullen silence, trying to hide his own frustrations. He hadn’t been able to pay the vacuna (vaccine, a term for extortion payments) that day. He wondered if he was to blame for what happened to his daughter.

Carolina spiralled. “My mind was lost, I felt there was no way out, I didn’t know what to do with my life after what happened,” she told InSight Crime.
That first year, she couldn’t sleep and cried day or night. Seeing a man on the street terrified her. She feared being abused again. She went to see a doctor but being examined by a man was traumatic.

Carolina did not feel capable of taking care of others and made the most difficult decision of her life. She gave up her first daughter, the same child which she had carried in her arms as they ran through the night fleeing from home.

“I gave her to her father. She always tells me that I’m not a good mom because I gave her up. But I gave her up, because I just couldn’t, I couldn’t raise someone. I was mentally and psychologically ill,” a distraught Carolina recalled. “But I call her, we talk by video about her and I tell her to forgive me.

To this day, Carolina has not had the strength to tell her eldest daughter, nor her former partner, what she experienced that night.

**Giraldo’s Reputation**

In 2001, Hernán Giraldo was one of the largest drug traffickers in Colombia.

“Giraldo is the head of a thriving drug syndicate that accounts for $1.2 billion in annual shipments to the United States and Europe. That places him among the top five cocaine traffickers in the country,” *Newsweek* wrote in 2001. “Colombian intelligence officials believe that Giraldo, the son of a poor rancher, could one day compare to the late Medellin cartel kingpin Pablo Escobar in both wealth and power.”
“I don’t have the luck, the money, the goods, or the people that Escobar had. My fight is different,” Giraldo commented in May 2001 to a local news outlet.

But his influence in the drug trade was colossal. As the kingpin of the Sierra Nevada, 40 percent of cocaine in Colombia passed through Giraldo’s territory, according to Colombian intelligence sources.

And he wasn’t alone. He could count on his partner and right-hand man, Jairo Musso Torres, alias “Pacho Musso.”

Pacho Musso was in charge of coordinating and sending large quantities of drugs that left for the United States and Central America in speedboats through the mouths of the rivers that descended from the Sierra Nevada to the Caribbean. This vast operation involved hundreds of people, and Pacho Musso brought in hundreds of millions of pesos each month, according to Colombian authorities.
The Colombian and US governments were after both men.

On October 9, 2001, a group of Colombian anti-drug police officers, who were cooperating with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), were in Santa Marta investigating Hernán Giraldo. That evening, they entered El Pechiche, a restaurant on the main road running along the Caribbean coast. While they were waiting for their drinks, a group of Pacho Musso’s men arrived and opened fire. Two police officers, two tourists and a hotel employee were shot dead. A third officer was left alive, brought to Musso for questioning and later killed.

In response to this attack, the Colombian authorities sent more than 200 agents to the Sierra Nevada and confiscated 16 tons of cocaine. These drugs belonged to the Castaño brothers, who used Hernán Giraldo’s Caribbean routes to move their cocaine.

Carlos and Vicente Castaño were the main commanders of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - AUC), an infamous paramilitary network which was waging a bloody war against the FARC guerrillas and financing themselves through drug trafficking.

The Castaños had cultivated strong relationships with the Colombian authorities and were seeking to clean up their image with the Americans. The deaths of these police officers infuriated them.

In a statement to Giraldo, Carlos Castaño, the main leader of the AUC, demanded Musso’s head. Giraldo responded that “a father does not give up his children.” This answer was essentially a declaration of war between the AUC and Hernán Giraldo.

In late 2001, the Castaños sent some 1,200 men, led by the AUC’s Northern Bloc commander, Rodrigo Tovar, alias “Jorge 40,” to confront Giraldo’s approximately 300 men throughout the Sierra.

The Castaños had a legacy of shocking violence. In the early 1990s, they had created a private security group, known as Persecuted by Pablo Escobar (Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar - PEPES). The PEPES included some of Escobar’s former associates and wanted to corner Colombia’s most famous capo. The PEPES murdered anyone connected to Escobar: lawyers, drivers, accountants and more.

This same tactic was implemented with Giraldo, but the man known as El Patrón was no easy target. In early 2002, after four of his men were killed near Santa Marta, Giraldo ordered a paro armado (armed strike). From January 18 to February 8, 2002, nobody was able to leave Santa Marta. All shops were closed, transportation was stopped and Giraldo’s men patrolled the streets.

The civilian population was caught in the middle and many fled. Colombian authorities registered 8,000 displaced persons in Magdalena between December 2001 and February 2002, but other estimates put the number at 14,000.
After some four months of fighting, the AUC men reached Quebrada del Sol, Giraldo’s stronghold, and fought him for 72 hours. Giraldo had no chance but to surrender and negotiate.

“Sometimes, I wish I wasn’t a woman so this would not have happened to me.”

Giraldo was a valuable asset to the AUC, due to his local control, knowledge of trafficking routes and existing network. As a result, Giraldo agreed to join the AUC under the command of Jorge 40, the commander sent to hunt him. His men were renamed the Tayrona Resistance Front (Frente Resistencia Tayrona) of the AUC’s Northern Bloc, taking the name of the Tayrona National Park near Santa Marta.

But while Giraldo was officially no longer the commander of the Sierra, he was effectively still in charge.

