This is the story of Helena, a woman who was forcibly recruited by the FARC when she was 14. While she was with the guerrilla group, she was forced to undergo an unsafe abortion that caused serious, long-term health problems. Her rights to health, justice, and reparations are still being violated today.

Helena was born in a rural region of Colombia where guerrilla forces had been operating for years. Her family had faced intimidation and threats by the army for allegedly assisting the guerrillas. One day, they watched as soldiers shot some of the people on the next farm over, whom they accused of being guerrillas. Helena’s family had no choice but to leave their land and move to another farm for fear that they would be next. They had lived on their plot for 14 years, ever since Helena was born.

Two months after moving into their new home, Helena was at home alone taking care of her younger siblings when some men from the FARC guerrilla group burst in and made her go with them to the guerrilla camp with only the clothes on her back. She was now a victim of forced recruitment. For three months, she was trained on the group’s rules, different jobs in the camp, and use of weapons. She was told during the training that having children was not allowed in the insurgent group, so all the women had to use contraceptives. They made her use contraceptive injections almost the whole time she was with the group, around five years.

While a member of the FARC, she became pregnant from consensual sex. When the commanders found out, they decided to take her to a house in a small town where the commander of her company awaited with some other guerilla fighters. They told her she had to have an abortion.

Helena refused and asked them to let her carry the pregnancy to term. But the same day, a man who claimed to be a doctor and regularly performed abortions on women FARC members arrived at the house. The guerrillas tried to convince her to agree to the abortion, threatening to court-martial her and telling her she would be shot. She fought them off for hours to keep them from performing the abortion. Finally, they gave her an injection against her will and forced her to take some pills.

When she awoke, the abortion was done. The unsafe procedure caused her to lose a lot of blood. Despite her weakened condition, the guerrilla group made her travel to another municipality because the army was nearby. Finally, they gave her permission to go home. All alone and with no chance to recover from the procedure she had been forced to undergo, Helena walked back home to rejoin her family.

A month and a half later, she started to suffer serious health problems as a result of the unsafe abortion. She was very sick all year, despite whatever medications her family was able to get their hands on.

Soon thereafter, guerrilla fighters showed up at her house to inform her that she had to report back to the FARC. Helena decided to run away. She moved from place to place for years, seeking work unsuccessfully, until she finally found a job in the department.
Throughout this time, her family received numerous death threats from the FARC for refusing to reveal her whereabouts.

Helena’s health continued to deteriorate as a result of the forced abortion, and to this day she continues to suffer health complications. Although she is registered with the public health system, her healthcare providers have blocked her access to comprehensive treatment.

She still suffers from urinary infections, and she has never started treatment for her chronic renal failure. She also suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, feelings of powerlessness and frustration for her lost childhood, recurring nightmares about being chased, fear, and difficulty relating to other people.

It was not until a tutela action was filed that her clinic finally had to perform surgery to treat her condition, but her healthcare providers continue to erect barriers to her right to health. They do not schedule appointments for her to get referrals for the treatment she needs in order to make a full recovery. When she calls for appointments, nobody calls back, so she has to go to the clinic in person constantly in order to get authorizations and appointments and fill out endless amounts of paperwork, all of which interferes with her efforts to seek work.

The Victims Unit denied Helena’s application for inclusion in the Registry of Victims, so she has not been able to access the reparations that victims of the armed conflict in Colombia are entitled to. This is why she filed a tutela action in 2018 with assistance from Women’s Link Worldwide. The court of first instance denied her request to be registered as a victim, but her case was later selected for review by the Constitutional Court and is pending ruling. Helena has also decided to turn to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP in Spanish) and ask to be included in case 007 as a victim, to seek justice for what was done to her.

This is an opportunity for both the Constitutional Court and the JEP to set an important global precedent by ensuring that women former combatants and girls illegally recruited by armed groups who were victims of sexual and reproductive violence within the groups may obtain comprehensive reparations, and perpetrators can be tried for the war crimes and human rights violations they committed against them. This case is relevant to women throughout the country, including to many rural, indigenous, and black women.