The Victim/Perpetrator Continuum:

Understanding the Roles and Experiences of Female Combatants
In Colombia’s Armed Conflict

Savitri Restrepo Álvarez

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACR: Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración (Colombian Agency for Reintegration)

AUC: Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-defense Forces of Colombia)

BACRIM: Bandas Criminales Emergentes (Emerging Criminal Groups)

DAS: Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (Colombia’s Administrative Department of Security)

DDR: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

ELN: Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)

EP: Ejército del Pueblo (The Army of the People)

EPL: Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Army for Liberation)

FARC: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)

GAHD: Group for Humanitarian Attention for the Demobilized

IDPs: Internally Displaced Persons

IEDs: Improvised Explosive Devices

M–19: Movimiento 19 de Abril (19th of April Movement)

MOS: Military Occupational Specialty

NCHM: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (Colombia’s National Center for Historical Memory)

IOM: International Organization for Migration

IUD: Intrauterine Device

TRC: Truth and Reconciliation Commission

UNDDDR: United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Center
ABSTRACT

In December 2015, supported by the Schiff fellowship, I traveled to Colombia to interview recently demobilized female FARC guerillas participating in state reintegration programs. Estimates suggest that 40% of the combatants in Colombia’s decades-long conflict are women. However, the complex role that women have played has largely been overlooked. Much of the literature on conflict resolution assumes a dichotomy in which women are either ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators.’ In reality, the distinction between these absolute categories is never entirely clear. The purpose of my trip was to examine women’s particular experiences as combatants, looking at the circumstances that led them to join the FARC, the roles they played within the organization, and their transition back into mainstream society. My research reveals that there is no easy distinction between victims and perpetrators in the conflict, as the majority of female combatants describe an ambiguous experience in which coercion and consent, empowerment and abuse coexist in uneasy and tenuous relationships.

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1 Keith Stanski, “Terrorism, Gender, and Ideology: A Case Study of Women Who Join the Revolutionary Armed
First and foremost I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Christopher Candland, for his unconditional support, insightful guidance and tireless encouragement throughout this process. As my professor, major and thesis advisor at Wellesley, I take this opportunity to thank him for pushing me, over the past years, to take my work in new directions and for nourishing my interest in social science fieldwork. Without his mentorship, this thesis would not have been possible.

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I cannot express enough thanks to the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) in Cali, particularly to Andrea Barrero, without whom I would not have been able to conduct my interviews. I am indebted to Fabio Cardozo, regional peace negotiator for assisting me in preparing for the fieldwork, to former combatants of the M-19 for welcoming me into their home and entrusting me with her stories, and to all ACR participants who contributed personal experiences for the realization of this study.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Preface

As a Colombian woman, my honors thesis arises from a personal concern about how the decades-long military conflict has affected women in Colombia’s illegal armed forces, and how female guerrillas can overcome the contradictions, voids, and strains that result from their participation in the nation’s conflict. I come from a family that has been largely unaffected by the worst forms of violence, often characterized by massacres, forced ‘disappearances,’ and cases of torture and displacement. However, my family and I have not been completely isolated from the serious threats and dangers that are a constant product of Colombia’s armed conflict.

As a young girl, I often heard my parents speak of ‘The Violence’ being inflicted upon thousands of people. However, given my inability to fully comprehend it, I disassociated myself from the conflict. The FARC remained a distant notion, “a group of bad people living in the jungles.” This perception was shattered, however, on the 20th of September 2001, when a high school friend was kidnapped by the FARC. At the age of eleven, Laura was captured and held hostage for over a year in the Cordillera Mountains. Laura was sitting in the back of our school bus. About twenty minutes away from the school, five men with guns boarded the vehicle. One of them ordered everyone to put their heads down, as the other men pulled Laura off the bus. In less than an hour, she was already being taken up to the mountains. As a witness to Laura’s capture and to her family’s grief following the incident, I experienced first-hand the real effects of war and violence. After Laura’s release I became increasingly familiar with the destruction and trauma that accompany Colombia’s war, as several other incidents of violence involving family members and friends followed.
Through these experiences, I gained a firsthand knowledge of the most immediate victims of the conflict. At the same time, I was left with many unanswered questions regarding the people on ‘the other side’; the guerrilla fighters and operatives categorized as the ‘victimizers.’ Until very recently, discussion of the guerrillas in Colombia was taboo. Colombia’s ‘code of silence’ was strongly rooted, I believe, in society’s fear of being accused as sympathizers of the insurgent groups.

This fear and reluctance to discuss the complexities of the pervasive conflict, violence and human rights abuses has had fundamental socio-economic costs for individuals, local communities, civil society institutions and Colombia as a whole. This research seeks to contribute to the important emerging debate on conflict and peace within Colombia by challenging ingrained taboos regarding women’s situations as members of active guerrilla groups. As proposed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his famous 1997 address, I believe that all Colombians, victims, victimizers, civilians and negotiators, need to understand that forgiveness is liberating and is the only path to “true enduring peace.”2 By the end of this research, I hope that my readers will be able to re-imagine a new Colombia, where forgiveness and reconciliation lie at the heart of the post-conflict national initiative. In this way, I hope to contribute to building peace and understanding in my country.

**Impetus for Research**

The Colombian government, under President Juan Manuel Santos, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country’s largest left-wing rebel group led by ‘Timochenko’ (aka Timoleon Jimenez)3 began formal peace talks in November 2012 in

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2 Desmond Tutu and Douglas Abrams, *God has a dream: A vision of hope for our time* (Image, 2004). Pg.52
3 Given name: Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri
Havana, Cuba. This has been an effort to end more than five decades of armed conflict with devastating consequences for the country. After President Santos took office in 2010, he began secret peace talks with the FARC, which ultimately resulted in the formal negotiations currently being watched by the international community. As these negotiations come close to reaching a final deal regarding the terms of the transition, all parties have reiterated their commitment to achieving a ‘Final Accord for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Long-Lasting Peace,’ which includes a definitive, bilateral ceasefire and disarmament. The agenda of the ongoing talks comprises six all-encompassing points, which aim to address both the causes and the effects of the conflict. These include rural reform, political participation, illicit drugs, victims, ending of the conflict and implementation. Of the six points, negotiators have reached an agreement on the issues of victims, land reform, the FARC’s future political participation and the problem of the illicit drug trade. The remaining points, including the question of how to reintegrate over 8,000 FARC fighters into civilian life, are still highly contested. In accordance with the terms of the negotiations, regardless of the current agreement on some points, nothing can be acted upon until a final peace deal has been signed.

The FARC and the government had established a March 23, 2016 deadline to sign a final agreement in Cuba, following which Colombians from all walks of life would have voted in a referendum scheduled for the same month. However, the negotiations were delayed over remaining differences between the FARC and the Colombian government. Chief Colombian government negotiator Humberto de la Calle asserted that there “was no point in rushing into a bad agreement.” Despite these delays, the pressing and important nature of this study is

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4 Adam Isacson, Joint Communiqué, January 19 2016.
5 “What is at stake in the Colombian peace process?,” BBC 2015. Pg.1
6 Ibid.
magnified by the fact that both sides have committed to reach a deal by the end of the year.\footnote{BBC News, "Colombia-FARC peace talks delayed over 'differences'," \textit{BBC News}, March 24 2016. Pg.1-2}

As President Santos stated after reaching a landmark agreement on transitional justice, “2016 will be the year that Colombia sees a new dawn.”\footnote{Constitución Política De Colombia, "Constitución Política de Colombia," \textit{Bogotá, Colombia: Leyer} (1991).} In voting ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the adoption and implementation of the negotiated peace agreement, Colombian citizens would decide the future trajectory of the conflict. According to the Colombian constitution of 1994, a referendum represents the voice of the Colombian people and gives voters the power to approve or reject an executive decision.\footnote{The name BACRIM was created by the government of former President Álvaro Uribe in the aftermath of the demobilization of the AUC (right-wing paramilitary groups).} At least 13\% of eligible voters must cast a ballot in order for quorum to be reached, representing 4,396,625 total votes. In the event that the ‘no’ vote wins, the state must abide by the electorate’s decision and presumably re-engage in military activities against the illegal armed forces, despite all of the advances made towards reaching a final peace deal. The risk is not just that of having thousands of men, women and children return to the mountains to take up arms once again. More important, perhaps, is the danger of having hundreds of demobilized, unemployed ex-combatants vulnerable to recruitment by drug traffickers and BACRIM\footnote{Juan Carlos Monroy Giraldo, "Bacrim, una amenaza y hay que contenerlas, dice Naranjo," \textit{El Colombiano}, Enero 25 2011. Pg.1} (emerging criminal bands), a vast array of different criminal groups and enterprises which have been described by former National Police Chief General Naranjo as “the principal threat to Colombia” in the near future.\footnote{"El Ministro del Interior Juan Fernando Cristo explica el Plebiscito por la paz." Pg.2-3}

Even though many Colombians have welcomed and embraced the progress that has been made, there are “still powerful voices” opposing the peace negotiations and questioning the government’s ability to implement the reintegration process.\footnote{“El Ministro del Interior Juan Fernando Cristo explica el Plebiscito por la paz.” Pg.2-3} These “powerful voices” include that of former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who has repeatedly urged his followers
to abstain from voting. Critics of the peace process rely on two main arguments: first, the increase in violence that will allegedly follow the agreement due to the government’s failure to require a cease of hostilities and criminal activities, and second, the impunity and even political power that will be offered to individuals responsible for committing some of the conflict’s most atrocious crimes.\textsuperscript{12} Current signs, however, are promising. Since the beginning of peace talks in 2012, the government and the FARC have declared six unilateral ceasefires. According to Fabrizio Hochschild, UN humanitarian coordinator in Colombia, conflict-related violence has been reduced to its lowest level in thirty years.\textsuperscript{13} “Massive displacement [has] decreased 27% compared to the 32 months prior to the negotiations,” added Hochschild. The trend is towards a more lasting peace, rather than a return to violence.

As Colombia takes its first unsteady steps towards peace, it will need to navigate the myriad complexities of such a transition. The consequence of having an inaccurate or limited understanding of who perpetrates political violence and how women are implicated in conflict only grows in importance as the country seeks to design effective reintegration programs and to ensure that justice is pursued fairly. According to the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR), responsible for advising on, coordinating and executing the reintegration process, by February 2014 there were a total of 56,197 demobilized guerrilla fighters in Colombia. The ACR directly serves and supports 30,692 of these, among which 84.06% are men (25,800) and 15.94% are women (4,892).\textsuperscript{14} The fact that the rebel group has come to progressively embrace women in its cause is not news to Colombians. As a result of FARC’s efforts in the


\textsuperscript{13} Adriaan Alsema, "FARC ceasefires caused decrease in violence in Colombia: UN," El Colombiano, August 20 2015. Pg.1

\textsuperscript{14} Juan Manuel Castro, "Perspectiva de Genero en el Proceso de Reintegracion," ed. Relaciones Internacionales y Alianzas Estrategicas Grupo de Cooperacion (Bogota, Colombia: ACR Publicación Oficial, 2014). Pg. 4
1990s to establish a more flexible ideology and a new political profile, the number of women increased dramatically so that today almost 40% of the 18,000-member organization are women, with some fronts approaching 50%. This makes women an important group of actors in the conflict.

Despite the long-standing FARC practice of incorporating women into their ranks and the significant increase of demobilized female guerrillas; in the history of Colombia’s peace processes, women have often been left out of the equation. A key factor for the success and sustainability of Colombia’s current peace deal is the inclusion of women in the conversation. Overlooking the perspectives, experiences, roles and needs of almost half of the FARC’s mixed-gender army, as well as that of women from communities where ex-guerrillas will relocate, would be a disastrous mistake. As this thesis will argue, female guerrillas have performed a variety of strategic, enlistment, support, and combat roles in the FARC, which have shaped their experiences both as members of the organization and as demobilized ex-combatants. At this critical juncture, peace planners must recognize the extent and nature of women’s participation during the conflict, as well as their unique needs and desires. For instance, the reintegration programs designed to offer job training and economic opportunities to women must take into account the unconventional skills that FARC members have acquired during their participation in the conflict. Neglecting these unique skills and experiences may result in frustrated efforts to reintegrate all participants. Assigning a female FARC battalion commander (who has reached significant leadership positions) a job as a domestic helper, for instance, might increase her risk of recidivism or recruitment into other forms of organized crime.

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15 Stanski, "Terrorism, Gender, and Ideology: A Case Study of Women Who Join the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)." Pg.139
To arrive at a better understanding of the contribution of women in the FARC, researchers and policymakers should look beyond just those violent acts which affect women negatively. It is crucial to holistically analyze the myriad experiences that shape women’s thoughts, decisions and actions. The best (and perhaps only) way to guarantee that programs are designed to directly address the unique concerns of women is to listen to former and current FARC members and to allow ex-combatants to speak for themselves about their needs and circumstances. Consequently, it is imperative that Colombian leaders, negotiators, and FARC representatives in Havana take seriously those studies and policy recommendations that incorporate the voices of a diverse community of Colombian women. It is precisely this commitment to gender equality in the aftermath of conflict, this sensitivity to the particularities of context, which will determine whether or not ex-combatants are ultimately welcomed or ostracized in their transition to civilian life.

This thesis draws upon existing feminist theoretical perspectives on women’s roles in armed conflict, and aspires to advance our understanding of how these roles can define their identity, experiences and contributions once they are reintegrated into society. Examining the social conditions and ideological pressures that influence women’s recruitment into and involvement in illegal armed forces can reveal more subtle origins, nature, and complexities of women’s participation. Are female combatants attracted by the FARC’s egalitarian ideology and the possibility of escaping traditional gender roles? Or are they motivated by a desire to escape poverty, domestic abuse and poor access to education? With these insights, I hope that policymakers, the media, and the public may be more likely to approach and address left-wing armed guerrillas not only as a violent political entity, but also as the product of interrelated social, psychological, cultural, political, and economic factors.

17 Ibid.
After exploring much of the influential work on Colombia’s decades-long armed conflict, I have found that women remain to a large extent invisible – if not absent – in large parts of the literature. For the most part, scholars of war and post-conflict reconstruction have traditionally viewed women as victims, rather than as perpetrators, of violence – displaced, destitute, their families often scattered or murdered. In contrast, female fighters are often portrayed as anomalous to women’s traditional roles as ‘peaceful bystanders’ and ‘caregivers.’ As a result, there is an urgent need to elucidate the ambivalent, multifaceted experiences of women in conflict, so that sensitive and appropriate policy responses can be crafted to accommodate them.

In the chapters that follow, I will analyze how these women are able to transition back into mainstream society after engaging in activities that transgress gender norms. Are demobilized women more likely to be stigmatized and ostracized than their male counterparts because of their past surrounded by weapons and death, as well as their seeming loss of femininity? Early in the research process, I encountered contradictions in women’s experiences of being fighters. Some women claimed to have had a positive and constructive experience, contrary to stereotypes depicting women solely as victims of war. Others, however, expressed feelings of disillusionment and loss once back in civilian life. Despite their different experiences as guerrilla fighters, however, almost all women described the difficulties of readapting to society.

In this thesis, I examine in detail the role that women fighters have played as operatives and combatants in the conflict. I explore the numerous ways in which Colombian society views female fighters in non-traditional roles, and how these fighters’ experiences are shaped

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19 Andrea Méndez, "Militarized Gender Performativity: Women and Demobilization in Colombia’s FARC and AUC" (Citeseer, 2012). Pg.234
through being forced to perform and adopt traditionally masculine behaviors in order to survive. In acknowledging the ambivalent and multifaceted roles of women in the conflict, I propose new ways in which emerging transitional justice mechanisms should approach the issue of female ex-guerrillas in the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process. Are female fighters truly consenting participants, or are they coerced into the movement and then indoctrinated, abused, and prevented from leaving? How can a nuanced response to this question inform state policy? Negotiating this distinction and appreciating the extent of women's agency and participation (or lack thereof) is crucial in order for the government to craft an approach that properly accommodates female ex-combatants in DDR programs. In their return to civilian lives in the midst of ongoing tensions, women combatants often suffer a triple hardship from which their male counterparts are spared: exclusion from their families and home communities, hostility from their former armed groups still engaged in conflict, and neglect from the government itself. The broader aim of this thesis is therefore to add a new perspective to the peace process debate, to ensure that female ex-combatants are not sidelined or forgotten at this crucial juncture, and to serve as an important practical tool for their reintegration into civilian life.

Relevant Scholarship

Recently, the subject of women’s roles in war has attracted increased attention in both academic scholarship and political debate.\textsuperscript{21} Notwithstanding this growing interest, a comprehensive, nuanced account of the role of gender in war is still lacking in the scholarship on conflict and conflict resolution. Much of the literature sees men as the protagonists of conflict in which women and children are the inevitable victims. In this respect, women are often portrayed as weak, subordinate, and less likely to generate violent acts.\textsuperscript{22} Other writers choose to defend women’s agency, arguing that they can be the equals of men as active combatants. Taken together, this body of work tends to assume a binary interpretation in which women are either ‘victims,’ subjected to rape, forced abortions and other abuses, or ‘perpetrators,’ active fighters who should not simply be defined as ‘victims’ because of their sex and gender.\textsuperscript{23} In reality, the distinction between these absolute categories – victim vs. perpetrator – is never entirely clear. While women are indeed victims of violence in the context of conflict, this representation ignores the experiences of women who have joined and fought alongside men in illegal armed groups and militarized organizations. At the same time, active combatants often face uniquely degrading treatment linked to their sex and gender. Of particular concern is the lack of understanding of competing narratives of victimhood and agency, which influences the way in which authorities approach the victim/perpetrator distinction in conflict. The tendency to view women combatants and their militarization through binary categories emerges from common misperceptions about the context in which

\textsuperscript{21} Joshua Partlow and Julia Symmes Cobb, "An end to Colombia’s war seems close — except in rebel territory," \textit{The Washington Post}, October 17 2015.
\textsuperscript{22} Juan Carlos Ramírez Rodríguez, "Mujer y violencia: un hecho cotidiano," \textit{Salud pública de México} 35, no. 2 (1993), Pg.149
\textsuperscript{23} Gloria Yaneth Castrillon Pulido, "¿Victimas o Victimarias? El rol de las mujeres en las FARC: Una aproximación desde la teoría de género," \textit{Observatorio de Políticas, Ejecución y Resultados de la Administración Pública (OPERA)}, no. 16 (2015). Pg.78
these narratives are constructed. To fully understand the effects of non-state militarism on women, a more nuanced conception of the definition of ‘combatant’ and of the ambivalence of women’s experiences should be introduced to the debate.