**Women Fight Their Own Battles**

Carolina knew about the violence that was taking place in Santa Marta, but she was fighting her own internal battles.

She felt guilty about her family’s poverty and emotional loss after the displacement.

“I feel that they treat us women as if we were only meat. It is as if women were made to be violated and mistreated. Sometimes, I wish I wasn’t a woman so this would not have happened to me,” said Carolina.

She told InSight Crime how, at night, she closes her eyes and feels the weight of the men on top of her. She looks at the ceiling, the windows, and wonders from where they could come in again to abuse her.

She saw her abusers in any man who approached her.

“Giraldo took away the lives of my entire family, but especially mine,” she told InSight Crime.

Despite these constant thoughts, she gradually found the strength to carry on. She enrolled in a night school to finish high school and worked in a supermarket by day. She graduated in 2001.
However, she barely spoke to anyone. Her classmates shunned her for being quiet but she didn’t want their attention. Carolina was afraid someone would find out what had happened to her.

“Here (in Santa Marta), I have found a little peace, we have gotten away from everything. Here, nobody knows what happened to us,” she explained.

She wanted to go to university and study to be a physical therapist. But the only option for that career was in Barranquilla, a coastal city two hours away. The fear of being alone in an unknown place and being abused again discouraged her.

“I feel that, if that had not happened to me, if these things had not happened to me, I would have been someone in life,” reflected Carolina. “I would have been a happy woman.”

The trauma also affected the rest of her family. Her two younger brothers were children when the paramilitaries abused their sister and never went back to school for fear of being forced to join their ranks, a problem that still exists in Colombia.

Carolina’s mother spent her days in silence and began to fall sick. The night the paramilitaries entered her house, she was beaten so violently that she bled from one ear. In Santa Marta, Carolina and her father wanted to take her to the doctor but she refused. She didn’t want to tell the doctor why her ear hurt.

When they finally convinced her to go, it was too late. The beating had damaged one of her ears and Carolina’s mother had become partially deaf.

To overcome the pain and the economic crisis, Carolina’s father decided to rent a place and open a small shop in the city. For several years, the business went well and supported the family.

However, the fears of that night caught up with him. Carolina’s father decided to close the profitable business, out of fear that it would attract attention from criminals and lead to more abuse in his family. Since then he has never worked. Carolina would like take care of him and the rest of the family.

Carolina and her father, although close, have had a complex relationship. She feels that her father blames her for her abuse. “I feel that my father blames me, asking why I went out? Why did I go to the restaurant? Why did I go to where he was?” she said, distraught.
Winds of Change

Hernán Giraldo actually abided by the agreement and remained under the orders of the Castaño brothers of the AUC.

At that time, in 2002, the paramilitary group was looking for a negotiated solution with the Colombian government. The brothers saw this as an opportunity to avoid extradition to the United States and to launder their drug trafficking profits. In July 2002, Carlos Castaño resigned as the political leader of the AUC and, shortly thereafter, formal talks began with the authorities.

Some of the points up for discussion included reduced sentences in exchange for collaboration, major revelations and reparations towards victims. As negotiations went on, however, the United States filed extradition requests for Carlos Castaño and his main lieutenant, Salvatore Mancuso, to face drug trafficking charges. This made the paramilitary leaders nervous, including Giraldo who faced his own extradition order.

It was time to make alternative plans.

In 2003, Giraldo met with Diego Fernando Murillo, alias “Don Berna,” a seasoned drug trafficker from the Medellín Cartel, to form a criminal structure to that which Berna had set up in Medellin, the Oficina de Envigado.

The Office was a debt collection agency for Escobar but also acted as a referee in the underworld, with Don Berna mediating conflicts between leaders and gangs and also participated in lavish drug trafficking deals. The Office was originally created by Escobar in the 1980s as a debt collection agency, tracking payments owed by other traffickers. Don Berna took it over after Escobar died and Giraldo wanted to build a similar structure.

Giraldo wanted to do the same in his area of influence.

With the advice of Don Berna, “El Patrón” created the Oficina del Caribe (Caribbean Office) to administer his territory and criminal income. They would also serve as his backup once the Tayrona Resistance Block had fully disarmed due to peace talks with the government.

In July 2003, the paramilitaries and the government signed a pact for the AUC’s disarmament and reintegration

A few weeks later, the government began to hand down sentences specifically designed for paramilitary leaders signed up to the deal. Colombia's 2005 Justice and Peace Law stated that paramilitary leaders who fully admitted their crimes, including sexual violence, would receive maximum sentences of eight years in prison.
On February 3, 2006, Hernán Giraldo Serna, wearing a hat and poncho, met with representatives of the Colombian government at a village in the Sierra Nevada to hand over the weapons of the Tayrona Resistance Bloc.

As songs were sung in his honor and in front of the cameras, Hernán Giraldo demobilized with more than 1,100 combatants and surrendering over 500 weapons.

After demobilization, Giraldo was held at the maximum security prison in Itagüí, Antioquia, while judicial proceedings continued at the Justice and Peace courts.

