

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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## Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website.

17 February 2012

### COL103831.E

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Colombia: Whether women who head their own households, without male or family support, can obtain housing and employment in Bogota; violence against women in Bogota; government support services available to female-headed households in Bogota

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### 1. Background

The 2010 National Survey on Demography and Health (*Encuesta Nacional de Demografía y Salud del 2010, ENDS 2010*) indicates that 34 percent of Colombian homes are headed by women (Profamilia Mar. 2011, 37). In Bogota, 36 percent of households with children under 15 years of age are headed by women (*ibid.*, 40). The survey, which was carried out in 2010 by Profamilia, a non-profit organization that specializes in sexual and reproductive health (*ibid.* n.d.a), consisted of a sample of about 50,000 households in 258 municipalities in Colombia (*ibid.* Mar. 2011, 4) and illustrates the increasing [translation] "feminization" of households compared to 1995 (24 percent), 2000 (28 percent), and 2005 (30 percent) (*ibid.*, 36). Another Profamilia study entitled Survey in Marginalized Zones on Sexual and Reproductive Health, Forced Displacement and Poverty 2000-2011 (*Encuesta en Zonas Marginadas en Salud Sexual y Salud Reproductiva, Desplazamiento Forzado y Pobreza 2000-2011*), which was undertaken between 2006 and 2010 in low-income areas of 169 municipalities across Colombia (Sept. 2011, 18), indicates that 32.8 percent of households in Bogota were headed by women compared to 35.7 percent at the national level (*ibid.* 24).

However, in a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Coordinator of the Corporation for the Support of Popular Communities (Corporación de Apoyo a Comunidades Populares, CODACOP), an NGO based in Bogota that supports development programs for women heads of household, indigenous communities and peasant organizations, among other social groups (n.d.), indicated that the majority of these women who arrive in Bogota are displaced because of violence (CODACOP 27 Jan. 2012). With regard to number of households, statistics from the Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation (Agencia Presidencial para la Acción Social y la Cooperación Internacional, Acción Social), the government agency responsible for assisting victims of violence and displacement (Colombia n.d.a), indicate that, by November 2011, Bogota had 2,778 households headed by displaced women (*ibid.* n.d.b), 53 households more than in 2010 (*ibid.* n.d.c).

#### 2. Housing

The Coordinator of CODACOP indicated that displaced women heads of households live under [translation] "very hard" physical conditions (27 Jan. 2012). According to the Coordinator, they tend to be concentrated in low income sectors in the districts of Bosa, Ciudad Bolívar, San Cristóbal, Usme, Usaquén, La Candelaria and Altos de Casacá in Soacha (CODACOP 27 Jan. 2012). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

#### 3. Employment

According to the 1st Local Survey on Demographics and Health Bogota 2011 (*1ª Encuesta Distrital de Demografía y Salud Bogotá 2011*), which was conducted by Profamilia between June 2010 and May 2011 (31 Aug. 2011, 6), women were subjected to pre-hiring tests such as pregnancy (51 percent) and HIV (12 percent) (Profamilia 31 Aug. 2011, 71). The survey also shows that two percent of women were required to provide proof of sterilization and four percent were fired for being pregnant (*ibid.*).

According to Profamilia, the percentage of women living in low-income areas with employment in [translation] "professional, technical or administrative" areas reaches [translation] "only" one percent, whereas for women aged between

15 and 49 in the rest of the country the percentage climbs to 23 percent (Sept. 2011, 38). The survey also indicates that 95 percent of employed women living in low-income areas work in sales, mainly in the informal sector, or as housemaids (Profamilia Sept. 2011, 38). The above was corroborated by the Coordinator of CODACOP, who indicated that the majority of single mothers do not obtain stable employment, and when they have it, it is common to find them without social security benefits such as paid sick days or pensions (27 Jan. 2012). Often, the Coordinator notes, single mothers must leave their children alone to go to work, risking that the State might take them away (CODACOP 27 Jan. 2012). The Coordinator further indicated that displaced single mothers face a "much harder" situation when trying to obtain employment since they are "constantly discriminated against" (ibid.).

#### **4. Violence Against Women**

##### **4.1 Domestic Violence**

The Coordinator of CODACOP indicated that women heads of household experience violence [translation] "in all of its expressions," particularly in low income neighbourhoods (27 Jan. 2012). According to Profamilia, 37 percent of women in Bogota suffered physical violence from their spouse or partner, with [translation] "shakings" and hitting the most frequent types of violence (31 Aug. 2011, 253). The survey indicates that 84 percent of women victims of spousal violence suffered physical and emotional injuries (Profamilia 31 Aug. 2011, 255). The National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses, INMLCF) reported 16,332 cases of domestic violence in Bogota from January to November 2011; 10,517 of these cases involved spousal violence (Colombia Dec. 2011). However, sources report that family commissioners (Comisarías de Familia) received 69,154 cases of domestic violence in Bogota from January to November 2011 (*El Nuevo Siglo* 20 Nov. 2011; *El Tiempo* 28 Nov. 2011). *El Tiempo*, a Bogota-based newspaper, indicates that 75 percent of the victims were women (ibid.).