Behind every army the world has sent marching over land, and with a good many of the naval forces as well, there were always camp followers, who might be the wives of soldiers following from the start, or women who joined along the way. They cooked, carried the baggage, served as nurses and as sanitation officers, who buried the dead, served as scouts and spies, and suffered the same rigors as the soldiers.24

Salmonson, J. (1991)

Throughout history, women have actively participated in violent conflict as combatants in regular armed forces or guerrilla groups. The cases of Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, El Salvador and Colombia, among others, illustrate the wide-ranging roles and experiences of female fighters.25 These conflicts have revealed the many ways in which women and girls can participate as fighters on the front lines, guardians in the camps, mediators between opposing sides, negotiators of peace, or even as nurses and caregivers. Recognizing this extensive range of roles and obligations, a number of scholars have begun to question the deep-seated myth of women as ‘peaceful by nature.’ Cordula Reimann, for example, argues that designating women as “the peaceful sex” is not consistent with historical evidence.26 On the contrary, women have shown their capacity to use and provoke violence in a multitude of contexts. For this reason, women cannot continue to be pigeonholed as socially or biologically nonviolent. To the extent that it is apparent, women’s ‘peacefulness’ may be

24 Nathalie De Watteville, *Addressing gender issues in demobilization and reintegration programs* (World Bank, 2002). Pg.1
25 Ibid.
more accurately understood, Reimann argues, as a result of their exclusion from power and their outranked position in hierarchical gender relations.²⁷

With extensive evidence from recent wars in Central America, South America and Africa, a significant body of work devoted to the study of women and their role in violent conflict has emerged. Experts in the field of gender and conflict intervention, such as Elise Barth, have explored the contributions of women to various recent conflicts. Barth has established, for instance, that Tamil women occupied a key role in Sri Lanka’s civil war (1983-2009), where at least 30% of combatants were women attracted by the prospect of a more equal society.²⁸ Similarly in Africa, a number of guerrilla groups and liberation movements in Ethiopia, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Algeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, Uganda and Djibouti presented a high concentration of women in military ranks. In a similar vein, Ilja A. Luciak examines the role of women in the various stages of revolutionary and national politics in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. Beginning with women as participants and leaders in guerrilla movements, Luciak insists persuasively that “gender equality and meaningful democratization” in Central America requires the full incorporation of women.²⁹

Acknowledgement of the increasing number of women participants in armed conflict globally has led a number of scholars to explore the roots and gender dynamics of peace movements by recognizing the ways in which societies manipulate gender ideologies. Feminist researcher and writer Cynthia Cockburn takes a gendered look at peace and war in

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²⁷ Ibid.
²⁹ Ilja A Luciak, After the revolution: Gender and democracy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala (JHU Press, 2001). Pg.227
relation to the distinctions between male and female fighters. In her paper presented at the World Bank’s conference on issues of gender and violence in 1999, Cockburn stresses the importance of gender consciousness to understanding how women may be positioned differently, and have special experiences, needs, strengths and skills during wartime.\(^\text{30}\) In this vein, Vanessa Farr offers a specific approach to implementing Cockburn’s concept of gender-aware demobilization, disarmament and reintegration. In her working paper, “Gendering Demilitarization as a Peace-Building Tool,” Farr argues that to ensure a peaceful post-conflict transition, the accommodation of women’s rights and needs must lie at the heart of all policy-making.\(^\text{31}\)

Despite the increasing number of feminist authors who argue for the integration of a gender perspective into the formulation of policies in the aftermath of conflict, a holistic understanding of the complex, fluid roles and power relations involved in the fragile transition process remains limited. While pieces of the puzzle do exist, a complete picture is elusive. Perhaps the most meaningful attempt to provide a broad analysis of the involvement of women in violent conflict is to be found in *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors: Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* by Caroline N. O. Moser and Fiona Clark, a collection of essays bringing together a range of interdisciplinary perspectives. Through empirical case studies, various authors draw significant conclusions that depart from the simplistic division of roles between men as war perpetrators and women as victims, particularly of sexual abuse and forced abduction. In arguing for a more nuanced approach, these authors underscore the role that women play as active participants in conflict situations. A perspective that labels


\(^{31}\) Vanessa A Farr, *Gendering demilitarization as a peacebuilding tool* (Boon, Germany: BICC Bonn, 2002). Pg.27
women as ‘victims’ and men as ‘perpetrators,’ they argue, denies men and women their agency and associated voice as actors in the process. These authors repeatedly draw upon the issue of agency and identity to contend that men and women are, above all else, ‘social actors.’ While this work is at the cutting edge of de-linking women from passive and peaceful stereotypes, it fails to acknowledge the ambiguous distinction that exists between women as victims and as perpetrators. Therefore, even while acknowledging a female presence in the ranks of military combat, women are still divided into binary categories: passive victims or engaged actors. This theoretical framework continues to undermine what is a critical theme in my own thesis: the need to question and deconstruct the contradistinctive rhetoric of ‘victimhood’ and ‘culpability,’ which obscures complex underlying truths about women’s varied experiences in conflict and peace-building.

While the proliferation of regional conflicts worldwide in the wake of the Cold War catalyzed the development of a literature on women and war generally, less gender-oriented work has been done on the roles and experiences of women combatants in Colombia’s five-decade-long armed conflict. Most of the literature that does exist on gender and conflict in Colombia has focused on the leftist guerrilla movements that demobilized in the 1990s, such as the 19th of April Movement (M-19), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) and the Quintín Lame Armed Movement. A critical academic research paper published by the Women and Future Foundation, for instance, compiles a number of testimonies of demobilized women.

32 Caroline Moser and Fiona Clark, Victims, perpetrators or actors?: Gender, armed conflict and political violence (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).
33 The M-19 began its demobilization process in the 1990’s and turned into an official political party called the “M-19 Democratic Alliance.”
34 Most of its former members demobilized in 1991, although a dissident faction led by alias Megateo, continues to operate.
35 Indigenous guerrilla group organized to extend indigenous lands through land invasion and to defend indigenous communities. In 1991 the group entered the process of demobilization.
The study aims to explore the reasons that drove women to join these armed groups in the 1970s and 1980s, and to examine how power relations in military structures transformed women’s subjectivities, influencing their views on sexuality and motherhood. Concurrently, Human Rights Watch and Erika Páez, coordinator for Save the Children, published two of the most comprehensive accounts of child soldiers in Colombia. These children make up a third of the total number of those actively involved in the armed conflict. Out of Colombia’s total population of 42 million in the early 2000s, 17 million were children, and 6 million of them were affected by the violence of the conflict. These accounts discuss the recruitment, training and experiences of children as guerrilla fighters, as well as their behavior after demobilization. Through a gendered lens, Páez specifically addresses the ‘invisibility’ that girl child soldiers often feel during their rehabilitation processes. DDR programs in Colombia, the author argues, remain ill equipped to tackle the needs of girls and to challenge the stigma attached to their involvement in armed groups. This works represent the emergence of a literature that includes the individual voices of women and girls who have directly participated in conflict, yet emphasizes a single dimension of women’s experiences of conflict – their victimization – to the exclusion of others.

As a result of the widespread attention and media coverage elicited by the unsuccessful peace talks held from 1998 to 2002 under former President Andrés Pastrana, a new wave of literature aimed at a public audience emerged. This literature, in fictional and non-fiction writings, includes several historical accounts alongside anecdotal descriptions of

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38 Erika Paez, "Girls in the Colombian Armed Groups: A Diagnosis: 'Let us Dream!'," (Bogota, Colombia: Germany: Terre des Hommes, Save the Children UK, 2002).
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
women’s lives as guerrilla combatants. These forms have allowed authors to enter the relatively uncharted territory of the involvement and contributions of women in guerrilla armies. For instance, Patricia Lara, a well-respected Colombian journalist, has dedicated her career to writing books critical of the army’s anti-guerrilla strategies. Her most prominent work, *Las mujeres en la guerra* (*Women in War*), is drawn from interviews with women on opposing sides of the war and delves into issues of gender and domestic violence.\(^{41}\) Similarly, two former leaders of the M-19 guerrilla army have contributed to this new trend with important autobiographical works. *Razones de vida* (*Reasons for Living*) by Vera Grabe and *Escrito para no morir* (*Written Not to Die*) by Maria Eugenia Vásquez, seek to explain why these women chose the life of a guerrilla fighter, taking up arms to achieve social justice and change in Colombia. Grabe’s anecdotal work offers a unique female perspective and provides a powerful testimony of her family’s history, her childhood and her motivations for joining the movement.\(^{42}\) Vásquez’s story focuses on her experiences as an active urban guerrilla member, her insights as a young student at the National University in Bogota, the perils of being a woman in a predominantly male world, and the uncertainties of returning to civilian life.\(^{43}\)

In addition to the new wave of fictional and anecdotal accounts that emerged in correlation with the increased demobilizations of the 1990s, a large amount of journalistic work followed in the early 2000s. Renowned writers like Elvira Sánchez-Blake, Elsa Blair,\(^{44}\)

\(^{41}\) Patricia Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* (Bogota, Colombia: Planeta, 2000).
Yoana Fernanda Nieto, Luz Maria Londoño,45 and others have undertaken significant empirical research to understand why thousands of women from diverse armed groups in Colombia took up arms to achieve social justice and change, and what their experience was of the reintegration process. For example, in her book *El legado del desarme (The Legacy of Disarmament)*, Sánchez-Blake focuses on her informants’ sense of frustration, uncertainty and hopelessness during their reincorporation to society. Drawing on their testimonies, she imagines ways in which women can overcome wartime trauma and find personal fulfillment.46 These authors have successfully portrayed the connections between the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ in their female informants’ narratives. They have also emphasized the repression that their interviewees have suffered because of their sex and gender. In so doing, these literary works represent a valuable contribution for scholars interested in the effects of women’s participation in violent acts.

Again, though, the majority of this literature is dedicated to a study of older, now-defunct armed groups such as the M-19 and the ELP, which flourished in the 1970s and 1980s. Comparatively little has been done to analyze more recent trends within active groups like the FARC, in part because they still pose an eminent threat to outsiders. Several organizations exist, however, to produce research in this regard. Colombia’s National Center for Historical Memory (NCHM) and the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) are two major national and public entities that produce regular reports and statistics on the FARC in relation to DDR processes. Aside from these resources, some written accounts do exist of

conditions in the FARC. For example, extensive research and interviews with victims and perpetrators have allowed two internationally renowned journalists, Claudia Palacios and Salud Hernández-Mora, to publish books depicting the lives and experiences of FARC guerrillas. With information gathered from consultations with former leaders involved in successful and frustrated peace efforts, Palacios proposes valuable insights into efforts to end the war in Colombia and argues for the need for all Colombians to forgive their aggressors in order to secure peace. Over and above these works, several scholarly articles evaluating Colombia’s peace negotiations and emerging transitional justice mechanisms have appeared in the past four years. While existing works interrogate these processes at an abstract or institutional level, they generally fail to consider the implications for women in particular.

Encouraging signs do exist that an awareness of the importance of women in the construction of a sustainable peace is growing. A limited body of works exists which attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice for including a gender perspective into peace processes. Several writers have illustrated the nature and scope of violence against women and girls during the war and its aftermath. These scholars, including Jeremy S. Harkey, Jeanne Ward, Mendy Marsh, Andrea Méndez, Monica M. Alzate, and Natalia Herrera,

49 Examples of such scholars include, among others, June S. Beittel (analyst in Latin American Affairs), Michael Shifter (President of the Inter-American Dialogue and Professor at Georgetown University), and Nazih Richani (Director of Latin American studied at Kean University).
51 Jeanne Ward and Mendy Marsh, "Sexual violence against women and girls in war and its aftermath: Realities, responses and required resources" (paper presented at the Symposium on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Beyond, Brussels, 2006).
52 Méndez, "Militarized Gender Performativity: Women and Demobilization in Colombia’s FARC and AUC."
54 Herrera and Porch, "'Like going to a fiesta'– the role of female fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP."
have shed light on the incidences of sexual violation, forced abortions and torture of civilian women and girls at the hands of FARC guerrillas. At the same time, much of the literature portraying women as ‘victims’ has received strong criticism in recent years, indicating a shift towards a feminist paradigm that recognizes female guerrillas as war protagonists and independent actors with agency and a long history of activism. Scholars such as Gloria Y. Castrillon Pulido, Keith Stanski, Melissa Herman, Catalina Rojas and Maria Truño Salvado argue that the roles women and men play in armed struggles are not predetermined. To a certain extent, these authors challenge gender norms by reversing the false dichotomy between men as protectors and perpetrators biologically inclined to violence, and women as victims predisposed towards peace.

The feminist framework in Colombia’s armed conflict has provided an approach that is, to a certain degree, sensitive to the complexity of gender stereotypes and the notion of victimhood. Nevertheless, relatively little is still known about women’s contributions, and the extent of their emancipation and agency during their involvement in violent acts is unclear. Fixating on female ex-guerrillas’ experiences as ‘victims’ or as ‘perpetrators’ reveals little about why and how women participate in illegal armed forces. The victim discourse undermines the notion of relative blame/innocence by creating rigid dichotomies that often result in exclusive and limiting arguments and seldom recognize a position somewhere in-

55 Castrillon Pulido, “¿Víctimas o Victimarias? El rol de las mujeres en las FARC: Una aproximación desde la teoría de género.”
56 Stanski, “Terrorism, Gender, and Ideology: A Case Study of Women Who Join the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).”
between the victim/perpetrator binary. Consequently, in my thesis I contribute to the existing gendered literature on Colombia’s armed conflict by demonstrating that ‘victimhood’ cannot be a unitary, ‘all or nothing’ category, but rather one that occurs along a continuum. In contrast to previous scholarship, my research posits a pragmatic understanding of the role and experiences of female ex-combatants. This understanding exhibits how female guerrillas are positioned simultaneously as victims and perpetrators, somewhere in between the two distinct poles of victimhood and culpability.

Methodology

(a) My Role as a Researcher

I began research, planning and scheduling for the interviews that I would conduct during two weeks of fieldwork several months before my arrival in Colombia in December 2015. Unlike many post-conflict research studies carried out once the most immediate dangers for the researcher or interviewee have passed, the fieldwork for this thesis was conducted in the midst of an ongoing conflict. The FARC remains an active guerrilla movement and tensions with the Colombian government are still high. The Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) responsible for the wellbeing and protection of demobilized fighters is reluctant to allow ‘outsiders’ conduct interviews through the agency that could jeopardize their own security and that of the ex-combatants. Since the conflict persists and the FARC have refused to demobilize and surrender their weapons, all of my interviewees are deserters who have left (or escaped from) their respective guerrilla units. While the ACR’s reintegration program provides some security and legal advice to those who need it, most deserters are still

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at a very high risk from their former groups seeking retribution. As explained to me by Eliana, a female ex-combatant who refused to participate in my focus group interviews, there cannot be an atmosphere of trust and safety during an ongoing war: “I cannot trust or speak in front of any of the other demobilized members here, you never know which one of them has been sent by the FARC as an infiltrator to find out what exactly we are telling the government.”

Mindful of these challenges, I spent months making personal phone calls, drafting formal letters and project proposals for the ACR centers situated around Colombia, and contacting non-profit organizations facilitating the reintegration of former guerilla members. After explaining the purpose and implications of my study, I received a positive response from ACR in the city of Cali. The ACR is the government’s predominant reintegration agency, with ex-combatants from approximately 120 municipalities participating in its programs. Specifically, the ACR center in Cali serves demobilized individuals from 33 out of the 120 municipalities, which offers a fairly representative sample of the population of women ex-combatants. Having been granted an unusual level of access by the center, I was careful to conduct my interviews with sensitivity. Establishing a meaningful connection with my study’s participants was the first step in ensuring a trusting environment that would result in their authentic testimonies. As a Colombian woman and a native to the city of Cali, I share characteristics with my interviewees such as gender, language, and a familiarity with places and people, which were key to presenting myself as a reliable ‘insider’ during the interview process.

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60 All direct quotations in this study are taken from oral interviews with FARC, ELN, and M-19 female ex-combatants conducted by the author in Cali, Colombia, December 2015. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities’ of all interviewees.
61 Jack Aldwinkle, "How Colombia Plans to Turn 32,000 Ex-jungle-dwelling Guerrillas into Useful Members of Society," Quartz, May 31 2015.
Establishing a rapport with my interviewees and being able to appreciate their testimonies in context and from the perspective of an ‘insider,’ was unique and extremely valuable for my findings. Nonetheless, I also played the role of an ‘outsider,’ given my experiences living and studying abroad as well as my relative distance from the most extreme forms of violence. This dual lens as an insider and outsider allowed me to engage intimately and critically with all of the participants in my fieldwork.

The ACR center scheduled individual interviews with thirty recently demobilized female guerillas. All of these women were explicitly told that the interview was non-mandatory. Moreover, the ordinary operations of the ACR center ceased during the month of December – when I conducted my interviews – and, as a result, all participants who showed up on the day of their interview came of their own accord, and especially for that purpose. While some of them were eager to share their testimonies from the start, others were more hesitant, but open nonetheless to sharing their stories. For many, the interview represented a chance to express anxieties and traumas that are overlooked by psychologists and social workers who attend up to fifty ex-combatants per day. I was initially warned by the ACR that for security reasons all my interviews were to be supervised, but ultimately my conversations were not overseen. After discussing in some detail with ACR staff the kinds of questions I planned to ask, they agreed to allow me a private room for all my interviews and to approve the recording of our conversations so long as the women themselves were comfortable. The majority of women I interviewed gave me meticulous descriptions of their lives and experiences as guerrilla fighters, including accounts of their most difficult moments.
(b) Qualitative and Quantitative Fieldwork in Colombia

(i) Ex-combatants

My research relied primarily on interviews with a total of twenty female ex-combatants of leftist guerrilla movements and right-wing paramilitary groups. These include twelve recently demobilized members of the FARC; two former ELN combatants; five female leaders and soldiers of the now-defunct M-19 guerrilla movement; and one female commander of the right wing paramilitary group, AUC. All interviews with the FARC and ELN former members and the paramilitary commander were conducted in the ACR center in 60 to 90 minute-long sessions during the course of a week. All interviewees came voluntarily and did not receive compensation for their participation (their out-of-pocket expenses were reimbursed and a light breakfast or lunch was provided). Most ex-combatants of the M-19 group demobilized in the 1990s, and so these interviews took place in the interviewees’ private homes or in public spaces such as cafés and shopping centers. The M-19 is no longer an active armed group, and has become a legitimate political party, with the result that these women no longer face immediate danger. For this reason I was able to conduct a focus group interview with four women who met one another after their DDR process and who currently belong to a national network of women ex-combatants called “Red Nacional de Mujeres Excombatientes de la Insurgencia.” For the final interview with a former member of the M-19, I travelled to Popayan, a city in the municipality of Cauca (approximately 140 kilometers from Cali).

Recognizing the complementary attributes of quantitative and qualitative data, I chose to combine these two methods to provide a more comprehensive picture of the issues being

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62 See Appendix B for photographs of FARC interviewees.
63 National Network of Women Ex-Combatants of the Insurgency
addressed. This research explores the life stories of twenty women who have lived through Colombia’s violent political conflict as members of illegal armed groups. The life story interview method features a set of open-ended questions that allowed me sufficient flexibility to extract the most information possible from each encounter. As a researcher, this method helped me to better understand and relate to the specific factors shaping my interviewees’ decision to join armed groups and then remain as guerilla fighters. By reconstructing their individual circumstances and the dynamics that influenced their decisions, I hope to evaluate their sense of self and recovery once having rejoined civil society. The interview I designed features a set of open-ended questions in five thematic areas: migration history, occupational history, economic history, social, cultural, and psychological history, and education.64

While in-depth interviews constitute the primary data source for this investigation, semi-quantitative approaches are also used, such as intercept surveys. These are one-on-one, impromptu surveys done on location. By giving out an anonymous questionnaire to all of my participants, I was able to quantify common trends or generalize patterns found in the personal face-to-face interviews. These ‘objective’ questionnaires are significant and complementary to my study, as they allowed me to measure intangible concepts using a wide-range of proxies.

