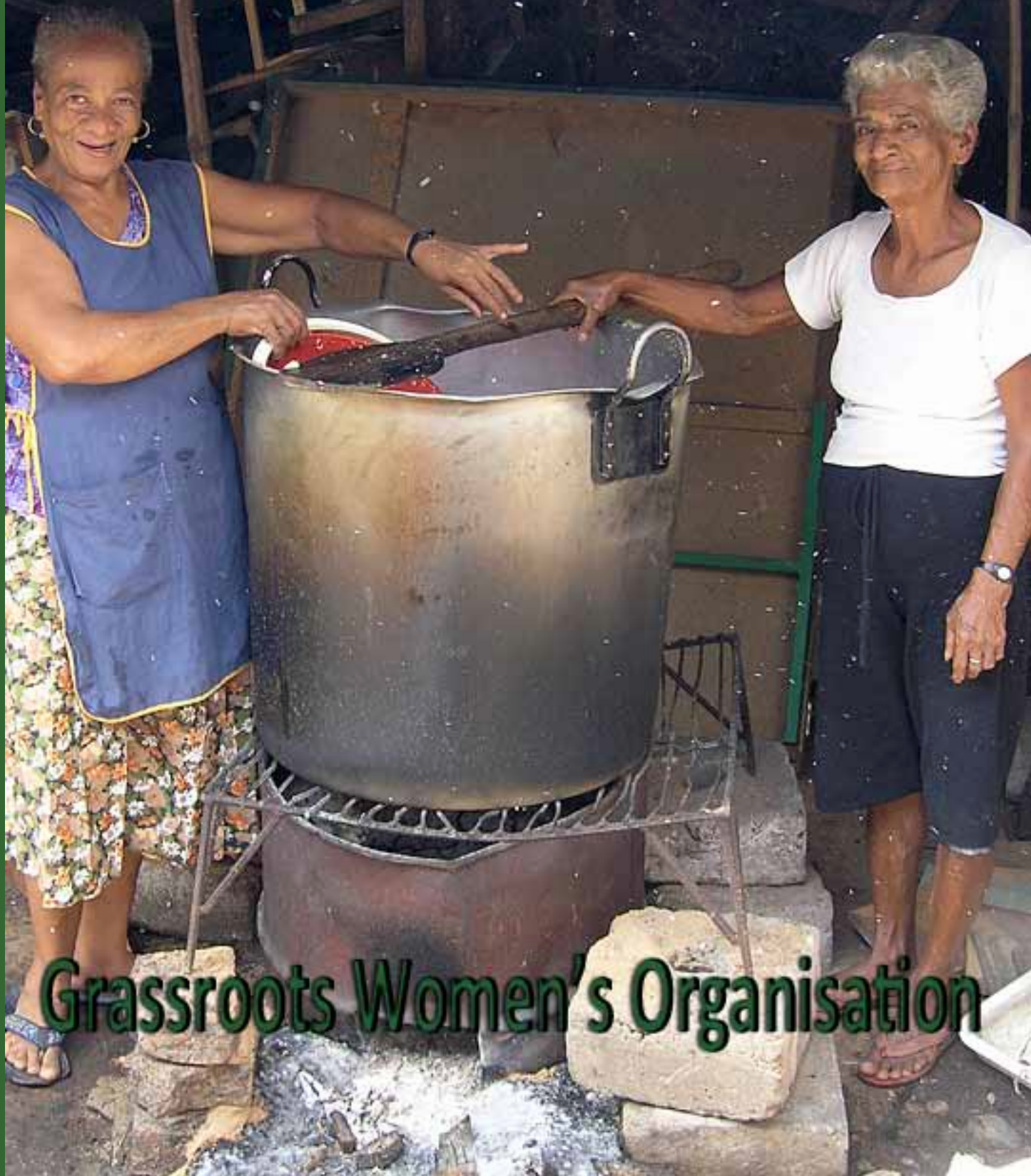


Press Kit – March 2011

PBI COLOMBIA PRESENTS



Grassroots Women's Organisation

PBI HAS ACCOMPANIED THE GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S ORGANISATION SINCE 1995.



PBI members in front of OFP offices in Barrancabermeja. Photo: Charlotte Kesl.

For over 38 years, the OFP has been organising, training and mobilising women to defend their rights and create dignified life projects for their families. Today, all of the network's centres bring together 3,000 people who are in civil resistance against the war. They do not want death to continue devastating lives and communities as has ruthlessly occurred in the Magdalena Medio, a region located in the centre of the country¹.

History

In 1972, the Grassroots Women's Organisation (OFP) was established by the Catholic Church in Barrancabermeja. The region of the Magdalena Medio has been marked by the turmoil of labour struggles at the oil company and the agrarian mobilisations led by Colombian migrants coming to the port on the Magdalena River in search of a better life². In 1988, the OFP

separated from the Catholic Church. At this time, the organisation's work focused on projects in food, housing, grassroots women's leadership, and sexual and reproductive health³.

