

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

[Home](#) > [Research Program](#) > [Responses to Information Requests](#)

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.

1 March 2012

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

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Background

According to the 2010 National Survey of Demography and Health (*Encuesta Nacional de Demografía y Salud, ENDS 2010*), 34 percent of Colombian homes are headed by women (Profamilia 2010, 37). Medellín leads the list with 38.8 percent, followed by Santiago de Cali with 37 percent, and Bogota with 36 percent (*ibid.*, 40).

According to statistics provided by the government of Colombia, 3,736,032 persons were displaced in Colombia between January and July 2011; 1.05 percent (or 39,176 persons) of them were from Medellín, and 5.69 percent (or 212,761 persons) relocated to Medellín (Medellin 31 July 2011). Statistics show that 30,926 of those who relocated to Medellín were single mothers (*ibid.*).

The Ombudsperson of Medellín (Personería de Medellín) notes, in his Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Medellín, First Six Months of 2011 (*Informe sobre la Situación de Derechos Humanos en Medellín, Primer Semestre de 2011*), the increase of forced interurban displacement in the city since 2008 (Medellin 26 Sept. 2011, 42). This phenomenon increased 74 percent from 2008 to 2009, 211 percent from 2009 to 2010, and 81 percent from 2010 to 2011 (*ibid.*). The report indicates that 70 percent of the total numbers of complaints of interurban forced displacement in the city were made by women who head their households; and in 59 percent of the cases, the cause was violence perpetrated by relatives, gangs and illegal armed groups (*ibid.*, 51).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Ombudsperson of Medellín indicated that it is [translation] "difficult" for a displaced woman to relocate in Medellín under "dignified conditions" (Medellin 25 Oct. 2011). He explained that "discrimination and stigmatization" against them occur "very often", even within their own neighbourhoods, due to their place of origin and because they are seen as "competition for the access to local aid and services" (*ibid.*).

2. Housing

According to the Ombudsperson of Medellín, the housing conditions of displaced women heads of households are [translation] "precarious," given that they live in "subnormal" settlements characterized by environmental instability and absence of public services (*ibid.*).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Director of the Solidarity and Compromise Foundation (Fundación Solidaridad y Compromiso, Funsolcom), an NGO based in Medellín that develops projects to help women affected by different types of violence (Funsolcom n.d), stated that the housing conditions for displaced women are [translation] "very difficult" (*ibid.* 14 Sept. 2011). According to the Director, since most displaced women arrive in the outskirts of the city and build houses with plastic sheets, they face a constant threat from the rain and natural disasters that are common in these areas (*ibid.*). Additionally, they do not have access to potable water and electricity (*ibid.*).

3. Employment

According to the report of the Ombudsperson of Medellín, the National Administrative Department of Statistics (Departamento Nacional de Estadística, DANE) indicates that the unemployment rate in Medellín from April 2010 to June 2011 was 12.5 percent (Medellin 26 Sept. 2011, 6). Between December 2010 and February 2011, 51.4 percent of jobs available were [translation] "informal" and 57.4 percent of employed people did not have social security (*ibid.*). In the same

report, the Secretary for Women of the municipality of Medellín indicates that, of 1,102 households that participated in a program known as Economic Empowerment (Autonomía Económica) [translation] "only" 55 percent of women earned between US\$1.40 and the statutory minimum per day, for an average monthly income of 363,397 Colombian pesos (COP) [C\$194 (XE 28 Oct. 2011)] (Medellín 26 Sept. 2011, 6). According to the Ombudsperson of Medellín, it is [translation] "difficult for [displaced women in Medellín] to access decent employment" given their low levels of education and the discrimination they face when trying to obtain employment (ibid. 25 Oct. 2011).

In the majority of cases, the Ombudsperson notes that displaced single mothers are employed in the informal sector, or as housemaids (ibid.). The Director of Funsolcom corroborated the above, adding that displaced single mothers are [translation] "exploited and very badly remunerated," with salaries that range between 5,000 COP per day [C\$2.65 (XE 31 Oct. 2011a)] and 80,000 per month [C\$ 43 (XE 31 Oct. 2011b)] (Funsolcom 14 Sept. 2011). *El País*, a Santiago de Cali-based newspaper, reported in December 2011 that the minimum monthly wage in Colombia for 2012 would be COP\$566,700 [C\$316 (XE 25 Jan. 2012)] (*El País* 16 Dec. 2011).

4. Violence Against Women

4.1 Intrafamily Violence

According to the Ombudsperson of Medellín, the rates of domestic and sexual violence in the city are [translation] "preoccupying," given the present social conditions and the "lack" of investigation and effective sanctioning of aggressors (Medellín 25 Oct. 2011). The Ombudsperson's report further states that women in situations of displacement may face intrafamily violence [translation] "in all of its expressions" (ibid. 26 Sept. 2011, 52). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Technical Director of the Forced Displacement Unit of the Municipality of Medellín indicated that intrafamily violence is [translation] "alarming" and present throughout the city (ibid. 13 Oct. 2011).

According to the ENDS 2010 survey, during 2010, 40.7 percent of women suffered violence from their spouses or partners in Medellín, and 16.3 percent from other persons (Profamilia 2010, 371, 384). In 78.4 percent of these cases, victims did not seek legal or health assistance (ibid., 376). The Technical Director indicated that the Centres for Family Assistance (Comisarías de Familia) assisted 3,767 victims of intrafamily violence from January to August 2011; 83 percent of these victims were women (Medellín 13 Oct. 2011). According to statistics of the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses, INMLCF), 4,790 cases of intrafamily violence were reported in Medellín between January and November 2011 (Colombia Dec. 2011).