Measuring women’s empowerment and resilience remains a challenging task for social researchers. For this reason, it is imperative to break down the complex word “empowerment,” into its smaller components: power within, power with, power to, and power over.65 In disaggregating power in this way, I gathered some evidence that might have been overlooked through a purely qualitative analysis. Asking female ex-combatants straightforward questions regarding their own experiences may shed light on meaningful

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64 See Appendix A for English and Spanish versions of the interview questionnaire.
65 Jo Rowlands, Questioning empowerment: Working with women in Honduras (Oxfam, 1997).
realms of empowerment and agency. As a measurement (proxy) for women’s leadership, empowerment, freedom and civil engagement, women were asked about the number of soldiers under their command or their training, their ability to voice their opinion or make decisions, and their association with civil organizations after demobilization.

(ii) Experts in the Field

Even though this study draws on evidence gathered primarily through interviews with female ex-combatants, key informant interviews were equally important as a means of collecting insights from a wide range of people – including community leaders, media professionals, legal experts, peace negotiators, and ACR personnel – who have firsthand knowledge of the experiences and challenges of demobilized ex-combatants in their route to reintegration. These experts, with their specialized knowledge and understanding, also provided me with unique perspectives on how their own fields and professions evaluate and adopt different policies to improve DDR processes.

During my fieldwork in Colombia, I had the opportunity to interview ACR’s regional staff including Andrea Barrero, Social Communication Director and journalist, Edwin Muñoz, Responsibility Adviser and anthropologist, Andres Felipe Stapper, Commercial Law attorney, and Rocío Gutierrez, Center Coordinator. In addition to these experts, I interviewed Clara Eugenia Botina, a community leader and director of the first Community-Based Reintegration Center in the city of Palmira called ‘El Centro de Formación Tejiendo Caminos para la Reintegración Comunitaria.’ This center aims to support the reintegration of female ex-combatants and heads of households from Palmira by creating capacity-building and training
programs, which instruct women in trades like weaving and agriculture so that they can generate a sustainable income and provide nutrition for their families.\textsuperscript{66}

The last section of this study focuses on the reintegration process of female ex-combatants \textit{vis-à-vis} current peace negotiations and those new policies that should be incorporated into future programs. In reaching its conclusions, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to interview Alejandro Eder Garcés, former national ACR director. In 2010, under President Santos, Eder was appointed as High Presidential Counselor for Social and Economic Reintegration in Colombia. In this role, he contributed to the reform of Colombia’s community-based reintegration strategy and “to deepening the process’ exposure in the international arena.”\textsuperscript{67} Finally, my research has received the support of Mariana Garcés Cordoba, Colombia’s current Minister of Culture. Mrs. Garcés has facilitated key contacts and sources of information that are highly involved with the current peace negotiations in Havana. Their insights and work related to FARC guerrillas and Colombia’s peace process were a very valuable source for this study. Of course, besides drawing evidence from the interviewees’ experiences and work, this research also relies on an extensive theoretical base of older and current literature in the field of women in conflict and post-conflict reintegration.

(iii) Obstacles during Fieldwork

I originally intended to arrange focus groups over and above individual interviews with all of the participants of this study so as to create a more dynamic and interactive setting that I assumed would encourage women to discuss their thoughts more freely with other interviewees. This group approach is commonly used within reintegration programs

\textsuperscript{66} See Appendix E for photographs of the center.
concerned with female ex-combatants after conflict; examples include programs in Sierra Leone and Liberia. In these contexts, focus groups are encouraged in acknowledgement of the fact that relationships are continuously being formed and remade. In my study, however, this participatory dynamic of trust building was impossible given the ongoing nature of the Colombian conflict. Even though an increasing number of FARC combatants are leaving their respective groups in response to the government’s reintegration promises, it is imperative to remember that they still represent a minority. Labelled as ‘traitors’ by their former organizations, deserters live in constant fear of being re-captured, extorted or killed. Data from the ACR indicates that 85% of demobilized women who unilaterally chose to leave their armed groups are now reported to live in urban environments, which offer them some small degree of security in anonymity. To protect themselves, most of my participants refused to share their personal stories with other women in the center, even if they had been in the same FARC unit. Ex-combatants are particularly afraid of the “milicianos,” FARC civilian informants in urban areas who are responsible for finding deserters that have joined the government’s reintegration programs.

While the paper questionnaires were very helpful in quantifying some data relating to women's roles, leadership skills, and level of decision-making, among others, I encountered two main challenges. First, most of my former FARC participants were front line fighters and occupied the lowest military ranks. A majority of them were coming from poor families in rural, FARC-controlled territories where they are deprived of access to health and education. Therefore, regardless of the succinctness of the paper questionnaire, most of my interviewees

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were not able to fill it out independently and required my assistance or that of an ACR staff. Second, even when some participants had the ability to read the questions in the survey, often they had a difficult time understanding a few questions. For example, it was easy for them to answer yes or no if they had received any training experience or had at some point soldiers under their command. However, questions that asked them to rate their decision-making ability, or to describe any "transferable skills" that could be applied in their current jobs were too conceptual and confusing to them. In these cases, participants either left it blank, answered "I don’t know,” or asked for explanation. In either case, answers to these questions were far from consistent and generated limited insights into common trends among my participants.

**Structure of the Project**

All of the sections in this thesis explore key questions relating to female guerillas’ experiences in armed conflict. In order to fully recognize women’s multifaceted involvement and participation, it is essential to explore their complex roles, responsibilities and interests throughout their lives as civilians and combatants so as to provide a comprehensive assessment of their agency, identity and power. This necessitates a close examination of their experiences starting from their recruitment and factors influencing their decision to join the movement, continuing through their participation as guerrilla members in times of war, and ending with their experiences as reintegrated civilians in a society torn apart by fear and mistrust.

Part One examines how women are recruited, and why female recruitment increased unusually rapidly over the past ten years. I explore the reasons affecting their vulnerability (focusing on socio-economic factors), as well as political factors that drove these women to
join the armed forces. The concepts of ‘consent’ and ‘coercion’ will be key in determining the
dynamics of victimhood and agency. This section will ask a crucial question: to what extent
are female guerrillas autonomous ‘actors’ with agency and 'associated voice' as willing
participants in the recruitment process? And do they remain as active, autonomous agents
once having joined the armed movement?

In Part Two, the testimonies of recently demobilized female FARC guerrillas are used
to examine the roles and experiences of women once they enter and become active in the
FARC’s military structure. As most women’s traumatic stories demonstrate, their time as
guerrilla fighters is one characterized by ambiguous situations of
empowerment/disempowerment and shifting power relations. These situations, in which they
behave as active and willing participants while at the same time being victimized, render any
assessment of women combatants as only ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators’ impossible. This section
attempts to find explanations for the presence or absence of violence against female
combatants across different FARC armed groups. These accounts are important to
understanding the repercussions of female combatants’ individual and collective experiences
as members of a hierarchical military structure.

Part Three draws on these findings about victimhood and culpability, as well as the
genral experiences of female combatants, in order to examine the ways in which that vital
information can be used to enhance and facilitate the DDR process. This section proposes a
gender-specific approach to be incorporated when reintegrating female ex-combatants who
have been simultaneously victims and perpetrators in the conflict. I evaluate how transitional
justice mechanisms should accommodate ambiguous cases such as (a) women fighters who
might have been consenting participants at first, but who were later coerced into the
movement, indoctrinated, abused, and prevented from leaving, and (b) women fighters who were initially coerced into the movement but later operated within it as apparently willing participants. As increasing numbers of deserters decide to reintegrate into society, the importance of an accurate understanding of the complex and ambivalent experiences of guerrilla combatants only grows in importance. I argue that most – if not all – women fall somewhere a victim/perpetrator continuum that adequately captures the ambivalence involved in each case. This section therefore serves as a guide for researchers, policymakers and Colombian citizens in general, urging them to look beyond violent acts and gender stereotypes in the making of sound policies that will contribute to achieving a sustainable peace in Colombia.
CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Colombia’s Armed Conflict

Colombia has suffered a civil war that has lasted a little longer than half a century, making it one of the longest and most brutal on the continent and one of the world’s “most complex internal wars of the century.” According to Ramsey W. Russel, Colombia’s protracted volatility has led to the emergence of a large literature on its vicious and multifaceted conflict. Characterized by widespread political strife and a culture of violence, the conflict has led to a myriad human rights violations and war crimes.

The origins of the armed conflict can be traced back to Simon Bolivar and independence from Spanish rule in 1819. The colonial legacy left a fractious political environment and triggered a power struggle within the elite. For more than 150 years, Colombian politics vacillated between two parties. The Liberals were reform-minded and drew their support from autonomous peasants and landless workers, while the Conservatives represented landowners and the workers reliant on their patronage, with the backing of the Catholic Church. According to Kathleen Malley-Morrison, in the 1920s and 1930s peasants and their reformist allies fought land-owning elites over “strict working and living conditions, disputed property rights, and restricted land access for smaller agrarians.” This class conflict and the political divide between the Liberal and Conservative parties fueled inter-communal conflict that gave rise to Colombia’s most violent period. Referred to as “La Violencia” (The

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Violence), this was a de facto war between Liberals and Conservatives that was waged between 1946 and 1966.  

While there is no direct or linear causal relationship between the period of La Violencia and the contemporary Colombian conflict, recent and past periods of violence are intimately intertwined. To fully understand current, daily lived Colombian realities and to examine the future of the decades-long armed conflict, it is imperative to start by analyzing the country’s most violent era. Reported deaths during La Violencia ranged from 80,000 to 400,000, marking this period as one of the bloodiest in Colombian history. Approximately 600,000 people were injured directly or indirectly by the conflict. Many of those affected were among the thousands of Colombians who fled their homes in search for safety in other towns or rural areas. Taking into account the population of cities that were directly affected by mass violence, one can argue that at least 20% of the total Colombian population experienced violence between 1946 and 1966. However, statistical data for this period is variable because, in many regions of the country, records were not kept at all. This lack of complete and consistent data during this time is attributed to the fact that many of the record-keepers were, in fact, the very perpetrators of the violence itself.

Many historians have argued that the assassination of the Liberal presidential candidate, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, on the 9th of April 1948 was the ‘official start date’ of La Violencia; in reality, however, it started well before that. By that time the interparty competition had already escalated into a larger conflict that challenged the existing bipartisan hegemony. A number of studies have listed the legacy of socio-economic inequality, political

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74 Frank Safford and Marco Palacios, Colombia: Fragmented land, divided society (Oxford University Press, USA, 2002). Pg.361
76 Ibid.
violence, Cold War tensions, and the influence of Communist revolutions around Latin America as factors that fueled the formation of independent leftist guerrilla movements in Colombia.\textsuperscript{77} Both communism and socialism had taken root in the early 1940s and 1950s as “a voice for the poor, landless and working class struggle” against the rich and business-owning elite.\textsuperscript{78} For instance, the victory of the Marxist revolution in Cuba in 1959 inaugurated a new historical movement in the Colombian revolutionary process. Fidel Castro, who described himself as a modern Simon Bolivar destined to bring “freedom and unity” to Latin America, along with Ernesto Guevara (known as ‘Che’), an Argentinian intellectual and revolutionary, played a crucial role in spreading socialist revolutionary ideas throughout the continent.\textsuperscript{79}

Both Liberals and Conservatives are to blame for the violent period and for the instability, which prepared the ground for the first guerilla groups. In response to the legally elected but minority Conservative president, the Liberals resorted to armed confrontation in an attempt to block the government. This resistance, together with the aforementioned social and political factors, culminated in the emergence of the first organized guerrilla forces that defied the Conservative-dominated authorities.\textsuperscript{80} Concurrently, the conservative government began to infiltrate and politicize public security forces including the police and the army, which were previously assumed to be neutral. In response to the Liberals’ use of guerrilla tactics, the Conservatives did not waste any time in forming their own counter-insurgent forces made up primarily of devoted Conservative peasants.\textsuperscript{81} After the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, guerrilla warfare intensified significantly as each band grew in size and aggressiveness. The

\textsuperscript{77} Ramsey, "Critical bibliography on la Violencia in Colombia."
\textsuperscript{78} Steven Dudley, \textit{Walking ghosts: Murder and guerrilla politics in Colombia} (Routledge, 2004).
\textsuperscript{79} Bert, "The Colombian Civil War." Pg.60
\textsuperscript{80} Bailey, "La violencia in Colombia."
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
situation worsened when contending bands began to fund their activities through the use of illegal activities, including “extortions, pillage, expropriations, and the forced sale of crops.” Coffee, sugar, cotton and cacao were among the crops that were most severely affected as they were harvested and then forcibly sold for outrageously low prices.

By the early 1960s, seven different guerrilla groups had formed strongholds in Colombia’s political milieu. The three largest and most well known were the ‘19th of April Movement (M-19),’ the ‘National Liberation Army (ELN),’ and the ‘Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).’ In the 1980s, right-wing paramilitary forces acting in opposition to the left-wing guerrillas also emerged as new actors. The paramilitary groups were unified under the umbrella organization ‘United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).’ In contrast to the leftist guerrilla groups, the AUC attracted primarily elite landowners, drug traffickers, and members of the security forces. Besides the differences between Liberal guerrillas and Conservative paramilitary forces, there were also fundamental distinctions between the leftist guerrilla groups. While the ELN, was to some extent, the direct result of Cold War ideologies, the FARC has been defined as “the heir of a long and endogenous process of accumulation” of rural peasant armed struggle.

With the United States’ guidance and aid, the counterinsurgency campaign against the rebel groups officially began on May 18, 1964 when the Colombian army surrounded and attacked some of the principal rebel agrarian communities. In 1959, under the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, the United States sent a Special Survey Team comprised of experts

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82 Ibid.
83 See Appendix C (b) for the current geographical presence of armed actors in Colombia’s conflict.
86 Oliver Villar and Drew Cottle, Cocaine, death squads, and the war on terror: US imperialism and class struggle in Colombia (NYU Press, 2011).
with irregular warfare experience from all over the world to assess the Colombian situation.\textsuperscript{87}

By urging the Colombian army to establish a counter-guerrilla combat force and to form a public information service with “covert psychological” and “warfare capability,” the Special Survey Team’s recommendations soon began to shape the landscape of the battle.\textsuperscript{88} Labeling the liberal guerrillas would-be “independent republics,” the Colombian government sent 16,000 troops (one-third of its army forces) accompanied by tanks, helicopters, and warplanes into direct combat.\textsuperscript{89} Modeled on the Phoenix Program in Vietnam,\textsuperscript{90} “Plan Lazo” attempted to increase alternative warfare capabilities to eliminate independent communist guerrillas. This strategy, like the United States’ Alliance for Progress,\textsuperscript{91} was largely unsuccessful because it relied heavily on military interference and failed to address structural reforms to achieve economic, political, and social equality.\textsuperscript{92}

This study focuses on the FARC as the main contemporary guerrilla armed force, and on the experiences of its former members. However, it also draws upon a combination of testimonies from ex-combatants of organizations including the ELN and the M-19. The FARC is the “oldest and largest group among Colombia’s left-wing rebels, and one of the world’s richest guerrilla armies.”\textsuperscript{93} According to Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue, “the FARC is the critical group” when referring to Colombia’s current illegal armed

\textsuperscript{87} Chelsey Dyer, "50 years of US intervention in Colombia," Colombia Reports, October 4 2013.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid. Pg.2
\textsuperscript{89} Villar and Cottle, Cocaine, death squads, and the war on terror: US imperialism and class struggle in Colombia.
\textsuperscript{90} Phoenix Program: An intelligence operation designed to gather and analyze information on both the operational structure and members of the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI), the Communists’ secret administrative and political apparatus in South Vietnam.
\textsuperscript{91} Alliance for Progress: An anti-communist aid and development program that was begun in 1961 by the Kennedy administration to reward U.S allies in Latin America and to offset the radicalizing effect of the Cuban Revolution. The alliance was promoted as an economic solution to poverty, but its ultimate goal was to deepen U.S economic influence in Latin America. (Villar and Cottle, 2002, p. 25)
\textsuperscript{92} Villar and Cottle, Cocaine, death squads, and the war on terror: US imperialism and class struggle in Colombia.
\textsuperscript{93} UNRIC, "The guerrilla groups in Colombia," (Brussels: United Nations Regional Information center for Western Europe, 2015).
forces. Initially, the FARC was composed of communist militants and peasant self-defense groups. In turn, the ELN was composed primarily of students, Catholic radicals, and left-wing intellectuals, who tried to emulate Cuba’s communist revolution. After the ELN’s influence and growth began to decline in 1999, many of its members were welcomed into the FARC insurgency.

On the 27th of May 1964, the government-led military operation “Marquetalia” intended to destroy, once and for all, the fortress of fifty guerilla units led by Pedro Antonio Marin, alias ‘Manuel Marulanda’ or ‘Tirofijo’ (‘Sure Shot’). However, instead of a strategic victory, the operation backfired and officially gave rise, in retaliation, to the longest-running communist guerrilla in Latin America. The FARC’s earlier revolutionary efforts, which were focused on self-preservation and land reform on behalf of all marginalized Colombians, soon evolved into a wider strategy to regain political power. The FARC expounded a revolutionary program, which was targeted in particular at citizens who dreamed of a “Colombia for Colombia,” a country “with equality of opportunities and distribution of wealth.” In this regard, the organization’s ideology reflected its origins as a peasant self-defense organization and its close ties with the pro-Soviet Communist Party. Consequently, the FARC was initially comprised of and led by peasants who fervently believed in the organization’s revolutionary platform.

95 Ibid.
97 Stanski, "Terrorism, Gender, and Ideology: A Case Study of Women Who Join the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)." Pg.138
98 Ibid.
Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)

Strengthened by support from the United States’ military, the Colombian government continued to launch a series of offensives aimed at exterminating the guerrilla uprisings. Eager to confront the ‘communist threat’ in the south, the U.S military openly provided training and support to government forces. Faced with increasing military pressure, many guerrilla combatants left the cities and fled to the jungles, where they could hide and recover.99 As groups splintered and proliferated, forty-three guerrilla leaders announced their intention to overthrow the government and install a Marxist regime in its place. However, the organization’s ambitious objectives were to prove untenable, as the movement would remain small and isolated until its re-emergence in the late 1980s. In 1982, under the leadership of Jacobo Arenas, the FARC underwent structural changes and absorbed ‘El Ejército del Pueblo (EP)’ or ‘The Army of the People’ into its movement.100 The new FARC-EP alliance was more forward-looking and, for the first time since its inception, the FARC officially began to recognize women on an equal basis with men.

The FARC never reached its 30,000-member target, yet its membership continued to increase steadily over the years.101 In the late 1990s and early 2000s, at the peak of the organization’s strength, the FARC counted approximately 18,000 fighters and controlled over 42,000 square miles of land – approximately 3.7%102 of Colombia’s total territory – making it one of the largest insurgent organizations in the world.103 Despite the peace accords in the

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99 Herrera and Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta’—the role of female fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP.”
100 Ibid.
102 I obtained this estimate by dividing the FARC-controlled territory in the year 2000 over Colombia’s total square mileage (equal to 1,138,903 square miles) as indicated in the Encyclopedia of the Nations.
103 Bilal Y Saab and Alexandra W Taylor, "Criminality and armed groups: A comparative study of FARC and paramilitary groups in Colombia," Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 32, no. 6 (2009). Pg.1
1980s, the FARC’s violent tactics and kidnappings persisted as the organization argued that political reforms made by the government were insufficient. Consequently, in 1999 a quarter of the Colombian population demonstrated in cities throughout the country in the “No Más” (No More) protests against the FARC and its violence. In response to these protests, Colombian security forces succeeded in forcing the guerrilla groups out of major cities and into the country’s periphery. This “hardline approach” to security adopted under former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) received the support of the United States. Under Uribe’s presidency, the US-funded, multibillion-dollar initiative “Plan Colombia” significantly reduced the FARC’s strength by neutralizing numerous senior commanders and assisting the Colombian government fight the drug trade. The success of the Plan Colombia is still highly debated within Colombia; however, many attribute the start of FARC’s decline and significant security gains to Plan Colombia and Uribe’s anti-guerilla program. Following Uribe’s administration, President Santos, elected in 2012, restarted the peace process with the FARC. However, unlike past peace attempts, Santos opted not to concede to a ceasefire, given the FARC’s predisposition to “replenish forces during such periods.” By the end of Santos’ first term in office, the FARC forces had already been significantly reduced. In 2014, the FARC only had a presence in 11% of Colombia’s municipalities, compared to over 50% in 2000. Moreover, of the FARC’s 80 active Fronts in the late 1990s, only 67 are alleged to be active today, operating particularly along the southwestern Pacific coast. Despite having been significantly weakened over the past two decades, the FARC has nonetheless proved

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104 Michael Shifter, "Colombia on the brink: There goes the neighborhood," Foreign Affairs 78, no. 4 (1999).
106 Ibid.
107 Gonzalez, "Explainer: The FARC and Colombia's 50-year civil conflict." Pg.3
108 "Colombia and the FARC: Digging in for peace," The Economist, June 1 2013.
itself to be a resilient organization that still receives considerable support from a number of recruits and militants.