But before being imprisoned, according to what El Tiempo published at the time, Giraldo had planned his next step. In exchange for $5 million, he had sold access to a percentage of his criminal network to the Mejía Múnera brothers, hardened drug traffickers that collaborated with the AUC.
Miguel and Víctor Mejía Múnera arrived in the Sierra Nevada and founded a new group, the Nevados, to exercise control over part of the Giraldo territory. One of Giraldo’s sons, Hernán Giraldo Ochoa, became part of the group, along with 400 others who refused to demobilize.

However, the brothers soon became a headache for authorities. In 2008, after the brothers reportedly killed an investigator from the Attorney General’s Office in Magdalena, authorities made bringing them down a priority.

In April 2008, Víctor Manuel Mejía Múnera was shot dead. Less than 72 hours later, Miguel was captured.

Giraldo’s carefully built criminal empire was at risk of crumbling. And he was soon going to have to start talking about his crimes as part of his demobilization agreement.

**The Price of Silence**

By early 2006, just as Giraldo demobilized, Karen was welcoming the arrival of her first child with great joy.

The families of Karen and her partner could not contain their emotion or happiness. “I always wanted a son, and thank God, I had him first. It was a very happy moment for me and my parents. My mom called him the king of the house,” Karen recalled, smiling.

Since arriving in Santa Marta, in 2003, she has worked hard to rebuild her life. Three years later, she had graduated high school with the hope of further education. She wanted to work on occupational health issues, helping to protect people at work. But her family did not have the money to support her.

Instead, she devoted herself to her family, taking care of her children while her husband worked in construction. Despite this, after years with her husband, she has still not told him the full experience. He knows she was displaced due to violence but not the details. When he asks, she changes the topic.

Her body, however, still suffers. She has had health problems linked to her womb, and although there is no medical proof this stemmed from the abuse, Karen believes it did.
Her silence was shared. It was difficult to talk about what happened. Karen’s father sold lottery tickets on the streets to put money on the table. He began drinking.

Her younger brother started taking drugs at 13, an addiction from which he has never recovered.

Her mother lived in constant sadness. She had a special affection for Karen, and she felt deep pain at her daughter having been sexually abused, the whole family being displaced and living in difficult conditions.

There was no money for rent, no money for food.

But, when Karen and her mother got together, alone, they could share and release their burdens. But after her mother got sick, those conversations became less and less frequent.

By 2007, demobilized paramilitary commanders were ordered to testify about war crimes in public hearings. Carolina and Karen were just two among thousands of women who had been victims of sexual abuse during armed conflict. According to the Colombian government’s unit for victims’ reparations (Unidad de Atención y Reparación a Víctimas), more than 31,000 people suffered sexual crimes. Ninety percent of them were women.

The northern department of Magdalena, where Giraldo and his paramilitary group held sway, was the second worst affected, accounting for more than 10 percent of all reported cases of sexual abuse. In 2002 and 2003, the cases there were the worst in the country.
A Revealing Omission

On June 5, 2007, Hernán Giraldo, wearing a black shirt and his traditional hat, appeared in the city of Barranquilla to testify. People from across the Sierra Nevada waited outside. They held a banner, expressing their unconditional support for “El Patrón.”

Just after 10.30 a.m., Giraldo sat down next to his lawyer. The judge explained to Giraldo that he should first discuss the structure of his paramilitary group and the crimes they committed.

“I came to try to tell the truth about everything I know. I tell the victims not to be afraid, because I am here to clarify everything and what they know will help,” Giraldo replied in court.

It was almost theatrical. Giraldo addressed the victims, with no apparent guilt, casting himself as someone who was to bring them long-awaited help.

Between 2007 and May 2008, Giraldo attended 16 hearings where he had to answer for homicides, massacres, forced displacement and forced disappearances. But, like other prosecuted paramilitary commanders, he did not speak about the sexual violence he and his men used for decades.

It was not until 2009 that the Attorney General’s Office opened an investigation into sexual crimes by Giraldo, after realizing mothers of many of the children he had recognized as being his were minors at the time of conception.

This is not surprising. Acts of sexual violence are among the least-discussed and most stigmatized crimes during armed conflict. According to Amnesty International, victims rarely come forward, and when they do, crimes are often only partially investigated. Furthermore, no criminal elements have openly confessed their role in this crime.

With Giraldo, the situation was particularly perverse. He did not reveal the extent of sexual violence perpetrated by him and his men on Karen and Carolina, and others in the Sierra Nevada. The women he abused found no justice, no peace, no reparations.
And, despite being behind bars, he reportedly continued to abuse minors, even while seemingly cooperating with investigators.

**The Abuse Doesn’t Stop**

While Giraldo was giving statements in Barranquilla, Ana Milena, a 15-year-old girl, moved to the city in early January 2008.

She made the difficult decision to leave her family because she wanted to pursue a career while working as a nanny. But when she arrived in the huge city, she found out that the job offer she had traveled long hours for was no longer open. However, she decided to stay, according to what she told El Espectador.

That is when she met a women, who offered her a place to stay in exchange for help with the housework. Ana did not know it but the woman worked for Hernán Giraldo.

One day, while Ana was cleaning, the phone rang, and Hernán Giraldo was on the other end of the line. “He started asking me about myself, how old I was, what I was like physically,” Ana recalled.

From that day on, Giraldo sent her his regards each time he called the house. But she was not interested in receiving any messages from him or having anything to do with him, she said in her statement.