Amnesty International (AI) observes that victims fear reporting crimes given the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators, ineffective protection measures and poor training of judicial officers, making it "very difficult to evaluate the true scale of the problem" (AI 21 Sept. 2011). This is corroborated in the Profamilia 1st Local Survey on Demographics and Health Bogota 2011, which indicates that 69 percent of women victims of domestic violence did not seek protection (31 Aug. 2011, 265), and 77.5 percent did not seek medical assistance (Profamilia 31 Aug. 2011, 263).

##### **4.2 Other violence**

The Profamilia survey indicates that six percent of interviewed women were victims of sexual violence, particularly in the districts of Usme, La Candelaria and Sumapaz (ibid., 258). *El Tiempo* reports that 59 [translation] "crimes of passion" (*crímenes pasionales*) were committed in Bogota between January and October 2011 (4 Oct. 2011).

#### **5. Government Services**

##### **5.1 Victims of Domestic and Sexual Violence**

The US Department of State indicates that the Colombian government provides services for victims of domestic violence through the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF [Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar]) (US 8 Apr. 2011, 41). Information on shelters administered by ICBF could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The City of Bogota offers refuge houses (*Casas Refugio*) for abused women where they can get food and find psychological, health, educational, legal, and therapeutic support for themselves and their children (Bogota n.d.a). In addition, the City of Bogota has 12 houses for the equality of opportunity (*Casas de Igualdad de Oportunidades*) that also provide legal and psychological assistance (ibid. n.d.b). The Coordinator of CODACOP indicated that there are three casas refugio and that abused women can stay there up to three months (27 Jan. 2012). However, the US Department of State says that the shelters' services "could not meet the magnitude of the problem" (US 8 Apr. 2011, 41). The Coordinator of CODACOP corroborated the above, adding that these programs do not have enough resources (27 Jan. 2012).

Victims of domestic violence can file complaints with any of the family commissioners, municipal judges, the Attorney General's office, police stations and the ICBF (Colombia 11 Aug. 2011). Profamilia also offers health, psychological and judicial services to victims of sexual violence through the Comprehensive Assistance for Sexual Violence Program (Programa de Atención Integral a la Violencia Sexual, AVISE) at any of its locations (Profamilia n.d.b). However, according to Profamilia, the rights of women victims of violence that are in place are not widely known, and [translation] "many" of them are "re-victimized" when trying to seek protection, since public employees responsible for taking their complaints and providing them with assistance are not adequately trained (31 Aug. 2011, 246).

##### **5.2 Displaced Women**

Women victims of displacement and violence can go to any of the 14 centres for assistance in cases of violence and serious human rights violations (Centros de Atención a Víctimas de las Violencias y Graves Violaciones a Derechos Humanos, CAVIDH) (Bogota 3 June 2011). These centres offer psychological and legal assistance and support groups (ibid.).

However, the Coordinator of CODACOP provided the following information with regard to state protection for displaced women. Protection is not actually given; the programs available to them are not sufficient given the high numbers of displaced women heads of households. Applications for assistance take a long time to be processed because of the existing bureaucracy. Most of the women arrive in Bogota with [translation] "serious" health, nutrition and psychological problems. They also face difficulties when trying to enrol their children in schools given the stigmatization they experience as displaced persons (CODACOP 27 Jan. 2012). According to Profamilia, 20.2 percent of women in Bogota do not have health insurance

(Sept. 2011, 167) and 30.9 percent of those who have health insurance, do not know their rights and benefits (Profamilia Sept. 2011, 168).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Attempts to contact representatives of the following organizations were unsuccessful: Agencia Presidencial para la Acción Social y la Cooperación Internacional, Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, Defensoría del Pueblo, Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, Instituto Popular de Capacitación, Pastoral Social, Profamilia, Sisma Mujer, Universidad Católica de Colombia, Universidad Nacional.

**Internet sites, including:** Alta Consejería Presidencial para la Equidad de la Mujer, *El Colombiano*, Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, Delegación de la Unión Europea en Colombia, Cruz Roja de Colombia, Factiva, Freedom House, *El Mundo*, Human Rights Watch, Ministerio de la Protección Social, Opción Legal, Organización Internacional para las Migraciones, Pastoral Social, *El Tiempo*, UNIFEM.

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