Over the years, the FARC has remained predominantly rural and peasant-based. When compared to other active guerrilla groups, the FARC’s membership tends to include a high number of women and younger recruits with lower levels of education.\textsuperscript{110} Appendix C (a) shows a map of Colombia’s thirty-two departments. The departments highlighted in red are known as ‘zonas rojas’ or ‘hot spots,’ where the FARC exercises territorial control and has successfully mobilized peasants. Testimonies of former guerrillas will show in subsequent chapters that a large majority of recruited women come from rural and FARC-controlled territories in the southwestern cordilleras (mountain ranges). “These communities have been abandoned by the state,” said Franklin Ramirez, a municipal employee in the department of North Santander.\textsuperscript{111} In these areas, the FARC has operated as a “shadow state,” building public works and providing services for the population in need.\textsuperscript{112} Given the lack of government authority and the institutional crisis in these zonas rojas, the guerrilla has fed on rural resentment to effectively earn the population’s support and loyalty. The FARC’s military control is most secure in southern departments such as Caquetá, Guaviare, Putumayo, and the Amazon region. Furthermore, prior to peace talks with the government, the FARC had already consolidated its presence in 622 out of the total 1,071 municipalities in the country.\textsuperscript{113}

A number of scholars such as Michael Radu and Vladimir Tismaneanu (1990) argue that, to consolidate its influence, the FARC has resorted to the use of coercive methods

\textsuperscript{110} Francisco Sanín Gutiérrez, "Telling the difference: guerrillas and paramilitaries in the Colombian war," \textit{Politics & Society} 36, no. 1 (2008).
\textsuperscript{111} Joshua Partlow and Cobb, "An end to Colombia’s war seems close — except in rebel territory." Pg.2
\textsuperscript{112} Ricardo Vargas Meza, "The FARC, the War and the Crisis of the State," \textit{NACLA} (2014). Pg. 1
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
including intimidation and enticement, offering salaries twice that of the Colombian army.\textsuperscript{114} Nevertheless, evidence from the interviews conducted in this study seems to indicate otherwise. In fact, all female ex-combatants – including those in lower-ranking positions – were well aware that the FARC did not offer salaries or any sort of financial compensation. The growth in support for and enlistment in the guerrilla forces should not be overlooked simply as the product of their increasing ability to coerce individuals through extortion, kidnappings, or threats. On the contrary, the increased membership of the FARC should be understood as the result of its ability to take advantage of the contradictions and voids left by the government in a historically fractured society.

Most of the FARC’s violent activities are directed against Colombian military personnel, bases, and equipment. As an organized insurgency, the FARC’s military structure closely resembles that of the Colombian army. The basic tactical unit is ‘the Column,’ which is composed of twenty to forty combatants and is responsible for the control of a defined territory. A number of Columns together constitutes a ‘Front,’ and Fronts are often assembled in ‘Blocks.’ In short, the FARC’s military and political structure is vertical, with well-defined hierarchies and rules in place. Already in 2000, the FARC controlled approximately 70 different Fronts that were organized into 7 regional Blocks, 15 independent companies (comparable in size to a Front), and several mobile Columns.\textsuperscript{115} The commanders of Fronts and Blocks are accountable – both military and financially – to the FARC’s Central High Command composed of at least 25 officials. A smaller, male-dominated group forms the

\textsuperscript{114} Michael Radu and Vladimir Tismaneanu, "Latin American Revolutionaries: Groups, Goals and Methods," (1990).

\textsuperscript{115} Brett, "You'll Learn Not to Cry: Child Combatants in Colombia."
Secretariat, which is the supreme military leadership of the organization.\textsuperscript{116} The FARC’s long-term goal continues to be the replacement of the Colombian state with a FARC-controlled government. However, they have moderated their political ideology in the past few years. By abandoning Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, the FARC has begun to focus instead on the current government’s ineffectiveness and poor governance.\textsuperscript{117}

**Women in Colombian Society**

Latin American colonialism implanted a deeply patriarchal society, in which the separate roles of men and women are clearly defined. While women are traditionally responsible for educating children and taking care of their families, men are often expected to provide financial support. These demarcated gender roles and societal expectations have been shaped, in part, by culturally-specific values and beliefs. The terms ‘machismo’ and ‘marianismo’, for instance, refer to the supposedly ideal attributes of males and females respectively which have developed in the region.\textsuperscript{118} *Machismo* is defined as “the cult of male virility, in which the ideal man is bold, intransigent and sexually aggressive.”\textsuperscript{119} Conversely, *marianismo* is “the cult of feminine moral superiority, which defines the ideal woman as selfless, submissive, and possessing great spiritual strength.”\textsuperscript{120} These two distinct societal values have not only shaped expectations of men and women, but have also reinforced men’s strong resistance to the sharing of equal participation in society with their female counterparts.

\textsuperscript{116} Francisco Sanín Gutiérrez and Antonio Giustozzi, “Networks and armies: Structuring rebellion in Colombia and Afghanistan,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010).

\textsuperscript{117} Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk, *Colombian labyrinth: The synergy of drugs and insurgency and its implications for regional stability*, (Rand Corporation, 2001).

\textsuperscript{118} Lisa Zimmerman, “Women in Latin America,” in *Stone Center Tulane University* (2014). Pg.3

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
The effects that *machismo* and *marianismo* have had on gender relations and on the status of women have extended inequalities to various aspects of daily life. Even though the Colombian Constitution upholds the principle of equality, women in Colombia still suffer structural discrimination and occupy a clearly unequal position in relation to men. By law, women share the same legal benefits of ownership as men. However, in reality women remain heavily affected by unemployment and receive lower wages compared to their male counterparts.\(^{121}\) Cultural norms also play a role in preventing women from playing an active role in the decision-making process and enjoying a share in the exercise of power. This political inequality between men and women is reflected in a low number of women in top-level government positions.\(^{122}\) According to Piedad Córdoba, a Colombian senator and peace activist, for the 2010 - 2014 electoral period, elected women represented just 14% of the Colombian Congress, and over the past twelve years this percentage has never exceeded 15%.\(^{123}\)

In addition to these gender imbalances in the political domain, discrimination against women is widespread in the domestic realm. The rate of domestic violence is devastatingly high in Colombia. According to the United Nations, in 2001 there were 70,134 recorded cases of family violence against women, which statistically means that about eight women were attacked every hour.\(^{124}\) There is a systematic underreporting of crimes of sexual violence and an almost total impunity for aggressors. Women are often afraid to report their attackers due to internalized patriarchal norms, the insensitivity of public officials, and the pervasive

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\(^{121}\) Gjelsvik, "Women, war and empowerment: a case study of female ex-combatants in Colombia."
\(^{123}\) Ibid.
*machismo* culture. At the same time, violent conflict in Colombia has influenced gender roles and, to some extent, female roles have been ‘masculinized’ by changing social dynamics. It is estimated that 75% of displaced individuals are women and children.125 In these situations, women have had to become breadwinners and heads of families. In some cases, however, their displacement has also put women in even more vulnerable positions due to the strong correlation between displacement and sexual violence.126 It is precisely in this context of changing social and political structures that the FARC has actively tried to recruit women to join its ranks. According to Dalia Andrea Ávila, former army officer and psychologist at the Group for Humanitarian Attention for the Demobilized (GAHD), women have become an integral part of the FARC. They “play important political and emotional roles,” to the extent that these guerrillas would face major challenges without them.127 Properly understanding the historical and social context of Colombia’s civil conflict is crucial to appreciating the new and evolving roles of women in the guerilla movement, the issue to which this thesis now turns.

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Who does the FARC recruit?

According to the International Crisis Group, the FARC often recruits in rural and marginalized areas where it has a strong presence and civilian support. The overwhelming majority of recruits are rural ‘campesinos,’ frequently illiterate or with little formal education, indigenous or Afro-Colombian and generally young. This particular confluence of factors makes them susceptible to the ideologies and recruitment techniques of the movement.

FARC’s official policy states that forced recruitment is prohibited, and FARC commanders have maintained that no one under the age of 14 is enlisted. In an interview with the *Colombian Journal*, Raul Reyes, a FARC secretariat member who died in early 2008, stated that “forced recruitment is prohibited because it goes against the organization’s safety rules,” and explained that “people who join the FARC are between the ages of 15 and 30 years of age.” Nevertheless, testimonies of recently demobilized guerrillas show that enlistment of children is common. “Tiro Fijo (the former FARC leader) set the recruitment age at 15, but he never respected it,” argues a senior International Organization for Migration (IOM) official.

In Colombia’s countryside, the *quinceañera* (15th year) is widely regarded as the threshold of adulthood, which is ostensibly the basis for the FARC’s restriction. Out of the fourteen female ex-combatants from active groups interviewed for this study, ten were under 15 years old.

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130 Herrera and Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta’–the role of female fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP." Pg.614
when they joined the movement; and an additional three were under the age of 18. Of those who joined as minors, seven demobilized before reaching adulthood.

A number of studies have explored the range of motivations and circumstances that prompt women (and girls) to join the illegal armed forces. Most of this literature draws attention to a combination of personal, political and social factors that contribute to women’s recruitment, and focuses on the patterns of abuse and neglect among recruits that the FARC exploits to advance its own agenda. In addition to poverty, a lack of access to education and difficult family circumstances, the FARC’s purposeful depiction of women as equal members of its organization has led to an increase in female mobilization in recent years. The prevalence of women and girls in Colombia’s armed insurgency has attracted the interest of a handful of scholars, who have attempted to explain the reasons behind their mobilization.

As evidenced in a number of studies, the most common factors behind women’s mobilization include ideological convictions, desperation as a result of economic hardship and inequality, the allure of weapons and uniforms, direct experience with or witnessing of government violence, and membership in preexisting political groups. Nevertheless, more recent studies from newly demobilized FARC female guerillas have found that a significant number of women are forcibly recruited or have been deceived with false promises of a salary and good treatment. In particular, these interviews show that the FARC offers female recruits a life of “adventure and meaning” as well as the illusion of gender equality in both “training and the enforcement of discipline.” These are attractive promises for women frustrated by Colombia’s patriarchal civilian society.

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132 Ibid.
In exploring how women enter and function in the FARC, this chapter draws from a combination of media accounts, human rights reports, and interviews with female ex-combatants to analyze what drives women to enlist as guerrilla fighters. Its primary question is this: Are women forcibly recruited into the movement, or do they join voluntarily and consent to participate in FARC activities? Before attempting an answer, however, it is necessary to examine critically the concepts of ‘consent’ and ‘coercion.’ Departing from a generally accepted definition of consent, this chapter will begin by laying out the criteria for what constitutes ‘meaningful consent’ so as to establish a framework that will inform the rest of the chapter. The threefold criteria that determine an informed, independent, and voluntary decision appear in theory to be an efficient and accurate mechanism of judging the presence or absence of consent. In most cases, however, determining whether or not women’s decisions to enlist in armed groups meet these standard criteria is a highly complex and ambiguous exercise. Using a variety of first-hand accounts, this chapter will conclude by illustrating how in almost every case, elements of consent and coercion coexist simultaneously in female ex-combatants' recruitment experiences.

**Theoretical Framework: What Constitutes Consent?**

Generally, consent can be understood as “subsisting, free and genuine agreement to the act in question.”\(^{133}\) In this sense, the existence of valid consent can serve as a practical justification for doing something to an individual or to their property. Determining what constitutes ‘valid consent,’ however, is a complex endeavor. As a result, a number of authors from different academic and professional fields have created their own definitions of consent

to delineate its conceptual boundaries. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Law, consent “is an act of reason and deliberation,” which assumes the individual “possesses and exercises sufficient mental capacity.” Following this definition, the consenting person is assumed to have a capacity and understanding in relation to the decision or action to which she/he is consenting. This notion of consent (as it is applied in the legal field) appears to be a fairly unproblematic idea. Legal doctrine supports the idea that consent should be free and informed. Indeed, the standard that a ‘free’ contract is a fair contract is founded on informed consent. In international relations, the same concept manifests in the principle of ‘pacta sunt servanda,’ which underlies the entire system of treaty-based relations between sovereign states.

Nevertheless, the prevailing contemporary view is that “there is more to consent than saying ‘yes’ or signing on the dotted line,” as elucidated by Beyleveld and Brownsword. The determination of whether consent has been given freely and whether it was fully informed is undoubtedly a complex puzzle.

The notion of consent is a fundamental one, and extends to larger questions of authority. George Fletcher, a leading scholar in the field of criminal law, explains that “consent has the potential to ‘transform’ an aggressive criminal act into a non-criminal act – a theft into a sale, a rape into lovemaking, and, in international law, an invasion into humanitarian aid.” In this sense, if consent has the authority to transform unlawful acts into lawful ones, and vice versa, then the notion of consent must also have the ability to generate a legal order. Arguably, the development of “the ethic of individual rights” has strengthened the

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view of liberal theorists such as John Locke, who claims that “consent is the foundation for the entire politico-legal order.”\textsuperscript{138} Locke’s political philosophy holds that ‘consent’ plays a crucial role as the mechanism by which political societies are created and by which individuals join those societies. In this regard, the notion of consent has important ramifications in the modern legal system, and lies at the heart of the social contract itself. Thus, the presence or absence of consent has wide-reaching implications for any act or transaction in society, and speaks directly to perceptions of legitimacy and justice. Establishing a method of ascertaining meaningful consent is therefore imperative.

This study proposes a threefold criteria that lays out the basic conditions constitutive of meaningful consent and the circumstances under which this consent may be nullified. These criteria include rationality and mental capacity, access to all relevant information, and freedom from external (physical or psychological) coercive pressures. While the difficulty of applying these criteria to complex, ambiguous cases in the real world is later illustrated, nonetheless they provide an important framework or benchmark to guide any discussion of consent.

First, any consenting agent must have the \textit{capacity} to understand that to which they are consenting. As clearly outlined by Beyleveld and Brownsword, “a person with a capacity to consent will be capable of forming their own judgment and making their own decisions free from the influence or opinion of others.”\textsuperscript{139} In other words, the ability to consent requires a stable mental aptitude that allows the individual to make rational choices based on the processing of relevant information.\textsuperscript{140} This rational competence is often attributed to adults. In the case of minors, capacity to give consent to certain activities, such as sexual intercourse, is

\textsuperscript{138} Beyleveld and Brownsword, \textit{Consent in the Law}. Pg.3
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid. Pg.12
\textsuperscript{140} Jessica Elliott, \textit{The role of consent in human trafficking} (Routledge, 2014).
disputed and varies according to different national legal systems and cultures. In Colombia, according to Article 208 of the National Penal Code, the age of consent for sexual activity is fourteen and for marriage (with parental permission) is fourteen for girls and sixteen for boys.\footnote{Congreso, "Codigo Penal Colombiano," in \textit{I}, ed. Secretaria General de la Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D.C. (Bogota, Colombia: Diario Oficial, 2000).} In most other areas, Colombian law designates the age of 18 as marking the socially accepted entrance of men and women into adulthood. Under these circumstances, the recognition of children as rational consenting agents is doubtful on a legal basis.

Second, ‘meaningful consent’ should always be \textit{informed}. Early in the 1950s, ‘informed consent’ became a chief concern of professionals in the field of medical ethics and law. In several cases, courts contended that physicians had the obligation to disclose appropriate and ample information to enable patients to give voluntary and informed consent concerning their medical treatment.\footnote{Paul S Appelbaum, Charles W Lidy, and Alan Meisel, \textit{Informed consent: Legal theory and clinical practice}, 2 vols., vol. 28 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).} The increased focus on ethical obligations in the field of medical research has given rise to a huge professional literature on the doctrine of informed consent. As an ethical doctrine, informed consent has associated legal implications. Following the revelation of medical experiments conducted in Germany under the Nazis, the Nuremberg Code emerged during the post-war period as a principle to ensure the ethical treatment of all participants in tests and trials.\footnote{Crisol Escobedo et al., "Ethical issues with informed consent," \textit{Elizabeth Zubiate} 8, no. 1 (2007).} The Nuremberg Code states that all participants are required to give voluntary consent free of “coercion, fraud, duress, or deceit.”\footnote{Nuremberg Trial, "From “Trials of war criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under control council law No. 10”," (Washington, D.C: Nuremberg, October, 1946).} The fact that valid consent requires complete access to and understanding of information means that a consenting agent must realize the nature, quality, scope, and significance of that to which they are consenting.
Despite the absence of a single, standard legal definition of ‘informed consent,’ the doctrine clearly requires not only external freedom, but also freedom from ignorance.\(^{145}\) Therefore, valid consent must be founded upon the disclosure and sharing of comprehensive information that is deemed relevant to the decision-making process. Nevertheless, just like the first criterion that is complicated by the difficulty of defining who is, in fact, a ‘rationally competent’ agent, the second criterion is likewise restricted by the parameters of imperfect information and withheld necessary information. When considering the role of consent in contract law, Brian H. Bix argues that consent may be nullified on the basis of “mental capacity, duress, or undue influence.”\(^{146}\) It should be added that valid consent can be nullified under certain circumstances where the consenting agent is not fully informed. While acknowledging that a number of events could vitiate the initial agreement, this study focuses on three cases in which the agent cannot be considered fully informed. These cases include incomplete and/or incorrect information, deception, and misunderstanding. Clearly, if there is incomplete or false information given to individuals, then they lack the pertinent knowledge to make a fully voluntary and informed decision. Similarly, in cases where the agent is induced through purposeful deceit, fraud, or manipulation, the consent cannot be considered a valid one and renders the decision or action coerced.\(^{147}\) Although sometimes overlooked, it is crucial that information is communicated in a way that is easily and properly understood by the individual. This means that even an ‘informed consent’ can be nullified if the agent has agreed to something on the basis of a fundamental mistake. Overall, evaluating whether an individual \textit{really} understands what they are consenting to – even with access to full

\(^{145}\) Elliott, \textit{The role of consent in human trafficking.}  
\(^{147}\) Elliott, \textit{The role of consent in human trafficking.}
information – is very difficult. Moreover, the issue of ‘how informed’ the agent must be is fraught with ethical and legal complications. Despite this, though, the key roles of knowledge and information are universally accepted as conditions for a valid and ‘informed consent.’