One Sunday, the woman told Ana Milena that “Maria is not going to go (to the prison) today, it’s your turn.” She immediately understood that she had to go to the Barranquilla prison to which Giraldo had been transferred, instead of the girl who usually visited him. She had no choice.

Ana arrived later that day at the jail, carrying a bundle of money hidden inside a sanitary napkin. She was taken to a comfortable cell, with a refrigerator, television, bed and private bathroom. That day, her name was added to the long list of women to be sexually abused by Giraldo.

But unlike the abuses which took place in the Sierra Nevada, the assault on Ana Milena took place in a prison cell, with the complicity of staff from Colombia’s prison institute (INPEC).

She was not the only one. According to investigations by the Attorney General’s Office which were made public years later, Giraldo abused of at least four other minors while in prison in Antioquia and Barranquilla.

It was not the only time. She was told that she had to visit Giraldo one more time. And when she was awaiting to go on a third occasion, Hernán Giraldo was extradited to the United States.
The Extradited Truth

On May 13, 2008, in the early hours of the morning, the Colombian police escorted 13 paramilitary commanders, including Giraldo, to an air base in Bogotá.

Dressed in a leather jacket, black pants and with a serious expression, Giraldo was escorted by Colombian police onto the plane that would take him to the United States. His worst fear had come true.

That day, Carolina turned on her television in the afternoon. She remembers seeing a man with black hair, a black mustache, handcuffed and accompanied by DEA agents. Giraldo had already arrived in the United States.

She felt an inner peace that she still cannot explain.

That night, then-president Álvaro Uribe Vélez appeared on television, announcing that the decision to extradite Giraldo because members of his paramilitary group had committed new crimes since their demobilization while others were not cooperating with judicial authorities. Furthermore, the group had not complied with their obligation to pay reparations to victims, either by hiding assets or delaying their delivery.

At that moment, Carolina did not think about what Giraldo’s extradition meant for her case, that it could seriously delay finding out the truth that she and hundreds of other victims were waiting for.

She just thought that for now, he was far away and could never hurt her or her family again.

However, Giraldo had already left everything in place for his criminal empire to thrive through his brothers, nephews and children.

Giraldo had left Colombia but his criminal legacy was far from over.
At the start of 2010, the former Colombian paramilitary leader Hernán Giraldo Serna was awaiting his sentence for drug trafficking in a US prison.

When he was extradited from Colombia years earlier, he left without speaking of the systematic sexual abuses he had committed against hundreds of women and girls in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta in northern Colombia.

In 2011, he broke his silence.

“There are no forced rapes. In the countryside, it’s normal for 13- and 14-year-old girls to have sexual relations ... I had kids with an underage girl, but it wasn’t out of bad faith... I’m a campesino (farmer) and not aware of the laws,” Giraldo reasoned when he was investigated by the Justice and Peace Unit of Colombia’s Attorney General’s Office.
Despite the fact that Giraldo swore his innocence, prosecutors spent two years investigating the sexual abuses Giraldo committed. The victims of that violence also broke their silence. After years and years of being suppressed by the fear and the shame, they found their voice.

A Pandora’s Box of Abuse

More than 3,000 people suffered crimes against their individual freedoms and sexual integrity in the Magdalena department between 1990 and 2006, according to data requested by InSight Crime from Colombia’s Victims’ Attention and Reparations Unit. Of these victims, at least 200 women and girls were sexually assaulted by Giraldo, according to data provided by investigator and ex-senate candidate Norma Vera Salazar.

Just like Carolina and Karen, whom Giraldo abused when they were just 21 and 15 years old, respectively, Gladys was another of Giraldo’s child victims. Almost two decades after he abused her, she formally reported him to prosecutors.

In March 1996, when Gladys was just 13, her mother became sick. She left Gladys with her one-year-old brother while she made the long trip to the doctor. Medical centers are few and far between in the Sierra.

“When El Patrón arrived, people gave him the prettiest girl.”

For three days, the children were alone. When her mother returned from the hospital, she found Gladys acting strange. She asked the young girl what happened. Gladys told her that Giraldo had found out she was alone and came to the home to assault her.

Days after he raped her, Giraldo came back to the house to speak with Gladys’ mother. “He told me not to get mad at him, that he was going to take care of my daughter,” she told the Attorney General’s Office, after staying silent out of fear of reprisal.

Many other victims’ parents also chose not to contact authorities due to the fear and vulnerability they felt amid the power Giraldo wielded in this area.

Giraldo also offered money, property, cattle and jewelry to his young victims and their families, looking to buy his way into continuing on as he pleased with his widespread sexual abuse. According to Corporación Humanas, a Colombian human rights group, some of the families may have even encouraged the sexual abuse in exchange for some type of reward.
“I heard that some fathers handed their daughters to Giraldo themselves in exchange for a house. But for me and my story, that’s not true, no father would want to hurt their daughter like that,” said Carolina.

But the reality was more complex. “When El Patrón arrived, people gave him the prettiest girl. I don’t think he was a genius, but he had the power,” said a Colombian government official who spoke with InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

In 2011, prosecutors discovered that the mothers of 19 of the 38 children Giraldo recognized as being fathered by him were younger than 14 years old at the time of birth.

Gladys was one of them. As a girl, she had two children as a result of being raped on multiple occasions. Both were legally registered as Giraldo’s children.

