

**GEILER ROMAÑA'S VOICE**

“My name is Geiler Romaña, I am 38 years old. I was born in Tagachì, a small village in the Chocó Department of the Pacific Colombian region. On my father’s side of the family there are 17 brothers. I am married with two children.

My personal experience of racism and racial discrimination which I am going to share with you is just one amongst thousands of cases which are lived daily by afro-descendants and other ethnic groups in Colombia. Allow me to tell you that we black communities only began to exist in the eyes of the Colombian State since the new Constitution enacted in 1991. The new Constitution recognizes ethnic and cultural diversity in the country and as a result law 70/93 was created with the aim of protecting the territorial and cultural rights of black communities in Colombia.

With the enactment of this legislation in 1996, a process of collective recognition was initiated to acknowledge the rights of the afro Colombian community who had historically inhabited the Colombian pacific, inter-Andean and Caribbean region. You may ask what this has to do with my personal experience of racism? I would like to inform you that not only is it related to my own personal story, but also to that experienced by almost one million afro-descendants forced from their land in Colombia. The forced displacement of afro-Colombian communities living in the region began in 1996 when violence was employed by armed groups to remove us from our land.

This brings to mind the day the paramilitary groups came to the village and took over our home to carry out their military operations. I also remember the day when the news arrived that during an armed confrontation between paramilitaries and the guerrilla in the nearby village, a cylinder bomb was thrown at a church in which the community was seeking refuge from the violence, a holy place which could not prevent the death of 119 people of African descent against the explosion of the cylinder bomb.

After these events we had no other choice but to abandon the village without knowing what awaited us in the new place of arrival. Initially we went to a small city but we weren’t safe there. We then decided to go to Bogotá, the capital of Colombia,

a very big city which is totally different in terms of climate and culture from Chocó.

There we had to begin again, living in precarious conditions, without job, without money to satisfy our most basic needs. It was really difficult in these circumstances to adapt ourselves to this new environment. There, we had to start all over again, with the hostility of the residents who looked at us for what we were, foreign people who had come to invade their place, with whom they would surely have to share the little they had. It was very difficult to begin again, but we had to stand it in order to protect our lives.

Confronted with this reality it was necessary to take action. It was in this way that I connected with the project of the Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians – AFRODES – an organization founded to promote the defense and protection of the rights of the afro-descendent population affected by forced displacement. In this organization, I experienced and denounced cases of racism and racial discrimination, like the ones I would like to share with you now.

In 2003, before the Attorney General, I reported a case of police brutality and racism exercised by agents of the state against two of my brothers who were arrested and maltreated by the police on various occasions without ever having committed a crime. Due to the lack of any basis for their detention I carried out numerous interviews with young afro-descendents who were based in the city centre where my brothers were detained. The response I received was that black people who cross that area are frequently approached by the police who suspect them of being delinquents. This is a situation which does not often happen with white or mixed race people.

Afro-descendent children also live this racism in schools whether it is from their classmates or, in some cases, from their teachers who use racist language. On one occasion I had to go to my son's school to speak with his teachers because of the racist remarks being made by his classmates. My son had told me, "dad, I don't want to go to school because the children call me *"negrito"*, *"slave"*, *"chocolatín"* and say that "we are superior to the blacks". These cases are very frequent in schools where the majority of children are white or of mixed-race.

Other cases reveal extreme racism such as the assassination of a young afro-descendent this year in the Suba neighborhood of Bogotá by white and mixed-race people who, according to the victim's brother, before killing him, shouted that they were going to kill that black. This case was reported by a Bogotá newspaper.

My personal experience of racism in Colombia is not an exception and is a phenomenon which affects the entire afro-Colombian community. A recent decision passed by the Constitutional Court of Colombia, in which two public establishments were ordered to compensate afro-Colombian individuals who had been prohibited

from entering their venues based on racial discrimination, prompted various Congress members to propose developing legislation to combat racism and racial discrimination.

I appreciate your taking the time to listen to me and sharing your personal experiences with me. Don't forget that we must unite our voices to end the crime of racism and racial discrimination so that we can eradicate all forms of human rights violations based on the superiority of races or other aspects which impede human beings from living with dignity.

Thank you".