Third, as illustrated in the aforementioned legal definitions of consent, an authentic and binding agreement must be the product of an unforced, free choice. Ordinarily speaking, a ‘free’ decision can be defined as a “voluntary agreement to or acquiescence in what another proposes or desires; compliance, concurrence, or permission.”148 In short, valid consent must be free from the application of external pressures that can effect an influence on the decision-making process. Determining the presence or absence of these ‘external pressures’ is thus a major challenge. According to Beyleveld and Brownsword, determining whether ‘consent’ has been given ‘freely’ is highly convoluted because it is difficult to agree on what represents a ‘free action’ in the first place.149 In most cases of undue pressure or extreme forms of coercion, it is easy to see how the ‘will’ of the consenting agent has been overcome. But some argue that certain incentives can also make a decision the product of ‘forced consent.’ In addition, there is less agreement on those cases in which choices are made not as a result of direct coercion but rather based on a lack of agreeable alternatives. Even though within the legal framework these choices may not be invalidated, it is important for this study to understand that choices made between unattractive alternatives cannot be viewed as entirely ‘free’ or ‘autonomous.’

Theoretically, these three conditions for valid consent – capacity, information and autonomy – seem like efficient and accurate criteria for determining the presence or absence of consent. And there are certainly situations in which their application is clear. For instance,

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149 Beyleveld and Brownsword, *Consent in the Law*.
in extreme cases where an individual is asleep, inebriated, under the influence of drugs or the like, one can undoubtedly argue that the agent is temporarily unable to communicate consent because it lacks the capacity and freedom to rationally make an informed decision. On the contrary, an ideal consenting-agent is someone with the (mental and physical) capacity to analyze (freely and autonomously) the situation by processing all available information. For example, an adult of sound mind choosing based on a map and schedule, whether to take a bus or a train to work. These are two hypothetical cases in which it is very clear whether the criteria for valid consent are met or not. However, in reality, most cases are not so easily resolved. Voluntary, free and informed consent may occur in “varying degrees and shades of grey.”

Take the paradigm of human trafficking for example, where many women fall somewhere in between the extreme categories of non-consenting trafficked victims and willing migrants for sex work. How should one categorize a young woman who has been lured into becoming a sex worker by the prospect of a job and the possibility to feed her deprived family? In this case, the woman’s life in poverty, a lack of agreeable alternatives, and the presence of various pressures from family and recruiters suggest that no valid consent exists; however, she remains an apparently free agent capable of weighing up her decision. All in all, these cases shed light on the subjectivity and ambiguity involved in identifying ‘meaningful consent.’ Nonetheless, the criteria remain the best framework to work within, and a useful tool to evaluate consent generally.

An additional dimension exists in the Colombian context that is important in examining the notion of consent. This is the element of ‘active participation’ that should exist in a meaningful consenting process. Where most analyses of consent focus on the ‘decisive moment’ at which a choice is made, and the conditions prevailing at that moment, this study

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150 Elliott, *The role of consent in human trafficking.*
introduces a distinction between the key concepts of ‘initial consent’ and ‘ongoing’ or ‘participatory consent.’ Despite the fact that an individual might originally agree to do something in a free and informed manner, an active process of reevaluation and communication should also allow the same individual to withdraw from or continue to consent to a certain action. The timing of consent has been considered before in law as a relevant consideration in determining valid consent. In the case of consent during sexual intercourse, for example, “[a] withdrawal of consent effectively nullifies any earlier consent and subjects the male to forcible rape charges if he persists in what has become nonconsensual intercourse.” The presence or lack of consent throughout intercourse appears to be critical in the crime of rape. Consistent with this view, a fundamental principle is the ability of the individual to remove consent at any time. Comparably, in the medical and clinical fields, a subject may choose to withdraw from (or discontinue their participation in) an ongoing research study. Returning to the Colombian context, when it comes to determining whether a woman’s decision to enlist in armed groups is a consenting one, it is important to examine both ‘initial’ and ‘participatory consent.’

Two specific and conceivable hypothetical situations help to illustrate the ambiguity of applying these concepts in the process of guerrilla enlistment. In the first scenario, it is possible that a girl living in a marginalized, FARC-controlled area might be coerced into joining the armed group either through physical violence, or by the exertion of other external pressures. Once the girl (often in a vulnerable position) finds herself in such a military structure, however, she may express a willingness to remain as a combatant despite the circumstances of her recruitment. Suppose that the girl begins to embrace the FARC’s ideology and discovers within the group an emotional support, a collective identity, and other

benefits of participating in military activities. In this hypothetical situation, despite the lack of initial consent to join, there is ‘participatory consent’ as the girl contributes willingly to the FARC. Conversely, many testimonies indicate that women originally consent to enlist in the armed groups for a wide range of reasons. However, upon arrival in the insurgent camps they realize how different their expectations were from the reality of the situation. At that point, some women no longer consent to stay. In this second hypothetical situation, a valid initial consent is assumed, yet unforeseeable circumstances present an impediment to ongoing consent.

The question of ‘ongoing consent’ raises a particular conceptual problem when it comes to the FARC’s recruitment practices. To begin with, the organization’s official policy has an inherent coercive element: once soldiers commit to joining the organization, they are not allowed to leave, for fear they might provide critical information to the state. Desertion is the worst conceivable offense and in many cases defectors are killed on the spot if they are caught. The FARC’s formal position is that by entering into the organization, one makes a lifelong commitment to the movement. While ‘initial consent’ remains possible under these circumstances, and will be analyzed later in this section, it is important to first discuss whether or not ‘ongoing consent’ is conceivable in this setting. Is it theoretically possible for consent to be given in a situation where choice seems to be nonexistent? Many would argue that consent could not exist in a situation that renders choice impossible. In other words, how can women soldiers give consent meaningfully when they are forbidden from leaving the group

152 Myriam Denov and Alexandra Ricard-Guay, "Girl soldiers: towards a gendered understanding of wartime recruitment, participation, and demobilisation," *Gender & Development* 21, no. 3 (2013).
153 Scott Gates and Simon Reich, *Child soldiers in the age of fractured states* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).
under life-threatening circumstances? Consent surely implies having at least two options to choose between and in this case, women’s only rational option is to stay.

It seems clear that in some cases FARC soldiers have positive reasons for wanting to participate and remain inside the group. In these cases, it can be argued that consent is possible because soldiers choose to participate of their own volition: they would choose to remain even if they had the option of leaving. Theoretically speaking, then, soldiers cease to be consenting agents the moment that they decide to leave the group; that is, the point at which they withdraw their ‘initial consent’ to be part of the FARC and no longer ‘want’ to remain. At that crucial moment, the soldiers become coerced agents because the option of leaving is not available to them. In trying to resolve this dilemma, it is important to understand that there is in fact a choice at work: soldiers can choose to stay voluntarily, out of a positive expression of will, or under duress, despite a lack of will.

Using the three criteria for meaningful consent as a guiding framework, the following section will be dedicated to examining whether or not ‘initial consent’ and ‘ongoing consent’ is actually present and possible in the status quo.

**Why and How do Women Join the FARC?**

Colombian public opinion reveals a very limited understanding of the FARC’s official recruitment policies, owing to scarce and often inconsistent official FARC accounts. What is clear is that the FARC is not subjected to Colombia’s law, which defines the age of majority as 18 years. Rather, it claims to adhere to the criteria defined under international humanitarian law, which states that “conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 into armed
forces, or using them to participate actively in hostilities” is a serious violation.\textsuperscript{154} Moreover, while the FARC has resorted to forced recruitment in the past, this does not account for the majority of its combatants. FARC leaders have provided practical explanations for their attempt to follow a recruitment policy based upon “free will.” In particular, they believe that unwilling soldiers are more likely to betray their superiors.\textsuperscript{155} For this reason, joining the FARC entails three standard conditions, which recruits are supposedly informed of in advance: first, “it is a life-engagement,”\textsuperscript{156} with recruits warned that their enlistment will become permanent once a two-to-three month trial period is over; and second, recruits are expected to break ties with their families and their former lives as civilians. According to Gutiérrez Sanin, this is mainly for security reasons and “to preserve discipline.”\textsuperscript{157}

It seems counterintuitive, then, that anyone (especially women and children) would want to voluntarily join an organization given these deprivations and the high risks of being subjected to different forms of violence or even death. In Colombia’s rural areas girls are raised to do purely domestic tasks, a life which contrasts starkly with the strenuous and perilous work expected of them as they become guerrilla fighters. Why, then, have women and girls increasingly joined the FARC ranks? And, more importantly, are they joining of their own volition? Or are they coerced into the movement? In beginning to answer these intricate questions, it is important to note that a variety of both Colombian and international sources such as Human Rights Watch have demonstrated that a majority of recruits enlist (at

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{154} “Rule 156. Serious violations of international humanitarian law constitute war crimes,” in \textit{Customary IHL}, ed. ICRC (Geneva: ICRC, 2000).}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{155} Juan Guillermo Ferro and Graciela Uribe Ramón, \textit{El orden de la guerra: las FARC-EP, entre la organización y la política} (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2002).}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{156} Francisco Sanín Gutiérrez, "Organizing minors: The case of Colombia," (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). Pg.23}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.}
least ostensibly) voluntarily.\textsuperscript{158} According to the same sources, fewer than 20% of the FARC’s younger recruits are forced at gunpoint into the group. Compared to other illegal armed groups, the FARC is currently the largest and most successful at enlisting willing soldiers.

FARC commanders argue that women join their ranks voluntarily in support of social inclusion and are motivated by a desire for social justice and change. Ivan Ríos, a demobilized FARC commander, explained in an interview that there is sometimes no need for the organization to actively enlist new recruits: “Women and children are the ones looking for us. They know that we will become the home that they never had.”\textsuperscript{159} This claim is echoed, to a certain extent, by some of the interviewees’ accounts in this study. Six months before her 12\textsuperscript{th} birthday, Daniela (from Nariño department located by the Pacific Ocean) had already attempted to join the FARC on two occasions but was rejected because of her young age. Often alone and bored at home, Daniela had wanted for a long time to join the movement – despite several warnings about the strict rules and hardships of life as a combatant. She claims:

I knew exactly what I was getting myself into. Everyday I saw and followed some of the female guerrillas who visited my “vereda” (rural settlement) dressed in uniforms and carrying rifles. They constantly advised me to stay away from them, but they were so beautiful and strong... I decided that I had to convince them to let me join. The day they were leaving the vereda, I woke up early in the morning and followed them up to their camps in the mountains. When they realized I was there with them, it was already too late to send me back.

Daniela’s persistence to join the FARC seems to have stemmed from a childhood ambition. Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch argue that women “come to the FARC as a sanctuary.”\textsuperscript{160} In line with this view, it would appear that Daniela consented to join. Despite


\textsuperscript{159} Ferro and Ramón, \textit{El orden de la guerra: las FARC-EP, entre la organización y la política}.

\textsuperscript{160} Herrera and Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta’–the role of female fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP.” Pg.614
her age, she may be regarded as a consenting agent because of her ability to make the deliberate choice to change her own circumstances.

FARC officials have also claimed that women join voluntarily as they can easily identity with the mission and the ideology of guerrilla movements. While this was not the case for most of this study’s former FARC members, it was the defining motivation for many women from the 19th of April Movement (M-19). In Colombia, the protracted conflict has been fueled by perceived social inequality and injustice. Particularly for many women in the countryside, weapons have become a source of prestige, a metonym for justice and a sign of active solidarity and participation.161

A majority of the former M-19 combatants interviewed for this study stated that fighting for political ideals and against their country’s socio-economic structure was their leading motive for entering into the movement. “Many of us joined because we dreamed of a different country, and later on the movement became our family,” Elizabeth explained. These women decided to join the guerrilla group willingly in their efforts to achieve greater social and political equality. Most studies of the M-19 agree that as a modern urban guerrilla organization, many of its members were perceived as bourgeois nationalists from fairly “comfortable” socio-economic backgrounds.162 In comparison to the FARC’s membership in the late 1980s, the M-19 had a greater number of educated women enlisted in its ranks (between 28.6 – 31.5%).163 This might explain the predominance of ideological factors in their decision to enlist – a higher level of education correlates with a reduced likelihood of

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163 Luz María Londoño F., Mujeres No Contadas: Procesos de Desmovilización y Retorno a la Vida Civil de Mujeres Excombatientes en Colombia, 1990-2003. Pg.42
poverty or economic exclusion as socio-economic factors. For Elizabeth, the process of joining the M-19 began with her participation in different college groups focused on social issues:

I come from a traditional family in Cali. I started receiving information from the [M-19] movement when I was in my first semester of medicine at the Universidad del Valle, a well-respected public university. At first, I was very shy and distanced from social issues, so it was not until I joined the Communist Party of Colombia (Marxist-Leninist)\(^{164}\) that the thousands of social injustices, inequalities and misfortunes afflicting the lower classes got to me. I began to engage in [M-19] activities in 1972 by helping to organize workers and peasants into formal unions. I was driven by the prospect of participating in critical political processes and of contributing to revolutionary social changes.

These accounts seem to suggest that in certain regions of Colombia the act of joining an illegal armed group is an attractive alternative in its own right, providing a communal support structure or an ideological outlet, resulting in a sturdy stream of keen recruits. Conversely, however, critics of the FARC dismiss this narrative and contend that illegal groups (in particular the FARC) forcibly recruit female combatants. These critics argue that women are frequently kidnapped and coerced into the organization for strategic reasons.\(^{165}\) Their contention is supported by a twofold rationale. On the one hand, they claim that during civil conflicts, women’s participation can be perceived as an indicator of mass support and social inclusion, conferring an apparent popular legitimacy. On the other hand, it is both “morally difficult and politically costly” for government forces to fight women and girls in illegal armed groups.\(^{166}\) As a result, it is not surprising that the FARC would resort to forced recruitment to increase the number of women in its ranks. Although cases of forced

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\(^{164}\) A Colombian political party that splintered from the main Colombian Communist Party in 1965.


\(^{166}\) Sanin Gutiérrez, "Organizing minors: The case of Colombia." Pg.16
recruitment among my interviewees were the exceptions rather than the rule, it is nonetheless imperative to explore these accounts in greater detail.

Julia is a former FARC combatant originally from the region of Vaupés, located in the jungle-covered Amazonas region bordering Brazil. At the age of 14, Julia had to take a precarious boat journey every day on her way to school, where she was enrolled in 7th grade. After enduring this long and treacherous commute for years, Julia grew tired of it and dropped out of school to work for her teacher as a domestic helper and a babysitter. Julia had a few differences with her parents and siblings, but overall she describes a happy and stable life.

This, however, would be very quickly upended:

I asked my teacher if I could take a few days off work to visit my family. He agreed immediately and I departed with a friend that same day. We both got into a small boat that would take us home in a couple of hours. Unexpectedly, someone approached me from behind pointing a gun at me while covering my face tightly with a plastic bag… I could also hear my friend trying to fight back. I could not see things clearly because they kept my head down during the rest of the journey… but I was able to recognize the uniformed rubber boots of the FARC. When I arrived there [to the guerrilla settlement] the commander asked me to pick a pseudonym for myself.

The testimony of Julia, who was coerced into joining the FARC, illustrates the cases of many other non-consenting women who are transformed into guerrilla fighters against their will. The lack of initial consent and the coercive methods used further support that most women cannot be referred to as willing participants in conflict, but as victims of forceful and violent gendered recruitment strategies. Despite differences in context and circumstance, many women's experiences of forced abduction share similar characteristics: surprise attacks, terror, attempts to flee, and ultimately submission.167 Child welfare advocates, in particular, perceive the recruitment of minors as inherently exploitative and thus reject the very idea of

consent as a relevant indicator of voluntary versus coerced enlistment of children. In a phone interview, the former General Director of the ACR, Alejandro Eder claimed that, “regardless of the dissimilar individual situations for joining the groups, minors are always considered victims of forced recruitment.”\textsuperscript{168}

Over and above significant evidence showing that forced recruitment of women and children is a common practice, some scholars have argued that the 'free will' of those who join armed groups without explicit coercion is questionable because “they are nearly always bound by desperation and survival needs.”\textsuperscript{169} In this sense, the feasibility of women and girls being able to make clear and informed choices to join an armed group is debatable. My interviewees' testimonies reveal that, while a full spectrum does exist, most women fall somewhere in between the two poles of ‘non-consenting’ and ‘willing participants.’ Therefore, constructing an artificial division between coercion and consent, as mutually exclusive states might be a double-edged sword, one that ultimately generates a simplistic binary between "unwilling victims" and "willing perpetrators" of violence. In most cases the reality is much more ambiguous and complex than that.\textsuperscript{170} As the chapters to follow will show, establishing a clear distinction between these two opposing categories that portray women as 'consenting' or 'coerced' participants of war is likely to create damaging stereotypes during post-conflict reintegration.

Although the participants of this study expressed a variety of primary motivations, the majority of them mentioned that joining the guerrilla seemed, at the time, to be the best possible alternative available. This was especially true of the guerrilleras razas or low-level

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\textsuperscript{168} & Alejandro Eder, interview by Savitri restrepo, December 20-31, 2015, Phone Interview, Cali, Colombia. \\
\textsuperscript{169} & Posada, “Motives for the enlistment and demobilization of illegal armed combatants in Colombia.” Pg.266 \\
\textsuperscript{170} & Ibid. \\
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female guerrillas, who were largely uneducated and had often endured domestic abuse (more so than middle-ranking members or commanders). Given their lack – actual or anticipated – of viable legal alternatives, young women like Daniela are lured into believing that entering an armed group like the FARC will result in a better life.\textsuperscript{171} Given limited opportunities for rural youth employment, it is not surprising that only two out of the fourteen participants from active groups had a job outside of the home at the time of their recruitment. Under these circumstances, joining an armed group is an appealing option that seems to offer material sustenance, protection from abusive homes, and independence from parents or other adult caretakers.\textsuperscript{172} The absence of viable alternatives suggests that a woman's apparently voluntary decision to enter the organization cannot be deemed a fully autonomous one. The cumulative force of manifold external pressures pushes women in some instances towards an inevitable conclusion. This illustrates the complexity of establishing the nature of consent; for, if a woman is rational, adequately informed and strictly autonomous, but faces pressures and constraints that compel her to join an armed group, has she truly consented?

Turning back to Daniela's case, who seems to have consented voluntarily to join the FARC, a more complex picture emerges once we dig below the surface. Abandoned by her mother when she was only twelve months old, Daniela was raised by her paternal grandmother until she was nine years old. After her father was killed, her mother returned and forced Daniela to live with her and her husband, a man who treated her poorly and was abusive, she laments, "I was basically his slave," Daniela confessed. "My mother also constantly mistreated me, she hit me regularly and I remember her drinking a lot." Obliged by

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
her stepfather to do all of the household work, she was beaten whenever she neglected her duties or was caught playing soccer outside. Daniela was not allowed to attend school and had very little contact with other children. In short, her decision to enter the FARC was informed by very difficult circumstances at home which made her desperate to escape and thus vulnerable to recruitment.

Many women like Daniela who choose to join armed groups and leave their homes are cognizant of the type of work that awaits them, but still prefer to enlist with the guerrillas because they feel it is their best (and sometimes only) alternative. Daniela's decision to join the FARC remains a free and autonomous one to the extent that she was able to consciously make an informed decision for her own life, weighing up different hardships in order to make a decision that she felt was best for herself. Nonetheless, Daniela was in a vulnerable position, she says, "my life was tough...so I knew I had to leave." It remains ambiguous, then, whether Daniela is capable of meaningful consent and the full exercise of autonomy.