This legal link that’s created when a child is registered in Colombia discouraged the girls, women and families from reporting the crimes. Giraldo didn’t just have control via the weapons he wielded, but also through these family ties.

“He didn’t just rape girls because he was a pedophile. He wanted fertile, healthy girls, with specific characteristics, to bear him boys that would grow up and assume military and political control of his organization, maintaining the network he set up in this area during the war,” Norma Vera told InSight Crime.

### A Troubled Criminal Lineage

When Giraldo demobilized in 2006, he left everything in place so that his criminal operations were handled by some of his sons and nephews in his absence. However, things started to crumble without the family patriarch.

Giraldo sold part of the territory under his control to the Mejía Múnera brothers, a couple of hardened drug traffickers close to the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - AUC). After Giraldo and his bloc demobilized, the brothers moved into his territory and formed a criminal group known as the Nevados. Giraldo’s son, Hernán Giraldo Ochoa, alias “Rambo,” was designated second-in-command.

But Rambo had bigger ambitions. In addition to being part of the Nevados, he was supposed to be coordinating all of his father’s criminal operations. However, it was his older half-brother, Daniel Giraldo Contreras, alias “Grillo,” that took control of Giraldo’s criminal domain. This enraged Rambo and some of his other brothers.

What they didn’t know is that Grillo wasn’t alone. He had looked for protection from the Urabeños, a criminal group that emerged out of the AUC’s demobilization and that was in the middle of expanding its presence.
Paramilitaries and Sexual Violence Along Colombia’s Caribbean Coast

Relatives of Hernán Giraldo
Linked to Crime

**NEPHEWS**

**Hernán Giraldo Sema**
Alias “El Patrón”
Imprisoned since 2021

- Nodier Giraldo
  Extradited in 2008, returned to Colombia in 2015

- Rubén Giraldo
  Arrested in 2013

- Alberto Giraldo
  Alias “Beto”
  Arrested in 2013

- Aldemar Giraldo
  Arrested in 2013

- Eleazar Giraldo
  Arrested in 2013

- Gustavo Adolfo Giraldo
  Alias “Gustavito”
  Arrested in 2013

- Robinson David Giraldo
  Arrested in 2018

- Anderson David Giraldo
  Arrested in 2018

- Mario Giraldo
  Killed in 2019

- Deimer Patiño Giraldo
  Alias “80”
  Killed in 2020

**SONS**

- Hernán Giraldo Ochoa
  Alias “Rambo”
  Arrested in 2009

- Daniel Giraldo Contreras
  Alias “Grillo”
  Arrested in 2010

- Daniel Giraldo Ochoa
  Alias “Natalia”
  Arrested in 2019

- Carolina Giraldo Ochoa
  Arrested in 2018

- Amparo Giraldo
  Alias “Natalia”
  Arrested in 2019

- Gladys Giraldo Contreras
  Alias “La paraca”
  Arrested in 2019

- Sirley Milena Giraldo Pérez
  Alias “La encuestadora”
  Arrested in 2019

Source: InSight Crime press monitoring

March 2022
In 2009, the Nevados and the Urabeños were battling it out. The Urabeños eventually came out victorious and expelled the Nevados. As a result, they asked Grillo to share some of Giraldo’s criminal proceeds, primarily those derived from charging extortion fees, and his control of drug trafficking and gasoline smuggling. Giraldo’s heirs had no choice but to accept the request from what was now a major criminal group - much larger than theirs - despite not being very happy about the situation.

They’d have to wait three years before they could start trying to regain some of their control. To do so, Rubén Giraldo aligned himself with Elkin Javier López Torres, alias “La Silla,” a powerful drug trafficker in Colombia’s Caribbean region.

While Giraldo’s heirs had spent decades in this territory, the Urabeños had more weapons and resources on their side. When the fighting started, violence increased exponentially in Magdalena. In just two months, the fight between the Urabeños and Giraldo’s troops saw 150 murders committed in the city of Santa Marta alone.

Amid the total chaos, the government targeted several leaders from both factions. In September 2012, Colombian authorities captured the Urabeños’ leader in Magdalena. Two months after that, they captured La Silla.

By the middle of 2013, more than six of Giraldo’s family members were in jail. Meanwhile, three of his cousins, a son-in-law and one of his fathers-in-law had all been assassinated during these disputes.

These blows, combined with continued pressure from security forces, forced Giraldo’s heirs to pause their fight against the Urabeños and forge an alliance with their rival. Those on Giraldo’s side regained their power in the Sierra Nevada, serving as logistical intermediaries for the Urabeños and their drug trafficking activities through the north of the country.

Back in control, those that managed to avoid being captured by authorities came to be known as the Pachenca. The name emerged from the group’s new leader, Jesús María Aguirre, alias “Chucho Mercancía” or “Chucho Pachenca,” one of Giraldo’s former lieutenants.

With Chucho Mercancía at the helm, the Pachenca took charge as the armed wing that would protect Giraldo’s economic and criminal interests.

**Report At Your Own Risk**

While the Pachenca were busy extorting, murdering and trafficking drugs, Colombian prosecutors were calling on Giraldo’s victims to report the abuses they had suffered years ago.
But the victims were filled with distress. Giraldo had eyes and ears all over Magdalena, and many of those who survived the sexual abuse feared that reporting those crimes would put them in danger.