With regard to sexual violence, the Ombudsperson indicates that 63 percent of these cases occurred in households, with the next largest group being the 22 percent that took place in public areas (Medellín 25 Oct. 2011). According to statistics compiled by the Centre for Comprehensive Assistance to Victims of Sexual Violence (Centro de Atención Integral a Víctimas de Violencia Sexual, CAIVAS), 313 complaints of sexual-violence crimes were filed by women between January and June 2011, the majority of these cases being related to domestic and intrafamily violence (ibid. 26 Sept. 2011, 33).

4.2 Other Violence

The Ombudsperson denounces in his report the use of sexual violence against girls and women as a [translation] "strategy of war and social control" in some neighbourhoods of the city (ibid., 51). Women are [translation] "used as a disputed prize" by warring groups that seek the "social control of the bodies and lives of women and girls" (ibid.). In an article published in *El Mundo*, a Medellín-based newspaper, it is reported that gang members consider women as [translation] "objects" for sexual favours, in the majority of cases (29 Aug. 2011). The US 2010 Country Reports for Colombia indicates the presence of a "pattern of systemic sexual violence against women and girls by some armed actors" and that this sexual violence "remained one of the main causes of forced displacement" in 2010 (8 Apr. 2011).

The Ombudsperson also pointed out the presence of [translation] "invisible frontiers" in neighbourhoods where local gangs dispute territory for economic and social control (Medellín 25 Oct. 2011). According to the Ombudsperson, when women are related to gang members, the armed conflict has a [translation] "disproportional impact" on them when compared to men, since women become targets of "attacks and retaliations" (ibid.). According to the Director of Funsolcom, continuous displacement is very common; in some cases, women have been displaced three or four times (Funsolcom 14 Sept. 2011).

The Ombudsperson's report also notes that 18 percent of forced disappearances in the city are [translation] "children and juveniles, the majority of them female, who are also victims of homicides, threats and sexual violence" (Medellín 26 Sept. 2011, 18). The municipality of Medellín reported 94 homicides of women between January and July of 2011; 52 percent of them are considered [translation] "femicides", that is, "assassination of women based on their gender" (ibid. 25 Nov. 2011).

5. Government Services

The Director of Funsolcom indicated that the government offers subsidies to female-headed households (Funsolcom 14 Sept. 2011). According to the report of the Ombudsperson of Medellín, the municipality of Medellín provides assistance to displaced persons through the following programs: Immediate Humanitarian Assistance (Atención Humanitaria Inmediata, AHI), Emergency Humanitarian Assistance (Atención Humanitaria de Emergencia, AHE), and Transitory Humanitarian Assistance (Atención Humanitaria Transitoria, AHT) (Medellín 26 Sept. 2011, 43). For 2010, AHI had an assigned budget of 55,558 million COP [CAD\$29,400,000 (XE 7 Nov. 2011)] (Medellín 26 Sept. 2011, 43). The Technical Director at the municipality of Medellín indicated that the Forced Displacement Unit assisted 10,868 female-headed households with AHE in 2010, and 15,626 from January to October 2011 (ibid. 13 Oct. 2011).

The Technical Director also indicated that, even though the Ministry for Women (Secretaría de las Mujeres) of the Municipality of Medellín has no specific programs for displaced women, they are eligible for programs such as Welcoming Homes (Hogares de Acogida), the Search for Adult Women School (La Escuela Busca a la Mujer Adulta) and Legal Advice (Asesoría Jurídica) (ibid. 13 Oct. 2011).

However, sources indicated that given the [translation] "magnitude of the problem," government assistance is insufficient (ibid. 26 Sept. 2011, 42; Funsolcom 14 Sept. 2011). According to the Director of Funsolcom, families receiving assistance have many members (14 Sept. 2011). She also pointed out that some displaced women do not have information on assistance programs available to them since they refuse to denounce perpetrators of violence to state authorities for fear of being found by their aggressors (Funsolcom 14 Sept. 2011).

The report of the Ombudsperson also notes how the shelter system has [translation] "difficulties," such as overcrowding, theft, intrafamily violence, physical aggression, lack of health coverage, and the refusal to take victims who already have family and social networks in the city (Medellín 26 Sept. 2011, 43). The Ombudsperson's report points out that victims have to wait, in many cases, years, to get assistance (ibid.).

With regard to intrafamily and sexual violence, *El Mundo* reports the opening of a Victim Assistance Centre (Centro de Atención de Víctimas, CAV) in Medellín to assist victims of [translation] "sexual violence, homicide or domestic violence" (22 Nov. 2011). The CAV has a lawyer, a psychologist and a social worker to provide assistance during criminal proceedings as well as psychosocial services (ibid.). The Corporation Vamos Mujer, a feminist organization that advances human rights and the peaceful negotiation of conflicts (n.d.a), also indicates that victims of sexual violence can go to the Permanent Unit for Human Rights of the Ombudsperson of Medellín (Unidad Permanente para los Derechos Humanos de la Personería), the client assistance centres (Salas de Atención al Usuario, SAU) at the Office of the Attorney General (Fiscalía General de la Nación), the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, ICBF), or the National Police (Corporation Vamos Mujer n.d.b).

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, Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, Defensoría del Pueblo, Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, Instituto Popular de Capacitación, Sisma Mujer, Universidad de Antioquia, and Universidad Nacional.

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

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