In addition to these explanations, some writers have considered that in societies engaged in civil conflict, women and children often enter illegal armed groups as a form of economic survival. Peter Waldmann (1999) and Marcella Ribetti (2007) have shown that the predominant reason for female combatants to enlist is the presence of adverse physical circumstances such as “hunger, sickness, or a lack of shelter for themselves or their families.” However, despite the economic vulnerability of most Colombian rural peasants, none of the guerrilleras razas interviewed for this study indicated poverty or economic desperation as their primary motive for enlistment. The personal interviews and surveys confirmed that neither the FARC nor the ELN pays a salary or gives any kind of monetary

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compensation to its fighters. However, the combatants are well fed and are provided with “enough necessities to live a decent life.” The FARC also provides fighters with medical treatment for those who are injured in combat. Despite living a relatively austere lifestyle with a basic diet consisting of food such as yucca, bananas, corn, and peas supplied by peasants, most recruits arrive in the FARC accustomed to such a living standard. It might be that while economic pressures are not a primary motivating concern, they do play a background role in guiding women’s decisions.

In reality, those women who appear to have consented to enlist reported a broad set of motivations where elements of 'consent' and 'coercion' work in unison. The many levels and complexities of consent cannot be encapsulated in a few testimonies; however, a representative selection of first-hand accounts will illustrate the wide range of factors that motivate Colombian women to ‘voluntarily’ join the guerrilla groups. First and foremost, among recruits whom I interviewed, the decision to enter the organization was typically not the result of a lengthy or careful process of introspection. Rather, in most cases, it was a fairly impulsive choice based on momentary emotions and uncertain promises. The allure of wearing uniforms and learning how to use weapons was an important incentive for lower-ranking guerrillas. The social status that weapons confer is a product of the pervasive patriarchal cultural context in which these women are situated. In Colombia generally, women have limited opportunities to ‘have a say’ within the public sphere, and are disempowered both socially and politically. According to Edwin Muñoz, ACR staff adviser, many women in Colombia experience “una doble doblegación” (double discrimination).175 In other words, women are subordinate in a class-divided society, as well as subordinate to men in a

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Elise Barth has argued that the subaltern position of women in society can contribute to their actively wanting to enlist in armed groups. The allure of weapons as a symbol of power or the desire for freedom from restrictive social environments represents a common motivation for joining the FARC.

Lauren was born in the Cauca region located in the southwestern part of the country. As a 12 year-old, Lauren had just finished 5th grade and felt it was time for her to join the “Jacobo Arenas,” the FARC unit that controls Cauca. At the time, she would never have imagined that the FARC would become her life for the next 13 years. She describes having a “normal” and “good” relationship with her mother and elder brother. However, as a teenager, she sought “fun” and “exciting” opportunities away from her mundane routine and fixed destiny as a girl in the countryside. Arielle, another interviewee, shares some of Lauren’s characteristics. Besides living in the Cauca region, Arielle also had a “really good family relationship” and attended primary school. More than anything else, she wished for a “respected,” well-paid job in the city. Soon enough, Arielle’s dreams of leaving her “vereda” were shattered by her mother’s reluctance to let her go to the city. This became a source of rebellion, resentment, and anger towards her mother, which led her to seek an alternative means of escape.

Young girls like Lauren are tempted to enlist out of curiosity and admiration for “beautiful” and “powerful” female fighters often compared to “warriors” and “heroines from the comics. “They [FARC soldiers] told me that I would be able to do and learn many things that I would never be able to if I stayed,” says Lauren. Moreover, women’s inclination towards the armed groups often grows as they are told that guerilla life is an opportunity for

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176 Barth, "Peace as disappointment: the reintegration of female soldiers in post-conflict societies: a comparative study from Africa."
them to gain power and status, a chance to speak out, be heard, and even give orders. Arielle, for example, had spoken on several occasions to friends who had already joined.\(^{177}\) Given these encouraging promises, both Lauren’s and Arielle’s decisions to enlist were made lightly and without much apprehension. Their resolution to join was immediate, driven by a desire for change and escape. Frequently, it takes a split second for women who are either fascinated by the FARC or frustrated by unhappy family situations to wake up one day and choose to leave their civilian lives behind.

I remember it was a Monday. I spoke to them [FARC female combatants] in the morning and then I came home. I cleaned the entire house and waited for my mother to arrive from work. ‘I am leaving tonight with them,’ I told her. But she did not believe me. She thought it was only a rebellious teen urge, so everything I told her that day went in one ear and out the other. Despite my mum’s disbelief, I packed my things and left that same night. Now, I realized my mum was probably right…it was a blind impulse during my time as a rebellious girl. (Lauren)

Lauren’s experience is emblematic of the lives of many young women living in Colombia’s rural provinces, where they are marginalized and confined to domestic chores and a low socio-economic status. These conditions make them vulnerable to desperate and ultimately deleterious choices. However, these women’s actions are also hopeful and assertive, showing a capacity and aspiration to make choices that will change their status quo. For women who do not have the space to exercise mobility within their own community, accessing weapons and uniforms replaces the social respect and power that they longed for. In her definition of ‘agency,’ Mahdavi Pardis refers to “an individual’s capacity, desire, and potential to make choices and decisions about his or her own life, trajectories and future.”\(^{178}\)

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\(^{177}\) Ribetti, “The unveiled motivations of violence in intra-state conflicts: The Colombian guerrillas.”

\(^{178}\) P. Mahdavi, Gridlock: Labor, Migration, and Human Trafficking in Dubai, Illustrated ed. (Stanford University Press, 2011). Pg.4
In applying this definition, Lauren and Arielle might discover and exercise agency under constricting structures and conditions that limit them.

Nevertheless, these two women’s deliberate choice to leave home as courageous and autonomous agents in search of a better life (similar to those who leave to work in the cities, for instance) may be diluted by the absence of complete information regarding what actually constitutes life as a guerrilla. “I never imagined that the FARC did not live in houses or visit towns regularly,” Arielle contended. “They warned me life over there was ‘hard’… but I did not understand what they meant until I arrived.” As outlined in this study, a strict definition of ‘meaningful consent’ emphasizes ‘informed consent’ and freedom from ignorance and fantasies as a crucial criterion. The circumstances of incomplete, or even incorrect information described above, render any “pocket of agency” and decision to enter the group dubious.\(^{179}\) In short, Lauren and Arielle’s original consent was not necessarily a ‘truly conscious’ and informed agreement to undertake the serious roles and responsibilities required by the guerrilla.

Returning to the definition of ‘meaningful consent’ described earlier in this chapter, besides being fully informed, consenting individuals must also be free from distorting ‘external influences’ in the form of deceit, fraud, or manipulation. The significance of this distinction is that even a seemingly ‘informed consent’ can be voided if the agent has agreed to it on the basis of a fundamental mistake or misunderstanding. In her study, Natalia Springer argues that in rural Colombia, many women and young recruits are “under pressure” because they are too poor, uneducated, and young to truly understand what they are getting themselves into. Her evidence also suggests that the FARC systematically implements a “gradual,

\(^{179}\) Ibid. Pg.4
methodical, and selective” recruitment process. In parallel with Springer’s findings, some women interviewed in this study reported being involved, in one way or another, with the guerrilla before officially joining. One common example is working in the drug trade as “raspachines” or coca-leaf pickers. While usually considered a ‘light job,’ scraping coca leaves is reserved for women and children as it can easily lead them into joining the guerrillas. Another common task performed for the group before entering is the widespread role of “milicianos,” or plain-clothed FARC helpers. The FARC’s engagement of civilians in these roles allows for their incremental absorption into the ranks of the militia.

Lucia is from the guerilla-controlled county of San Vicente del Caguán in the Caquetá department. Once known as the ‘FARC Capital of El Caguán,’ it became a demilitarized zone in southern Colombia under former president Pastrana. After Lucia’s parents were divorced, her mother raised her until she was recruited by the FARC at the age of 13. Her testimony reveals how the recruitment process may occur gradually by increasing civilians’ participation in and trusts towards the members of the organization. While traveling to visit her aunt in a neighboring vereda, Lucia saw the guerrilla for the first time. At that point they were “dressed as civilians,” so Lucia did not deduce their real identity until many weeks later. As a “social” and “curious” woman, Lucia was “intrigued” by the newcomers and decided to be “friendly” to them:

I used to visit my aunt at least once every month. Every time I saw them [FARC guerrillas] in the vereda, they were kind to me; there was one woman in particular who would always ask me about my life. One day, she asked for my phone number and I gave it to her. A few weeks later I received a call from her. As a favor for ‘a friend,’ she needed me to buy groceries in the town and deliver

180 “Militants” is not a direct translation for “milicianos.”
181 Manuel Contreras and Russ Finkelstein, “Hard Road Back: A war that never ends?: Colombia’s former FARC guerrillas must live with the regrets of their past and the deadly temptations of the present,” Al Jazeera, November 7 2011. Pg.3
them to her. ‘A taxi driver will pick you up at the market and bring you to where I am staying,’ said the woman on the phone. ‘It is very easy, just remember to not tell your mother… you will be back home before she even gets there’ she added.

Unfortunately, despite the woman’s promises to Lucia, she never returned home. When she arrived to “la finquita” (a small ranch), she saw a number of uniformed men and women carrying weapons, and quickly identified her ‘friend.’ “At first I thought they were from the army,” she clarified. After spending the entire day with them, the woman insisted it was already too late for Lucia to return by herself and convinced her to stay with them. The next morning the commander approached her and prevented her from leaving the ranch: “You have already seen us and can easily recognize our identities…we are from the FARC and it is too risky for us to let you go back,” he explained. While still trying to make sense of her situation, Lucia was given a gun to hold in her weak arms as she cried in front of the group.

Lucia’s situation is far from being an isolated incident. Often the guerrillas progressively build ‘social networks’ or relationships of trust and care with their prospective recruits, which they later exploit to lure women into the organization. Especially in the southern regions, children “grow up seeing the FARC as the de facto authority.”182 In extreme cases, “the families even have obligations to the FARC,” so they allow their own children to run errands for them.183

Clearly, Lucia’s entry into the armed group was not free of coercion, fraud, duress, or deceit. Induced through false promises, Lucia cannot be considered a consenting participant because a combination of external influences prevented her from making an informed

182 Juan Forero, "Colombian rebels recruiting child fighters even as they negotiate to end conflict," The Washington Post, May 15 2013. Pg. 2
decision. The initial voluntary and free choice to ‘run the errand’ and engage with the guerrillas cannot imply a permanent commitment to the organization. A choice that is free of undue pressures means that the agent is able to understand the nature and significance of his or her decision. In Lucia’s testimony, the presence of fraud and false promises means there was no valid agreement to participating. In short, her actions were taken on the basis of a fundamental mistake.

Nonetheless, the evidence gathered for this study suggests that, in the cases of respondents who claim to have joined ‘voluntarily,’ the background presence of extremely abusive environments was more common and significant than manipulative tactics or lack of adequate information. In their study of seven adolescent girls from peasant backgrounds, Hernandez and Romero (2003) discovered that most girls experienced a home environment where domestic violence or abandonment was the norm. In circumstances of emotional and social deprivation, women endured traumatic abuse by family members. While none of my interviewees mentioned “abusive homes” as a direct motive for their enlistment, the experience of abuse seems to make the prospect of life as a guerrilla fighter an attractive opportunity to escape such damaging environments. Hernández and Romero (2003) along with other scholars have argued that severe emotional and physical abuse at home explains women’s vulnerability to the FARC’s recruitment campaigns. While these studies characterize abuse as a ‘conducive condition,’ or a passive enabling factor, it is more likely that patterns of violence and hopelessness directly motivated female recruits.

Ten of the fourteen ex-combatants from active armed groups interviewed for this study appear to have been targets of domestic violence before they joined, including physical and emotional abuse. Even though each woman experienced these devastating episodes
differently, there were some shared forms of violence that stood out. For example, the stories of Daniela, Eloisa, Sandra, and Maria involve sexual abuse by family members. At the young age of 8, Maria’s uncles molested and raped her on more than one occasion. Daniela, Julia, and Arielle describe being beaten by their parents for “neglecting their chores,” “playing soccer outside,” “coming home late,” or even for supposedly “seducing” their stepfathers who were molesting them. Juliana and Eugenia*184 each recalled experiences of abandonment. Juliana was given to another family because hers “had too many problems.” Eugenia, on the contrary, was sent to live on a small ranch with relatives at the age of 3 because, after raising five sons, her father “did not want to have any girls.” Finally, while most women appear to be victimized in their own homes by some of their closest relatives, Johanna describes being abused by armed forces. After killing her cousins (who were former guerrillas), a group of right-wing paramilitaries (AUC) came into Johanna’s house in search of weapons belonging to the FARC. Alone and helpless in their own home, Johanna and her mother were gang raped by the paramilitaries after they failed to find any weapons in their possession.

These aspects of women’s social, cultural, psychological, and domestic lives should not be overlooked, or simply understood as enabling environments for only poverty and deprivation. Studies focused on identifying the ‘immediate trigger’ that led women to join armed groups are crucial, but might fall short of understanding the deeper roots of the problem. When I asked about their primary motive for enlistment, respondents from all three-guerrilla groups mentioned a variety of simultaneous reasons. These included political and ideological beliefs, the glamor of possessing weapons and earning power and autonomy, a feeling of self-worth and the respect of former FARC members, as well as the desire to escape

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184 *Eugenia is a former paramilitary who demobilized in 2005 through the collective demobilization agreement between the Colombian government under former President Uribe and the AUC armed forces.
desperate and often violent circumstances with no perceived alternatives. Moreover, the majority of those who claimed to have joined of their own free will perceived the FARC as being able to offer them some protection from violence, in the form of safety from other armed forces or from precarious situations at home.\(^\text{185}\) In this regard, the guerrilla experience seemed to offer women affirmation and the possibility to make choices on their own, which were denied to them in otherwise patriarchal and exploitative environments.

To conclude, allowing the space for women to voice their stories was central and indispensable to answering the complex question of what exactly drives so many of them to enlist as guerrilla fighters. The fact that active groups like the FARC and the ELN have a long history of recruiting ‘child soldiers’ poses an initial challenge in the attempt to distinguish between willing participants and victims of forced recruitment. Certainly in cases involving very young children, recruitment is obviously exploitative. However, where older adolescents are concerned, the exercise of agency does seem to be a possibility, and the question is one of definition. Ultimately, one could argue that the crucial distinction between consenting actor and coerced victim is influenced by social beliefs about human dignity and moral culpability, and by different understandings of the concept of ‘meaningful consent.’ A number of scholars seem to disregard the correlation between human dignity and the ability to exercise agency, and are too quick to simply cast aside any decision to enter armed groups as an illegitimate or coerced one. Conversely, liberal feminists recognize the significance of women’s voluntary decisions to change their own lives, but are often too focused on dogmatically proving female agency at the expense of complexity and nuance. In practice, as this chapter has illustrated, there are some cases in which coercion is explicitly apparent, either by physical force or by

\(^{185}\) Denov and Ricard-Guay, "Girl soldiers: towards a gendered understanding of wartime recruitment, participation, and demobilisation."
deceit and manipulation. There are some cases in which unhindered free agency seems to be exercised – for instance, in the majority of combatants of the M-19. However, not all of those women who *claim* to have consented freely are educated, informed, and free from overwhelming external pressures. In the typical case, elements of coercion and consent coexist dynamically and simultaneously; various environmental factors exert pressure on the decision to enter an armed group, but do not fully impair the volition of the actor involved, who remains capable of rationally weighing up her options. While a theoretical framework for understanding ‘ideal consent’ is useful and necessary in guiding any such analysis, it is almost impossible – and thus disingenuous – to attempt to rigidly apply a standard criteria or to categorize each case in a dichotomous fashion. The testimonies of different women reveal that in Colombia, determining the existence of consent in women’s choice to join the armed forces is a very complex and ambiguous exercise. While it is clear that many lower-ranking guerrillas from poor and rural areas are vulnerable and face difficult circumstances, they should not be caricatured as voiceless victims devoid of any agency.\(^\text{186}\) On the contrary, this chapter has shed light on the multi-layered and even contradictory motives that drive women to join armed groups. As the remaining chapters of this thesis will show, appreciating the ambiguity of this decision – and the coexistence of coercion and consent – is central to establishing a victim/perpetrator continuum that adequately captures the particularities and nuance involved in these cases.

\(^{186}\) Ibid.
Chapter Three reflected upon the range of motivations and circumstances that prompt women to join the FARC. The aim was to question whether women are forcibly recruited into the movement, or whether they join voluntarily and consent meaningfully to participation in FARC activities. This inquiry revealed the difficulties in distinguishing between willing participants and victims of forced recruitment, and found that, in most cases, elements of coercion and consent coexist simultaneously. Nonetheless, it is clear that a significant number of female combatants do give some level of consent – both initial and ongoing – to their involvement in the movement. This gives rise to a debate about victimhood and culpability; simply put, should female combatants be considered as equal perpetrators of violence in war, or do they endure distinct treatment that reduces their agency and control? This chapter proceeds from the acknowledgement that once they join, women become active participants in conflict with a myriad roles and obligations. The objective of this section is to add greater nuance to our understanding of female combatants by empirically exploring the nature of their experience as active guerrilla members, exposing its complexity and contradictions. Are women active and willing participants? Or are they abused and victimized by an overwhelmingly male-dominated military organization? In drawing upon female fighters’ testimonies, this analysis will shed light on the multidimensional and sometimes contradictory experiences resulting from women’s involvement in armed conflict. In particular, this chapter challenges depictions of women, which underscore their vulnerability and characterize them as war victims entirely devoid of agency. At the same time, it problematizes the alternative view, which casts women as equals of their male counterparts. In negotiating a path between
these extremes, it is necessary to delve deeper into the actual experiences of female combatants to determine whether their situation is one of empowerment or disempowerment. While the FARC’s structure is informed by a theoretical equality, and ostensibly designed to give women a sense of fulfillment and agency, it is debatable whether isolated positive experiences are adequate measures of true emancipation. While involvement in the FARC definitely offers women a variety of opportunities and freedoms they would be denied elsewhere, several typical features of women’s experiences suggest patterns of mistreatment and abuse. As a result, ultimately this chapter will show that an assessment of women combatants as solely ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators’ of conflict is rendered impossible by the ambivalence of their experience.

It is imperative to begin by clarifying some key, interrelated concepts that have a bearing on women’s agency as actors in conflict. Given the contested nature of the concept of ‘empowerment,’ it is necessary to define at the outset how I will be using the term in this chapter, as it will inform an assessment of women’s emancipation or constraint. The notion of ‘empowerment’ as used in this thesis reflects the understandings proposed by Naila Kabeer and Carr E. Summerson, both of whom define women’s empowerment as a process of change “by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability.” In acknowledging ‘empowerment’ as a process of change rather than as an absolute outcome, this definition takes into account its psychological and sociopolitical dimensions, and allows for an evaluation of individuals in relation to their own

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189 Kabeer, "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment." Pg.437
personal environment. In other words, the process of ‘empowerment’ is relational and context-specific, as it varies in meaning according to time and across ethnic and cultural milieu.190 It is crucial to realize that the meanings attached to dis/empowerment and control may also vary from one female combatant to another insofar as diverse backgrounds shape their own perceptions and experiences of agency. To illustrate this: it is possible for a woman who comes from a severely subordinated position to be empowered even if she acquires only limited freedom or partial uplift. While her revised condition may not meet the ideal liberal standard of ‘empowerment,’ the relative change she experiences creates a feeling of increased power. This conception of empowerment seeks to evaluate agency and power relations within the context in which they play out, rather than in absolute or universalized terms. Even though most feminist advocates understand ‘power’ in terms of the ability to make choices (which implies the possibility of alternatives and an uninhibited freedom to decide between them), my understanding of ‘empowerment’ recognizes that the notion of choice can be controversial and ambiguous in some cases. The pressures of tradition and culture can sometimes influence women’s decisions and thereby reinforce gender inequalities or other forms of oppression. Thus, power relations can be reflected not only in the mere formal exercise of ‘agency’ and ‘choice,’ but also through the “kinds of choices that people make.”191 Power can operate through both consent and coercion. Choice alone is, therefore, an inadequate measure; the only meaningful assessment of empowerment is one which identifies a change in relative position, and which is rooted in subjective perception rather than objective determination.