By 2013, more than 10 years after being sexually assaulted, Carolina had spent a year receiving help from a foundation that accompanied female victims of the armed conflict in Magdalena. She had been invited by a relative who Giraldo also raped.

The foundation provided her with psychological care and direction and talking helped her slowly feel the pressure lessen.

The woman who ran the foundation encouraged her to report the crime. Carolina hadn’t because her father insisted that to do so put her life at risk. But the testimonies of other women compelled her to go to the authorities.

Around this time, the Colombian government passed Law 1448 on Victims and Land Restitution, which laid out regulations for how victims of the armed conflict were to be cared for. Carolina had to provide testimony to be included in the registry for victims. And if her testimony was accepted, only then would she be able to finally gain access to financial reparations but also see the truth come out about what she, and many others, had undergone.

But as she would later find out, the system had many flaws.

One morning in 2013, Carolina went to the Ombudsman’s Office, the agency in charge of overseeing the protection of human rights. The headquarters was located in a small, white, colonial-style house situated along a busy avenue. The security guard let her in and Carolina sat on a small wall in the garden while an official tended to her.

Minutes later, a psychologist welcomed her. She told her that another administrative official would be taking her case, and she accompanied Carolina to her desk. The office was dark, lit only by a single neon lamp hanging from the ceiling. It was hot, and there wasn’t any ventilation.

Carolina sat down at the desk in front of the official. She was nervous. It was the first time she was going to tell a stranger about the times in which Giraldo and his men raped her in front of her family and a few workers from her father’s restaurant.

The official didn’t seem particularly concerned, looking at her phone. Carolina waited for a minute. The silence seemed to alert the official, who asked that Carolina begin making her statement. While she typed, her gaze went from the computer screen to her cell phone. She didn’t once look up at Carolina, who had to recall the hardest moment of her life to a person that wouldn’t even look her in the eyes.
Carolina doesn’t believe even 10 minutes passed before the woman said: “That’ll be everything then.” Stunned by her coldness and the quickness of the entire process, Carolina responded by saying, “already?” The official responded yes and dismissed her.

Carolina left the office disconcerted, but that wasn’t the worst of it. When she got home, she realized that the certificate the woman gave her had incorrect dates. Carolina was raped in the 2000s, but the officials marked that it had occurred 10 years later. This made the statement different from what she had said, which complicated everything and made her entry into the victims’ registry even harder, as well jeopardizing her access to reparations.

As she suspected, Carolina received a notice from Bogotá five days later that said she wasn’t eligible for reparations due to the official’s error. In addition to having to find enough money for food and rent, she now had to ask for a loan so a lawyer would help her correct the mistake.

This wasn’t the only time that Carolina had to make a statement either. She also had to go to the prosecutor’s office in Santa Marta to give a statement before the Justice and Peace Unit, which was in charge of criminal investigations against armed actors. To formally file her complaint, she had to deliver the certificate they had given her at the Ombudsman’s Office.

This time she was accompanied by three other women, also victims of sexual violence at the hands of Giraldo.

A man received them at the entrance. He took the paper that had been given to Carolina and asked her to follow him. While entering the headquarters, Carolina noticed that one of her friends was visibly shaken, and had turned
back halfway. Carolina asked her what happened. Her friend said that she’d seen one of Giraldo’s men entering the building. According to her, he was one of those in charge of collecting extortion payments in her town.

Fear gripped the three women, and they left without ever giving their statements.

Two years later, in 2015, Carolina again gathered the courage to return to the prosecutor’s office and finish filing her complaint. Months earlier, in 2014, prosecutors had announced Giraldo would return to Colombia after finishing his sentence in the United States. Carolina preferred to finish the process while Giraldo was still out of the country. You never know what could happen with his return, she thought. She made her way to the headquarters once more and finally made her statement.

That same year, Carolina began weaving and embroidering for a living, which also helped calm her mind.

**Everyone Loses Their Battles**

In 2015, Giraldo was in the middle of his legal proceedings for drug trafficking in the United States. But the story US prosecutors told was very different from the reality of things in Colombia.

“"I want to inform you that I will plead guilty to the drug trafficking charges in my case because I was guilty," Giraldo wrote in a handwritten letter to Judge Reggie Walton, who presided over his trial. “My reason for taxing drug traffickers was to help my community fight against the FARC guerrillas.”

Giraldo and his legal team spent years looking for ways to reduce his sentence, arguing that he hadn’t directly participated in drug trafficking, but only taxed farmers and traffickers.

“I have a responsibility to raise my children. They’ve been separated from me for many years and have grown up while I’m here in the United States,” Giraldo wrote in his letter.
What US prosecutors either ignored or failed to recognize was that dozens of the children Giraldo referenced were the product of him raping young girls. In his absence, some of his children also helped him maintain his drug trafficking empire on Colombia’s Caribbean coast.

But Giraldo’s efforts were in vain. In 2017, a US judge sentenced him to more than 16 years in prison.

A year after her rapist was convicted, Karen, whom Girado and his men sexually abused in 2003, felt that it was the right moment to continue with her studies.

She’d wake up at 4 in the morning to leave breakfast and lunch ready for her entire family. After studying, she’d return home to help her kids with their homework while she also did her own schoolwork. Later she’d prepare dinner and clean the house before heading off to sleep.

