CRUCIAL TO UNDERSTANDING HUMAN EXPERIENCE in our contemporary world is a recognition of the global dimensions of economic and political processes. I regard myself as a global sociologist since my work is concerned with the manifestations of trans-societal processes in local contexts. I also believe in a sociology that has a humanist and transformative orientation, that is, concerned with promoting human well-being and contributing to social transformation by empowering people to become agents of change. I have been studying violence, development, social movements, and human rights violations in Latin America, and extensively in Colombia, for the past 13 years. My research is concerned with the relationship between the global economy and political violence exercised by states and parastatal forces.

My methodological preparation to carry out fieldwork was very basic, but the process itself taught me things that nobody could have prepared me for. I have had to reconcile concerns about my personal safety, and even my life, with my indignation at the injustices and humiliations that millions of people have to confront in their daily lives, and with my passion to investigate the forces that generate, sustain, and sometimes restore these injustices. My indignation is deeply rooted and has to do with my childhood experiences in the North of Brazil. When I studied sociology as an undergraduate student at York University, I began to develop an understanding of the causes of the dreadful conditions that had scarred my heart as a child, and I realized that what I had seen is a phenomenon that transcends borders and affects a large part of humanity. Thus, I saw sociology as my salvation, as my hope, and as my weapon.
It is not sufficient to say that I am a qualitative sociologist. My philosophy about what social research should aim to accomplish has been influenced by Marx’s belief that the study of human beings should start from their lived experience and material reality, by Paulo Freire’s model of liberatory education, and by Dorothy Smith’s standpoint sociology, as well as my own convictions. As Dorothy Smith teaches us, every researcher has a unique social location shaped by their gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, and so on. That social location presents opportunities as well as challenges in terms of creating knowledge. So here, I will discuss precisely that—the opportunities and challenges that arise from being a woman, from being progressive and committed to social justice, and from carrying out research in high-risk conflict zones. I conducted semistructured and unstructured interviews, participant observation, and focus groups with people from various sectors of Colombian society, including internal refugees, members and leaders of the indigenous movement, members and leaders of labor unions, criminal lawyers, officials in high-ranking positions in the Colombian government, political party leaders, officials from the Attorney General’s Office and the Ombudsman’s Office, army colonels, army generals, and members of paramilitary groups.

The challenge that comes from being a critical sociologist committed to social justice is that you are immediately perceived as an enemy by state forces and paramilitary groups. Being critical of the present political-economic models earns you the label of guerrilla, which until recently was a sufficient justification to kill you. Traveling in violent conflict areas known as zonas rojas (or red zones), which are generally avoided at all cost by most Colombians themselves, if they have the choice, obviously carried a high risk not only to my life, but also to my health because of the precarious conditions in which many of the displaced families that I interviewed lived. The positive side of all this is that one feels energized by the fact that one is gathering valuable, revealing information that is of significance to human lives and livelihoods. As an investigator, one feels motivated and overlooks the risks, making the search for the truth and the quest for justice overshadow any other personal concerns.

Being a woman and a sociologist in conflict zones poses a double challenge in a country with high levels of femicide and sexual violence. This was unavoidable and was something that I had to deal with creatively, depending on the situation. However, there was also an unexpected advantage. I often thought about how my fieldwork experience would have been different if I was a man. As a woman, I did not raise suspicion as easily as a man would. A man doing the type of work that I was doing would be more likely to be perceived as a potential “enemy.”

I came to some interesting observations and conclusions with regard to methodology. From the perspective of the interviewee (and this is true of both victims and victimizers/oppressors and the oppressed), the interview was an opportunity to have their voice heard, to exercise their agency, and
tell their story. I realized that I could receive richer and more interesting information that surpassed what I expected, as long as I did not take away the interviewee’s freedom to speak and organize the topics themselves. The interview became more like a conversation where one side spoke most (but not all) of the time.

The other fascinating aspect of the interview process was that the interview became a moment of self-reflection and clarification for some of the interviewees. The collective construction of new understanding and, subsequently, knowledge is something that erases the distinction between the one who searches for answers and the one who has the answers. It becomes a fusion of lived experience and analytical ability.

Critical sociology research is a learning process in itself and it has to be flexible, participatory, and based on dialogue. Committing sociology, therefore, is about combining intellectual endeavors with love for people and a belief that change is possible and necessary. If we enable our students to see this humanizing and empowering potential of sociology, our classrooms will be exciting and lively places.