In addition, the notions of ‘victimhood’ and ‘culpability’ are equally important in understanding female combatants’ roles and experiences in conflict. Drawing on a common

190 Carr, "Rethinking empowerment theory using a feminist lens: The importance of process."
191 Kabeer, "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment." Pg.459
definition of ‘victimhood,’ this chapter will use the term ‘victim’ to refer to any individual who has “suffered a loss or some significant decrease in well-being unfairly or undeservedly and in such a manner that they were helpless to prevent the loss.”\textsuperscript{192} In this sense, the status of ‘victimhood’ denotes powerlessness, helplessness and a lack of agency. On the contrary, ‘culpability’ implies a state of blameworthiness and personal responsibility. Especially during conflict, it is often unclear who is, in fact, a ‘culpable’ perpetrator. Should we attribute culpability to those who order crimes, those who carry them out, those who allow them, or those who started the conflict in the first place? A starting point for defining a ‘guilty actor’ is to view the individual as a decision-maker, someone who has the agency and the power to contribute decisively and to act in a particular way. In this view, an individual becomes a ‘perpetrator’ if at some point a clear choice is made to participate in actions that are harmful to others.\textsuperscript{193} In short, in contrast to the powerless and vulnerable ‘victim,’ a culpable perpetrator is able to exercise agency to purposefully and knowingly inflict harm.

As a political-military organization with specific objectives, the FARC functions under extremely strict community rules and policies that govern almost every aspect of guerrilla life. In order to explore the roles and experiences of female fighters, it is necessary to understand the functioning of the camps in which women operate and the ways in which their participation and contributions are situated within the FARC structure. Regardless of the circumstances by which women enter the organization, many female combatants participate willingly (because they joined voluntarily in the first place, because they become convinced by the agenda and ideology of the FARC, or because they resign themselves to their situation) and some feel a strong devotion to the movement. This chapter seeks to understand why

\textsuperscript{192} James E Bayley, "The concept of victimhood," in \textit{To be a victim} (Springer, 1991). Pg.54
\textsuperscript{193} Helene Ingerd and Henrik Syse, "Responsibility and culpability in war," \textit{Journal of Military Ethics} 4, no. 2 (2005).
women continue to volunteer and serve in the FARC, and how feelings of ‘fulfillment,’ ‘satisfaction,’ and ‘emancipation’ can coexist alongside extreme forms of mistreatment and abuse. It begins by analyzing the official FARC policies and guidelines as described by deserters and FARC commanders. It proceeds to evaluate the actual experiences of women interviewed for this study. The discussion centers on four main themes: first, roles, tasks, and responsibilities of female fighters; second, implications of women’s experiences in combat; third, ideological, political and social associations that are derived from participation in a rebel group; and fourth, restrictions on women’s sexuality and control over their bodies.

**Women’s Roles and Responsibilities**

The critical role of female soldiers in maintaining the FARC as a resilient and effective organization is unquestioned. Women have been shown to occupy essential positions that range from military, operational, tactical, judicial, and recruitment functions, to more basic social, supportive and community roles. In this regard, the impact of women’s participation cannot be ignored when accounting for the FARC’s survival and prominence. The FARC theoretically embraces egalitarianism as a core value, and uses this to present itself as an attractive alternative for women who are frustrated by traditionally patriarchal norms in rural Colombia. Declaring women to be ‘equal comrades’ and integrating them within its power structure has allowed the FARC to increase its female support. Most interviewees confirmed the FARC’s implementation of this policy by describing how both men and women are required to learn similar assignments within the camps. “Once you arrive in the camps, they treat you as a grown-up woman,” says Lucia. The FARC does not care “if you are a man or a woman, because we all have to do exactly the same.” For Lucia, equality within the
FARC ranks is reflected in strict discipline and in the distribution of roles without regard to differences in gender, age, or race. “If a man is capable of lifting three arrobas (75 pounds) carrying a rifle – an M-16 or an R-15 – then as a woman you should also be able to do it.” Similarly, Lauren also seems to corroborate the reflection of the FARC’s ideal of a more equitable society in the dynamics between soldiers: “In the eyes of the FARC, we [the soldiers] are all identical in importance. There is no such thing as ‘men are worth more and women are worth less.’”

The organization’s progressive platform of revolutionary egalitarianism and the importance of women in their ranks does seem to be applied in the equal allocation of roles, positions and responsibilities to all soldiers. In contrast to rural households where domestic duties (such as cooking and cleaning) are often reserved for women, in the rebel group women’s tasks transcend the traditional familial sphere. Most interviewees described how both men and women alike are compelled to take care of their own and the organization’s daily needs. Male combatants are required to do a broad range of ‘housekeeping’ duties that women would generally do, and which were formerly outside of their capacities or realm as civilian men. Women described performing numerous tasks alongside men, such as “prestar guardia” (staying up all night securing the camp), “remolcando la economía” (bringing food and other supplies from the small towns to the camps), cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, cutting wood, carrying heavy loads, and plowing trenches and latrines, among others.

Although women do perform several stereotypically female-coded tasks, such as cooking and taking care of the injured, they are also expected to engage in ideological/educational training and military tasks that involve combat and killing. According

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194 Schwitalla and Dietrich, "Demobilisation of female ex-combatants in Colombia."
195 See Appendix D (c) and (d) for photographs of what ordinary activities such as cooking and showering look like inside a FARC camp.
to Julia, after receiving their equipment, novice guerrillas (both men and women) generally undergo three months of basic military training, where they are taught fundamental skills using heavy sticks instead of firearms. After successfully completing this training, all soldiers are deemed ready to engage in armed confrontation and fighting in the frontlines along with the other soldiers. “We received different weapons that we were supposed to safeguard with our lives. I was assigned two carbines, a revolver and a few explosives… I was always so burdened,” says Julia. The hardships of everyday life and military training seem to be an equalizing factor between female and male combatants. In this respect, female guerrillas from the M-19 movement also suggest that in extreme situations, removed from normal daily life, there is “more room for equality” between men and women. Caicedo, a former M-19 fighter who served in both rural and urban settings, explains that “when assigning daily tasks, commanders do not care about your gender because it stops being a relevant point of differentiation, they only assess your skills and capabilities.”

While most interviewees agree about the equal distribution and ‘rotational’ nature of menial tasks and housekeeping duties between male and female combatants, and suggest that women are allowed to participate in combat, there are certain differences – influenced particularly by gender and literacy – regarding the specific military positions and responsibilities assigned to women and men. The FARC follows a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) system. This means that after some time and according to individuals’ skills and talents, soldiers are assigned differentiated military “cargos” or functions within the organization. Unlike the menial daily tasks that are shared evenly among all soldiers, commanders assign MOS designations selectively and despite the soldiers’ individual preferences. This technical specialization or division of labor is meant to increase the

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196 Herrera and Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta’–the role of female fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP.” Pg.620
organization’s tactical effectiveness. According to several studies, the FARC traditionally assigns women to positions as “nurses, radio operators, explosive experts, specialists in logistics and finance, intelligence, propaganda and ‘public order.”\textsuperscript{197} While every one of these positions carries its own risks, there are some that require extremely high levels of expertise and preparation. Nonetheless, soldiers generally do not have the freedom to refuse to perform these roles or to choose a different position. Eliana, recruited at the age of 15, comes from the Huila department, which is located in the southwest of the country and is one of the regions where landmines are most prevalent. The small hands of children like Eliana are important tools for the FARC. After completing her basic military training course, Eliana was taught to lay land mines, defuse and deconstruct enemy mines, and recycle their explosive material for ‘homemade landmines’ or improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

I never wanted to do the land mine training course, but I had to because we were not allowed to say ‘no’ to the commander. In the camp, I started practicing using light bulbs. If the light bulb turned on, then I knew that ‘the mine’ would have exploded on me. A few months after I began the course, the army came close to our camps. I was told that I had to go and lay some mines to scare them away, but I did not want to because I had already seen my experienced comrades die trying to do so. ‘I cannot do it,’ I said. ‘I still have not managed to do it without turning on the light bulb.’ But the commander didn’t care and told me that if I did not go, that meant I was a spy working for the government and he would kill me instead. The next day when I went to lay the mine, it detonated and I had an accident that left me for two years in a coma.

Instead of taking her to the nearest hospital to receive proper medical care, the FARC unit assisted Eliana with the limited medical supplies and facilities that were available to it given its remote location. “To this day, I do not know why they decided to keep me alive in a coma,” says Eliana. “They could have easily shot me and got it over with, but perhaps the commander valued my courage and my ability to fulfill my duties,” she adds. Eliana shared

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
with me that she was pregnant when the accident occurred, but she doubted that anyone else in the camp knew about her baby. Her testimony illustrates that both men and women are assigned responsibility for dangerous and complex military missions. Nevertheless, there is some discrimination at work. It seems as though Eliana’s designation of the role of explosives/landmine expert was not based on her ability, dedication or interest, but rather on her physical attributes as a girl. Even if including women in crucial military tasks advances gender equality, the differentiation of roles is not gender-neutral. Moreover, Eliana’s story is characterized by mistreatment, fear, and coercion; her experience was clearly disempowering, despite ostensibly transcending traditional gender norms.

Even though there are many women who share similar stories to that of Eliana, her MOS task as an antipersonnel landmine expert was the exception rather than the rule among the interviewees in this study. I found that many women were, in fact, satisfied on the whole with the roles and responsibilities assigned to them. Having completed the basic military training course, several female fighters assumed supportive and intelligence roles as nurses and radio operators. While some would argue that these positions actually reinforce traditional gendered roles, the women themselves agreed that they are “well respected” and highly valued positions reserved for the “best combatants.” “I was a very important person there,” asserts Angela, 21, from the Caquetá department. “I was a radio operator, so I was regularly in communication with neighboring Fronts. We would share information regarding the army’s advances, so it was very important for me to take good care of the radio and protect it with my life if necessary, especially during ambushes.” Angela was among the most educated women in the group. Despite the lack of opportunities to receive formal education in her province, Angela lived with her mother and sister who taught her how to read and write until she was
recruited at the age of 12. Angela struck me as a confident and ambitious woman. Even though her reintegration process with ACR is ongoing, she currently works as a secretary for a government office. Angela’s described sense of fulfillment and worth, and her belief in the significance of her role as radio operator, may stem from the fact that she was able to master a technical specialty (which many formally uneducated combatants could not perform) and occupied a key position within the group, making her an essential and appreciated member.

During her 12 years of experience as a FARC combatant, Lauren was exposed to a multitude of specialized trainings. While she started with the same basic course as everyone else in her cohort, she was later assigned to the sniper-training course. “I was very good at it,” she says shyly. “I was able to shoot from a distance of 500 meters (about 0.3 miles), and not everyone can do that,” she adds with a cautious laughter. After a few months in her role as a sniper, Lauren participated in the communications course in order to become a radio operator as well. This position is assigned to female fighters because women have a reputation of being “more loyal and trustworthy” than men, Lauren explains. The communication posts are considered tactical and require high levels of accountability and commitment to the group, as the FARC central leadership needs to speak to all commanders across the country in secret code as they plan military operations. Subsequently, Lauren went through the nursing course, which was the most common among female combatants. Similarly, Johanna, who remained a total of 8 years in the FARC ranks, was allowed to “take a break” from the frontlines by serving as a nurse in the camps: “I had to heal many injured comrades who had fallen because of the mines. I had to cut off their feet and fingers, take care of all the medical supplies and make sure that they suffered as little as possible.” Despite her willingness and devotion to helping the injured, she complained about the limited training she received and the lack of

198 Undisclosed Information.
adequate equipment. “Two of my comrades died in my hands because I had no experience. I had to practice my new skills on the wounded, and at first I had no idea what I was doing.” Johanna’s sense of frustration and impotence in failing to save her friends’ lives are emotions shared by other female combatants. Generally, novice guerrillas are not allowed to take the nursing or communication courses until they prove their commitment and worth by excelling at other roles and responsibilities. At the same time, these important positions are not given appropriate training or resources. Thus, while women are able to “earn top marks for their competence and utility,” receiving some recognition and increased status (especially as nurses), their high morale and satisfaction with their work can be compromised by a lack of guidance and support from the organization’s leadership.

The FARC’s egalitarian principle theoretically allows for any soldier to climb the ranks of the hierarchy based on merit and commitment. While this is true in practice at the lower levels of the structure, there are only a few cases of female commanders. At most, women are able to become commanders of squadrons, which are the basic units comprised of 12 members, or companies, which usually contain no more than 5 squadrons. Notwithstanding the possibility for female upward mobility, the so-called ‘12-man Secretariat,’ which is the apex authority of the FARC, is composed only of men. Despite such apparent inequality with regard to women in leadership positions, however, most interviewees did not seem to associate this male-dominated leadership with gender discrimination. For example, Lucia was the only ex-combatant of the 14 former FARC guerrillas who reached a command position in the movement. After outdoing her ‘comrades’ in nursing and military training, Lucia was “invited” to join the organization’s leadership as the commander of a

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199 Herrera and Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta’–the role of female fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP.” Pg.617
squadron comprising 12 to 16 soldiers. “Especially in the mobile column *Teófilo Forero* there was equality between male and female guerrillas. There was equality in our cargos, as well as in strategic military decisions,” she maintains. In addition to her skills as a military combatant and nurse, Lucia had higher literacy levels compared to other comrades in the group. Despite her young age, she had completed 7th grade before enlisting in the FARC. While some of her peers could not read and write, or had only completed 3rd grade, Lucia was comparatively well educated and quickly caught the eye of FARC commanders, she stated:

As a squadron commander, I was involved with the group’s politics. My role as secretary within the leadership assembly allowed me to discuss politics and the FARC’s objectives, and to study certain books. Since I had been a nurse, I was in charge of giving some of the ‘education talks.’ I would teach soldiers about diseases and how to prevent them. Since many of them [soldiers] came from the countryside, I even had to teach them how to take a bath, because they did not know about hygiene.

Lucía’s story offers evidence of the FARC’s egalitarian ideology with regard to promotions and upward mobility within the middle command ranks, offering alternative explanations for the comparatively low number of women in positions of authority even in the absence of explicit or formalized discrimination. She argues that although women have the same rights as men to become leaders in the organization, female combatants often lack the necessary commitment, as well as the leadership and charisma that the FARC commanders are looking for. Generally, *guerilleras razas* (low-ranking guerrillas) do not rise up the ranks because they lack the “capacity to speak to other soldiers, to understand certain topics, and to reach conclusions on their own,” she explains. This perception of women’s inferior capabilities may stem from their generally lower levels of education, which inform their low rank, and could indicate an internalized sense of inferiority or lack of confidence that prevents

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201 Mobile column *Teófilo Forero* operates mostly in the Huila and Caquetá Departments, with specialized urban militia around the country. As of 2013, there were at least 220 guerrillas in this unit.
some women from sharing the ambitions of their male counterparts. Some scholars have argued that women are discouraged from aspiring to higher ranks as they do not wish to earn a reputation as ‘ruthless’ and masculine. In fact, most women did not seem interested at all in becoming commanders or assuming additional roles. Ambitions among women to rise up the FARC’s chain of command were rare, in part because female combatants knew that besides the substantial advantages and privileges they unlocked, positions of leadership also carried extra responsibilities and liabilities. Even the lowest-ranking leaders are responsible for managing finances, logistics, the planning of operations, and above all, the discipline of their subordinates. Failure to implement their mandate rigorously, or making a mistake that compromises an operation or the lives of FARC soldiers, often results in the commanders facing investigations and court-martial. As such, female fighters find alternative ways of enjoying the benefits of high command, without having to assume the responsibilities that come with it.

In their study, Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch found that the small number of female soldiers occupying higher-ranking positions in the hierarchy should not necessarily be understood as an indicator of women’s invisibility. Instead of leveraging their capabilities and strength in the same way as men, women seem to use their sexuality to gain power and influence “without the headaches of responsibility.” In this regard, becoming the “compañera sentimental,” “moza” or “romantic partner” of a commander was highly sought after among female combatants. “If you become the woman of a commander, you don’t have to do anything! No cooking, no washing, no ‘standing guard,’ and of course, no fighting

\[202\] Florez-Morris, "Joining guerrilla groups in Colombia: Individual motivations and processes for entering a violent organization."
\[203\] Herrera and Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta’–the role of female fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP.” Pg.620
\[204\] Ibid.
during armed confrontation with the army,” describes Juliana. In addition to the reduced amount of work, commanders’ companions also receive special treatment and ‘benefits.’ After enduring many hardships during the training process and realizing the many advantages that she could receive – better bedding, food, uniforms, and even permission to go to the city – Angela did not protest when her commander “picked” her “for her looks” to become his companion. “I was 16 and he [the commander] was 48 years old. He was old and disgusting, of course I did not want to sleep with him. But he made sure I had all the necessary things: food, perfume, a swimsuit and permission to go to the towns,” she explains. After two years in this relationship, which she describes as one that “violated her childhood,” Angela became tired and decided to end it. “That was the day when I had to start fighting again – I no longer had his [the commander’s] protection.”

Undeniably, women like Angela are tempted to accept the commander’s advances in the hope that such a relationship will elevate their status and power within the group, reduce hardships and even give them a voice within the group’s highest command. In her diary, Tanja Nijmeijer, a 29-year-old middle-class Dutch woman who joined the FARC in 2002, describes how the commanders are “the FARC’s aristocracy.”\(^{205}\) In one of her entries she writes:

\[La \text{ mujer de un comandante es una clase aparte que ellas tienen ciertos privilegios, siempre tienen toda la información, y a veces dan órdenes.}\]^{206}

[The commander’s woman is a special case because they have certain privileges, they always have all the information, and sometimes they give orders.]

\(^{205}\) Carroll Rory and Brodzinsky Sibylla, "Diary of 'Eileen' tells of life with Colombian's communist rebels," \textit{The Guardian}, November 26 2007. Pg.2

In one of her last entries, Nijmeijer adds: “The girlfriends of the commanders in *Ferrari Testa Rossas*, with breast implants, eating caviar? It seems like it.” It appears possible, then, that the prospect of becoming a commander’s girlfriend is a more plausible alternative, in some women’s minds, than being commanders themselves. This indicates a culture of coercion and of subtle gendered discrimination, which explains the relative absence of women in the higher ranks despite a theoretically egalitarian promotion policy – men are taught to aspire to high command, while women are taught to aspire to seduce high commanders. In the absence of explicit discrimination, this operates to the same effect. Nonetheless, there are women who decisively refuse to compromise their values and morals in exchange for privileges. Despite being ‘chosen’ several times by high commanders, for instance, Juliana always declined their offers. However, by virtue of being the romantic partner of one of the commander’s closest men, she still enjoyed some limited privileges. “I was not allowed to go all the way down to the towns like other women, but I could go to nearby ranches and villages to collect information regarding the army’s location and advances,” she explains. Significantly, she describes having no interest in standing out among her peers or attempting to reach a higher position within the ranks based on her merit and hard work. “I always did what I had to do and nothing else,” she explains. “I was only trying to find a way to survive, and assuming higher ranks was not going to make it easier,” she adds. Juliana’s reluctance to attain positions of power indicates that some women view such roles as additional hurdles more than anything else. During the five years that she remained in the FARC, Juliana knew that the day for her departure would come; assuming a more prominent position would only make this possibility more remote.