It took a lot of effort, but she managed to graduate as a kindergarten teacher. She found work a short time later as a preschool teacher. During the day she spent her time teaching dozens of boys and girls, and in the evening she looked after her own children and took care of things around the house. But there came a time when she found it too hard to balance her family and work life, and she left her job.
A year later, in 2019, the death of her mother rocked her foundation. Her mother spent various months in the hospital due to a liver illness. Karen would never forget what it was like to see her mom in those final moments of her life through the glass window of the hospital’s intensive care unit. She was closest to her mom. Her mom was the only person she felt confident enough to talk about her past with.

**The Boss Arrives**

On the morning of January 25, 2021, Carolina woke up at 5:30 am, fixed her coffee and after drinking it, went to tidy up the front of her house. She swept up the leaves and pulled out the weeds that had grown in some of her plants. She went back inside to start breakfast for her daughter, making the sign of the cross over her chest as she passed the sacred heart of Jesus that hangs on her wall.
Carolina worked for a bit, prepared lunch and then let her daughter leave to go play with a neighbor outside. When it was around 6 pm, she asked her daughter to come back inside. The little girl pleaded with her mother to let her play for just a little while longer. Nighttime always brings back the worst memories of Carolina’s life. So as soon as the sun goes down, she hides in the privacy of her own home.

Ever since she was raped, Carolina has taken additional precautions to protect herself and her daughter. She chose her gray house, for example, because the neighbors couldn’t see her. To reach her house, you have to go through a set of doors, and the entrance to her house sits at the end of an alley behind another set of doors. She feels safer this way.
That night in late January, she ate dinner with her daughter before they each went to their bedrooms. She laid down in her bed and turned on the television right as an image of Giraldo deboarding a plane in Bogotá was shown on the news.

Giraldo, now more than 70 years old, had been deported back to Colombia after serving 12 years of his drug trafficking sentence in the United States. The man who returned did not look anything like the man who had boarded the plane to leave years ago, wearing a leather jacket and an arrogant expression.

The next day, Carolina went to buy the ingredients she needed for breakfast. She ran into a neighbor that had also seen the news the night before. She told Carolina that Giraldo was looking for all the people who had reported him.

“Look, he’s back for all of us,” Carolina’s neighbor said. This left her feeling unsettled as if she needed to explain herself. “Why? Why would he come for us if we haven’t done anything wrong? They were the ones that made me suffer and scarred me for the rest of my life,” she responded.

Karen also felt her worst fears resurfacing with Giraldo’s return. After seeing the news that morning of January 26, she woke up earlier than usual to grab breakfast. A neighbor of hers, whom Giraldo had also raped, approached her. “Didn’t you hear that Giraldo is going to be released? I’m scared, really scared,” the neighbor said.

“That makes two of us,” Karen replied.

But not everyone felt this way. In other places in Magdalena, people celebrated. On social media, some even posted messages expressing their happiness with Giraldo’s arrival, hoping that he’d bring some sense of security to the region, according to one government official who spoke to InSight Crime but who didn’t want to be named for security reasons.

The government was also standing by anxiously, waiting to see what Giraldo’s return would mean. They suspected Giraldo was going to take a backseat role in the Pachenca, so he could work on his image, make public apologies and try to maintain his communal roots, the same government official said.

Meanwhile, for the Pachenca, it was hoped Giraldo’s return to Colombia could give them a much-needed shot in the arm. The loss of many of their top leaders and a costly war waged against their former ally, the Urabeños, had left them in a sorry condition.

Despite this the Pachenca had maintained influence in certain areas that were historically under Giraldo’s control, like the municipality of Guachaca, according to officials. There, just like in other parts of the Sierra Nevada, Giraldo had established an extortion system that had been around since before he abandoned the area.
“When I get back to Colombia I want to work,” Giraldo wrote to the judge that heard his case in the United States. “I’m going to raise cattle, harvest crops, and wake up with the sunrise. If I have to, I’ll clean floors, wash dishes, work as a taxi driver or however else I can, but I’ll never be involved with drugs.”

Giraldo hoped to return to Colombia and remain free. While he had a pending sentence of eight years to serve with the Peace and Justice Tribunal, the sentence he served in the United States was longer. As such, he’d be free after certifying his contribution to the truth and reparations for victims.

**A Criminal Empire in Ruins**

Giraldo’s hopes of freedom seemed to ignore the many complaints that surfaced against him for rape while he was in various prisons -- complaints that had long sat in a dusty filing cabinet in the prosecutor’s office.

The first one came to light in February 2021, six days after Giraldo arrived in Colombia, from a woman who had gone to the prosecutor’s office years earlier.

Soon four other women came forward with accusations that Giraldo raped them as minors in different prisons around the country before he was extradited. Despite the fact that two of the complaints had been sitting in the Attorney General’s Office’s archives for years, it wasn’t until April 2021 that they officially opened an investigation.

This was something Giraldo hadn’t expected. After years of trying to clear his name, he was now at risk of spending the rest of his life behind bars. If prosecutors could corroborate the allegations against him, Giraldo could lose all of the benefits afforded to him by the Justice and Peace tribunal and face a 40-year prison sentence, according to court documents.