At the end of the 1990's, paramilitary groups began to enter Barrancabermeja. On 16 May 1998, some 50 paramilitaries murdered seven people and forcibly disappeared twenty-five more, all accused of belonging to the guerrilla⁵. In response to this harsh reality of violence, the OFP attempted to prevent inter-urban

«The OFP is the child of the Catholic Church's Social Ministry in north-eastern Barranca, which supported women's participation. These women along with their children were at the front of the demonstrations repressed by the police who attempted to prevent new inhabitants from moving into unoccupied land»⁴. Yolanda Becerra, president of the OFP

forced displacement. From 1998 to 2000, the organisation «began to address civil and political rights, without neglecting such rights as food (through community kitchens and urban and rural gardens), medical and gynaecological health care, activities for children and youth, and housing projects»⁶.

In 2000, Barrancabermeja became one of the most violent cities in the world. 567 people were mur-

dered that year, for a murder rate of 227 per 100,000 inhabitants⁷. In order to alleviate the food shortages for the region's internally displaced and poorest families, the OFP established a network of community kitchens. These kitchens then became a place to speak out against abuses⁸.

Areas of work

The OFP works in the following municipalities in the Magdalena Medio region: Barrancabermeja, San Pablo, Cantagallo, Yondó, Puerto Wilches and Patúria. The OFP also runs community kitchens in Bogotá (Cundinamarca) and Neiva (Huila).

→ Community kitchens: Women's centres for training workshops, meetings, and selling soy products (crackers, cakes and milk).

→ Support for the internally displaced population: Legal assistance, productive projects, and emergency humanitarian aid.

→ Women's training workshops: Workshops on

OFP WOMEN IN RESISTANCE

«The OFP was strong then and that allowed us to resist, but the years in resistance have also worn us down. The work in a context of terror and destruction of the social fabric has affected the organisation's members. Women have searched for the disappeared, pulled bodies out of rivers, accompanied family members, reported abuses, and visibilised the situation to all of the visiting international delegations»⁹. Yolanda Becerra



Lunch at OFP community kitchen. Photo: Charlotte Kesl.

Attacks against OFP members

From 2001 to 2008, the OFP¹⁰ recorded 130 acts of aggression¹¹, including the following:

- In April 2001, the OFP centre in Barrancabermeja was demolished by men under the orders of paramilitary commander «El Gato»¹².
- In April 2002, OFP dance teacher Diofanol Sierra was murdered. Paramilitary member Cesar Julio Reina Flórez, aka «Tamarindo», was sentenced to 21 years in prison for this crime in November 2004¹³.
- In October 2003, OFP leader Esperanza Amarís was murdered. Three paramilitaries were sentenced to 40 years in prison for this crime¹⁴.
- The brother of OFP leader Jackeline Rojas, Jesús Rojas Castañenda, was murdered in December 2003. To date, no one has been convicted for this crime.
- In March 2006, OFP member Yamile Agudelo Peñaloza was found dead in Barrancabermeja. In November 2009, a demobilised paramilitary was sentenced to 16 years in prison for this crime¹⁵.
- In 2007, OFP member Katherine González was forcibly disappeared. To date, no one has been convicted for this crime.

According to the Prosecutor's Office, 13 cases are presently under investigation. The Human Rights and IHL Unit of the Prosecutor General's Office is carrying out four of these investigations, which concern the murders of Esperanza Amaris and Diofanol Sierra and death threats against the OFP and Yolanda Becerra¹⁶.

Protection measures

In May 2000, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) granted precautionary protection measures to protect the life and safety of the members of the Grassroots Women's Organisation.

Awards

- In 2005, Yolanda Becerra was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize¹⁷.
- In 2007, Ms. Becerra received the Swedish Per Anger Award, which recognises those who have encouraged humanitarian and democratic activities¹⁸.
- In 2009, Yolanda Becerra received the «Ginetta Sagan» award from Amnesty International in recognition of her defence of women's human rights¹⁹.



Yolanda Becerra. Photo: Fundación Mujer y Futuro.

ceramics, sewing, and baking.

- Medical and psychosocial care includes family planning.
- Participation in other social movements: The OFP participates in the Human Rights Defenders Working Group (ETTDH) and the Inter-Sectoral Commission for Life.
- Publications: Bi-monthly publication, «Mujer Popular [Grassroots Woman]», annual publication, «Mohana».
- Annual activities: The OFP promotes international women's day on March 8, international workers' day on May 1, and the international day for the elimination of violence against women on November 25.
- Advocacy and lobby work: The OFP receives support from international organisations and participates in speaker's tours in Europe and the Americas.

International accompaniment

PBI has accompanied the OFP since 1995.

Contact

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1. «Una Colombia que nos queda», Fundación Mujer y Futuro, November 2007
2. «Organización Femenina Popular», National and International Campaign for the right to defend human rights in Colombia, 2010
3. Ibid. 1.
4. Ibid. 1.
5. Ibid. 1.
6. Ibid. 1.
7. «Magdalena Medio, un espejismo de paz». In 2003, Reiniciar Corporation presented this report to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.
8. Ibid. 6.
9. «Resisting an agenda of death», ColomPBIa, PBI Colombia, October 2009
10. OFP fact reports presented in the request for precautionary protection measures from the Inter-American Human Rights System.
11. Ibid. 1.
12. Ibid. 1.
13. Ibid. 1.
14. Ibid. 1.
15. Ibid. 1.
16. Ibid. 1.
17. Ibid. 1.
18. «Amnistía Internacional Reconoce El Trabajo De La Colombiana Yolanda Becerra Vega», ArtículoZ, 29 March 2009
19. Ibid. 18



Lunch at OFP community kitchen. Photo: Charlotte Kesl.