Meanwhile, Karen and Carolina have decided to move on with their lives.

In the middle of 2021, Carolina went back to the place where the rape occurred, hoping to turn the page. A friend offered to join her. They took the bus to the town, and after arriving, they approached the area where her father’s restaurant was. Everything had changed: her family’s house was no longer there, and the vast green spaces were now replaced by homes.

Her friend asked how she felt, but Carolina couldn’t find the words. She could feel the hair on her arms stand on end. The weight of the emotional impact made her feel like this was a necessary step to close this chapter of her life, which had stalked her for years.

After returning to town, Carolina wanted to make a change that would symbolize the new life she wanted to live. She cut her hair and dyed it.
strengthened her, she said. “Now I feel so much stronger than who I was. Before I couldn’t even go out because I was afraid this man would send his men after me. Now I have a foundation of women who were victims of this same abuse, and they’ve helped me move forward.”

In September 2021, Carolina received the good news she had hoped for: her request for reparations was accepted after so many years of fighting. But due to the slow administrative process, it’ll be years before she can access any of the money.

Carolina will be one of just a few victims of sexual violence to receive them. Despite there being more than around 30,000 registered victims due to the armed conflict, only some 8,000 have received some form of reparations.

The money she’ll get will be used to find her own home. While she waits, she dreams of how her new house will look, and of a better future for her and her children. Karen has these same dreams. If given the choice and the chance to go back to the countryside, she would. In the garden she made at her house she has tomatoes, aloe vera and some flowers. Her children play there while she waters her plants.

Even though she's happy, Karen would like to study again, have a home with a terrace and a patio to garden. She hopes to have lemongrass, lemon balm and other medicinal plants. Despite the fact that she saves her money and watches her finances, it's still not enough. She too hopes for reparations.

She hasn't received any word from the government. When she goes to the appropriate offices, they brush her off and tell her that victims of sexual violence aren’t the priority when it comes to reparations.

Currently, Hernán Giraldo remains in prison in Itagüí, Antioquia, awaiting a decision by the Justice and Peace courts that will determine if he will spend the rest of his life in prison, due to acts of sexual abuse which he allegedly committed after demobilizing.

For Carolina and Karen, who for so many years have fought through their worst traumas in a country where their rapist still wields influence, this is one step closer to becoming whole again.

They find comfort hoping that Giraldo will never come back to the Sierra Nevada, despite the fact that his heirs now occupy this territory. At the same time, they continue to wait for the government to guarantee their fundamental human rights and pay them back for at least part of the horrors their rapist committed.

*Great lengths have been taken to protect those whose stories are told here, including changing names, dates and some personal details.*
Key Moments in the History of Women Survivors and Hernán Giraldo

**KAREN**

- **1995:** Moved with her family in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.
- **2003:** Became a victim of sexual abuse and forced displacement.
- **2005:** Graduated from high school. Met her now-husband.
- **2012:** Connected with a foundation for victims of sexual violence.
- **2013:** Appeared before government bodies to tell the story of her abuse.
- **2017:** Began pursuing a teaching career.
- **2019:** Death of her mother.
- **2022:** Still waiting on reparations.

**CAROLINA**

- **1995:** Moved with her family to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.
- **2000:** Became a victim of sexual abuse and forced displacement.
- **2001:** Graduated from high school. Met her partner.
- **2012:** Connected with a foundation for victims of sexual violence.
- **2013:** Appeared before government bodies to tell the story of her abuse.
- **2015:** Last appearance as part of judicial process.

**HERNÁN GIRALDO AND ASSOCIATED GROUPS**

- **1969:** His family arrived in Santa Marta.
- **1977:** Created the group Los Chamizos.
- **1988:** Emergence of Self-Defense Forces in Magdalena and La Guajira, connected to Giraldo.
- **1990s:** Territorial expansion process continued.
- **2001:** Three DEA collaborators were murdered. Fight against the AUC’s Casa Castaño.
- **2002:** Outmatched, he agreed to integrate the ranks of the AUC as head of the Tayrona Resistance Bloc.
- **2006:** Tayrona Resistance Bloc demobilized and Giraldo sent to prison, where he continued to abuse minors.
- **2007:** His relatives disputed power in the Sierra Nevada in Santa Marta.
- **2008:** Extradited to the United States.
- **2009:** The Urabéños and Giraldo’s relatives formed a pact.
- **2011:** Free elements from Giraldo’s criminal group reunite.
- **2012:** The war between the Urabeños and the Giraldo Clan.
- **2013:** Emergence of the Pachenca.
- **2017:** Sentenced to over 16 years in prison in the United States.
- **2019:** Conflict breaks out between the Pachenca and the Urabéños after their alliance collapses.
- **2021:** Returns to Colombia and is detained. Reports of cases of sexual abuse after demobilization. Investigation opened and an arrest warrant was issued for him.
- **2022:** Attorney General’s Office charges Giraldo with sexual abuse of minors.

Fuente: Field work and press monitoring by InSight Crime

March 2022
InSight Crime is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime. For a decade, InSight Crime has crossed borders and institutions – as an amalgam of journalism outlet, think tank and academic resource – to deepen the debate and inform on organized crime in the Americas. On-the-ground reporting, careful research and impactful investigations are hallmarks of the organization from the very beginning.

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