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207 Rory and Sibylla, "Diary of 'Eillen' tells of life with Colombian's communist rebels."
Taken together, what this extensive evidence shows is that, while the FARC has committed itself to an egalitarian ideal, differences between female and male combatants exist for a variety of underlying reasons. To a certain degree, an equality exists in the distribution of roles and responsibilities in the movement – both men and women are required to perform daily household tasks that would ordinarily be reserved for women alone, and FARC fighters are expected to undergo the same basic military training regardless of their gender. Complex and important military and combat roles are not reserved for men alone, and women are provided with weapons and equipment no different from those of their male counterparts. However, there is a level of gender discrimination in the division of specialized roles, which is often informed by the perceived unique physical and social attributes of women. As such, women are more often assigned duties as nurses, radio operators or land mine specialists. These roles are not necessarily less significant or valued, but they are determined by gendered considerations. Moreover, when it comes to power relations and positions in the FARC’s hierarchical structure, a formal policy of equal opportunity is applied (and several women have risen to the middle ranks of squadron or unit commander). However, various underlying factors result in a disproportionate number of men in positions of authority. These include a generally lower level of education among women; a lack of ambition linked to self-perceptions of inferior capacity; an unwillingness to be viewed as ‘masculine’; and an aversion to the additional dangers and liabilities associated with prominent command positions. Finally, a common practice of granting exceptional privileges to the romantic partners of male commanders has entrenched a culture in which female combatants aspire to this role as an alternative to positions of actual responsibility. On the whole, a complex picture
emerges in which forms of empowerment and freedom coexist with patterns of degrading and differential treatment; women and men are in some ways equals, and in other ways distinct.

**Women and Combat**

Official FARC regulations require that combat training should take place soon after recruitment. However, in practice, some soldiers may be exposed to heavy combat early in their experience, while others may not engage in combat until many months later, and still more may not experience combat at all. This inconsistency shows that military engagement depends entirely on the location of the FARC unit and its needs at a given time. Thus, most female combatants interviewed in this study had different levels of exposure to combat. Despite these differences, all women, without exception, were exposed to combat situations in which they were trained to use weapons and to fight as soldiers. Notwithstanding the differential effects that these experiences have on female ex-combatants, which may be influenced by a number of contextual and personal factors, the following section challenges existing assumptions about the implications of women’s participation in armed conflict. It hopes to provide meaningful insight into what it means and feels like to be a woman in the FARC, and a better understanding of the range of motivations guiding women’s decision to enter combat. Rather than examining women’s specific roles and responsibilities in relation to men in assessing the equality of their treatment, this section pays close attention to women’s behavior and emotions as well as the personal gains and losses that arise from their military involvement and their socialization as combatants.

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Feminists Cynthia Enloe and Ilene Rose Feinman have argued that the denigration of the feminine lies at the heart of gendered institutions especially the military. Enloe defines ‘militarization’ as the “step-by-step process by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from the military as an institution or militaristic criteria.”

As a gendered process, the notion of ‘militarization’ includes that of ‘masculinization,’ whereby women and feminine qualities are devalued and rejected. Especially in times of war, masculinity becomes militarized and immediately associated with the display of violence, aggressive behavior, weapons, uniforms, and the suppression of emotion. While ‘militarism’ is not necessarily synonymous with ‘masculinity,’ the underlying logic of military institutions seems to be that “all men share a hegemonic masculinity.”

The implications of establishing these masculine precepts as the norm can be particularly dangerous in situations where female recruits join and ‘disrupt’ the very foundations on which these military institutions stand. Building upon this assumption, some scholars have shown that to maintain male privilege, the process of militarization requires the subordination of female soldiers and the suppression of all that is deemed as feminine.

In the particular case of the FARC as an anti-state military institution, the example of Nelly Avila Moreno, alias ‘Karina,’ a former commander of the 47th Front and one of Colombia’s most renowned rebel fighters, shows how some women adopt and perform masculine behaviors to thrive within the FARC’s ranks. In order to become a FARC leader, “you have to be utterly ruthless and vicious, even more so if you are a woman,” said Karina in

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one interview after she surrendered in 2008 to the Colombian secret police (DAS).\textsuperscript{212} A glance at Karina reveals how she earned her fierce reputation in combat: “She has lost sight in one eye and has scars on her face from combat. She has lost a breast and has bullet wounds along an arm,” described an army intelligence source.\textsuperscript{213} Karina was ‘hunted’ by Colombian and United States authorities, which had put a price of £400,000 for information leading to successful capture. At the age of 45, Karina occupied the highest-ranking leadership position ever held in the FARC by a woman. She had 350 soldiers under her command in the northern province of Antioquia, the region where she grew up and where she committed the majority of her crimes (including murder, extortion and kidnaping). Karina’s “fearsome” character was one that she gained in combat and that she leveraged as she climbed the FARC’s hierarchy. The “bravery” of FARC’s female soldiers has been confirmed not only by many women’s testimonies in this study, but also by several accounts of Colombian soldiers and male guerrillas who insist “a woman is more dangerous than a man.”\textsuperscript{214} As a result, women in the FARC have been described as being “strong-minded, precise in military assignment, alert and vigilant in clandestine activities, and dedicated to organizational activities.”\textsuperscript{215}

Like Karina, some interviewees revealed that in the FARC’s male-dominated context, they were pressed to imitate men by adopting masculine behavior because they felt it was the only way to surpass their male counterparts and to earn their respect. After joining the ranks, women’s femininity seemed to be suppressed as they incorporated certain masculine traits into their daily routines, manners, values, and language. In order to be ‘equal members’ of this

\textsuperscript{212} McDermott Jeremy, "Nelly Avila Moreno, FARC's 'Karina,' captured by Colombian forces in war on drugs," \textit{The Telegraph}, May 19 2008.
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{214} Herrera and Porch, "‘Like going to a fiesta’–the role of female fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP." Pg.619-620
\textsuperscript{215} Tazreena Sajjad, "Women guerillas: marching toward true freedom? An analysis of women's experiences in the frontlines of guerilla warfare and in the post-war period," \textit{Agenda} 18, no. 59 (2004).
masculine and militarized institution, women must “modify and reconfigure their own understanding of traditional gender roles.” This rupture with traditional identities leads to the recreation of new female archetypes in a space dominated by men. As such, it is not surprising that some women “end up acting and thinking like men.” Lucia, for example, describes how her experiences as a female “warrior” turned her into a “berraca,” or a “strong woman,” who is prepared to “confront the difficult conditions of the jungle.” However, “not every woman has the guts to do it,” she added. While Lucia had a higher military rank compared to other women in this study, she said her position “was not for free.” Besides her role in the FARC’s educational program, she was also a combatant in the frontlines, where she had to demonstrate her skills, abilities, and resilience:

> It is up to us [the women] to decide if we are respected or scorned. They [FARC members] knew that I had character, so they respected me. I accept that I adopted about 50-60% of a man’s character…. You can see me right now and I’m a woman. I’m modest, delicate and feminine. But there I was not always like that. I looked like a woman and liked men, but my attitude was more like that of a man. After some time, I could do it all: carry three arrobas (75 pounds) and use the machete to clear the paths, just like any other men could.

The testimonies of Karina and Lucia, two women who reached higher levels of leadership within the FARC’s chain of command, seem to reveal that in order to earn merit and respect, militant masculinities must be assumed. By fighting alongside (and even surpassing) their male counterparts in adverse environments, these women challenged the assumption that men are better prepared or more capable of performing numerous military tasks during armed confrontation. In recognizing the existence of a patriarchal hierarchy

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216 Barth, "Peace as disappointment: the reintegration of female soldiers in post-conflict societies: a comparative study from Africa."
217 Ibid.
218 Dietrich Ortega, "Looking Beyond Violent Militarized Masculinities: Guerilla gender regimes in Latin America ".

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and a culture of *machismo* in the FARC, these women showed that it was possible to mimic and adopt alternative gender roles. The implications of this are ambivalent; on the one hand, the mere fact of women being able to participate in traditionally masculine activities alongside men represents a challenge to traditional gender norms. On the other hand, though, the necessity of assuming masculine traits suggests a preservation of those same norms. Nonetheless, by adopting a stereotypical masculine-coded behavior, Karina and Lucia believe they were able to “weaken some of the *macho* or chauvinistic positions” that they encountered along their way up the ranks. At the same time, there are many other women (especially those from lower-level positions) who contend that their combat experiences were not predicated on the exaltation of masculine values. On the contrary, their role as equal fighters in relation to their male comrades was based upon a shared identity as “soldiers of the revolution” rather than a particular conception of gender. In this regard, gendered dichotomies appear to be diluted, and combatants judged according to their abilities as competent militants rather than their gender alone.\(^{219}\) Therefore, rather than simply ‘becoming men’ in a simplistic sense, women appear to go through different and often contradictory processes which influence their feminine behaviors and identities. They adopt typically masculine behaviors, thereby transgressing traditional gender roles, but retain aspects of their femininity as well. This is best conceived as a *hybrid* or syncretic form of gender identity, the absence of a specific masculine or feminine identity, rather than a mere transfer between existing archetypes. Such a conception echoes Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which rejects the idea that gender identity has explicit boundaries that separate one gender from another. According to Butler, “what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a

\(^{219}\) Ibid.
sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body.”

In other words, gender is “generated” through the performance and “repetition” of specific gender roles, which in conflict are broken down and complicated.

Besides a departure from stereotypical representations of women as ‘mothers,’ ‘daughters,’ and passive actors, the high level of female participation in combat, together with access to weapons and power, also catalyzes a process of emancipation that begins with women’s reflection upon their self-esteem, worth, and competencies. Some female fighters who rejected the idea of ‘having to become a man’ to succeed as combatants said that certain militarized values such as “strength,” “aggression,” “rationality,” “efficiency,” and “precision,” are not inherent to men, but can also be related to feminine behavior. “Sometimes women are stronger and more reckless in the midst of war compared to men,” according to Juliana. She maintains that after enduring hardships and arduous military training, women often become “tough” and “heartless” after they “bury themselves in the jungle.” However, these supposedly male traits are not adopted to “fit in” with their respective groups and their male comrades, but are instead a natural consequence of their lifestyle and environment as a militant. “Women are merciless. They are the ones who usually vote ‘in favor’ during ‘consejos de guerra,’ ” she added. A “consejo de guerra” or court martial is the FARC’s judicial procedure to impose the death penalty on those who have broken the rules or committed crimes deserving punishment. During these so-called “revolutionary trials,” the entire military unit is summoned to vote but the judge (who is generally the commander) has the final verdict. The court martial is convened when soldiers commit crimes as serious as rape or as insignificant as stealing a piece of bread. Women “vote against the defendant

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because they simply want to or because they don’t care, not because they have to,” clarified Juliana, who claims that women’s “harsh” behaviors are signs of their own masculinized (or hybridized) femininity rather than a result of peer-pressure or the imitation of masculine qualities.

Combat allows for more equality because no one can afford to say ‘I am not going to shoot because I am a woman, or let me save you because you are a woman.’ No, the only important thing in war is surviving, and for that, only your combat skills matter. I learned that I don’t need to become a man to survive. I have to bring out the strength that I have as a woman. We are smarter, mentally stronger, and resilient – men give up easily, we don’t. [At first] I was weak and vulnerable, but I learned to defend myself and to bring out the strength. As women, we will never be able to be like men… my commander used to tell us we are the weaker sex. But I don’t think so! His wife was very brave and strong.

Notwithstanding the experiences of women and girls who said that they preferred to remain in the camps rather than going out to the frontlines, most women reported having derived some benefit out of their engagement in combat through the attainment of new skills, status, power, access to weapons and the possibility to surpass men based on their own abilities and merit. Despite the wide range of roles and positions assigned to women and men, the battlefield was undoubtedly a space where “precision, rather than physical strength” was determinative of success. Having the opportunity to fight side-by-side with men, as well as learning how to confront the grueling and dangerous realities of war, disrupted the patriarchal cultural and social contexts in which these women were raised. Their experiences as guerrilla fighters allowed them to relinquish their fear of conflict, and offered affirmation and spaces to make choices and develop a sense of autonomy. Furthermore, when asked to consider their militant experience as a whole, the allusion to a greater sense of ‘capacity’ was common among participants. “I think I’ve become much stronger, not only on the outside but also on the inside. I am not like those [women] who let others step over them, and I am not outshined
by challenges, I have learned how to act to try to fix them,” reflects Johanna. The captivating observation to be made here is that during armed struggle, women in the frontlines believe that they are playing a crucial role in attaining a degree of emancipation that was previously denied to them. The opportunity to ‘prove’ that they can fulfill traditionally masculine roles and be responsible for the same tasks as men, and even be in charge of protecting those in the frontlines, provides female fighters with a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction and acceptance.

Another factor associated with women’s empowerment as a result of their participation in combat is their ability to lift the veil of ‘normativity’ that had previously prevented them from transgressing gender norms and challenging the boundaries of the ‘feminine’ realm. During war, it becomes almost impossible to sustain the ‘normal’ dichotomy between men and women and the gender roles imposed by society. According to Johanna, who fought in the FARC as a low-level guerrilla for 8 years, “there is no makeup, no time to comb our hair, no time to look pretty or to think about your appearance, you are working all the time.” Both female and male cadres must comply with strict orders and follow a rigid discipline where capacity, tenacity, disposition and commitment play a greater role than gender. The evidence that is needed to answer the question of whether or not women’s new identities and roles that arise during the struggle will translate into a continuous empowerment after the conflict ends will be available in years to come. However, it is clear that the adoption of masculine qualities or a militarized feminism in their identity as guerrilla fighters carries over into their new lives as civilians. It seems as though the archetype of an ‘ideal soldier’ was not necessarily based on a rejection of women or femininity in general, but rather on the construction of a particular

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221 Sajjad, "Women guerillas: marching toward true freedom? An analysis of women's experiences in the frontlines of guerilla warfare and in the post-war period."
hybrid model in which ‘male’ and ‘female’ coded behaviors overlap and converge. The ‘soldier identity’ is respected and encouraged in a military setting, but it remains incompatible with society’s rigid gender norms. After four years in the reintegration process, Johanna still claims that her family and siblings complain about her “roughness” and ‘heavy hands.’ “Every time I caress my younger sister, she tells me that I’m like a brute because I leave her a bruise with my heavy hands and my brusque attitude.” In retrospect, Johanna along with many other female fighters seems to acknowledge the gains that they experienced from their exposure to war. They also recognize that they “are different from the women outside,” and have changed in a myriad ways that pose new challenges as they reintegrate into Colombian society. Ultimately, the transgression of traditional gender roles during conflict is an empowering experience for women who are freed from the restrictions imposed by regular civilian society, and allows for the emergence of hybrid or syncretic forms of gender that blurs normative boundaries.

Women, Politics and Belonging

Literature regarding the internal organization of armed groups has stressed combat training as well as political and ideological indoctrination as crucial processes through which armed groups shape the behavior of soldiers and supporters. As one of the most resilient guerrilla groups in the world, the FARC has over the years developed a sophisticated hierarchical system that entails command councils and military formations, which provide

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order and political guidance.\textsuperscript{223} Every military unit or cell has a political secretary and a secretary of propaganda, and all the members of the cell must gather once every two weeks to make decisions democratically.\textsuperscript{224} As such, in addition to the important role of military training and rigorous discipline, the FARC also emphasizes ideological instruction, consisting primarily of lectures on Marxism and Colombian history. As mentioned in chapter three, most of the women interviewed for this study were aware of the pervasive socio-economic injustices in Colombia’s society; however, none of the former FARC guerillas interviewed seemed to have joined the movement for primarily political or ideological reasons. Nonetheless, most of them claimed to have become socially and politically engaged during their time as FARC members. The FARC was founded on a Marxist ideological platform and its original objectives included far-reaching land redistribution to counter economic inequalities, as well as an overthrow of the government.\textsuperscript{225} Since 1975, the FARC has enlarged its vision from that of an armed group fighting for the survival of its members to that of “la lucha por la toma del poder para el pueblo,” or the Marxist insurgency “fighting for power for the benefit of the people.”\textsuperscript{226} This does not mean, of course, that the FARC has remained solely a political and social actor; it has, over time, become involved with illicit activities such as the drug trade and extortions as its main sources of funding. Moreover, there seems to be a vacuum in its strategy regarding the specific steps that would follow after the FARC took political power, or what kind of policies would be enacted to promote socio-

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{225} Ben Oppenheim and Michael Weintraub, "Doctrine and violence: The impact of combatant training on civilian killings," \textit{Terrorism and Political Violence} (2016).
\textsuperscript{226} Ribetti, "The unveiled motivations of violence in intra-state conflicts: The Colombian guerrillas." Pg.714
economic equality. However, the FARC has been relatively successful at maintaining a consistent ideological agenda.\textsuperscript{227}

According to most of the women interviewed for this study, political and ideological ‘educational talks’ conducted in the camps included daily lessons on the FARC’s regulations and norms, political doctrine, social discourse and the treatment of civilian populations. An ordinary day in the life of a FARC combatant began at 4:45am as they woke up, had breakfast, and then readied to listen to the commander announce the “order of the day,” where all the daily assignments were distributed. Military training, which included handling weapons, physical exercise, operating in formation and combat tactics, usually took place in the mornings. The ‘educational talks,’ readings, and group discussions would then be arranged in the afternoons or evenings, after all the housekeeping duties were completed. Every soldier was required to study the lectures about Lenin and Marx given by top commanders or guerrillas who had been selected for their high level of education and “political consciousness.” Some interviewees also mentioned having ‘cultural hours,’ in which all the members of the camp would gather to discuss daily news or events, sing, play music or simply relax with their peers. In some fronts, like Eloisa’s, the FARC offered literacy classes taught by a teacher from the \textit{vereda} or rural village, who was asked to come over the weekends or during the soldiers’ free time. “She would usually come from 8am to 10am and teach many of us how to read and write. One day, she stopped coming and that was the last time I received classes.” Eloisa has continued to practice her writing and reading skills during her reintegration process, which she will complete in June this year.

As the only woman in a position of leadership, Lucia was able to read the FARC’s collection of books, which included “Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and books on Colombia’s

\textsuperscript{227} Gates, "Recruitment and allegiance the microfoundations of rebellion."
land reform, so we could understand the projects that would benefit the civilian population after the FARC takes power.” During political discussions, in addition to the FARC’s ideology, the leadership would teach soldiers about “the oligarchy, ‘minorquía,’ corruption, the history of the FARC, etc.” Most women, like Lauren, seemed to have a basic understanding and to approve of the FARC’s attempt to fight inequality:

There are things that the FARC do to help poor people. Since one is like those people who have very little, it is easy to sympathize. They take away things from the rich to give it to the poor, like for example those big delivery trucks in the unpaved roads…we stole food from those because they belong to rich people who own rich companies. Then, the FARC would give the food to the poor and indigenous people in Toribio (in the department of Cauca).

Lauren’s testimony reveals the fact that, despite having only a basic understanding of the FARC’s founding principles and the theory behind its actions, she is aware of the role of the FARC as a political and social actor that claims an ability to bring change to the country and improve the lives of its poorest citizens. The FARC’s education programs seem to be designed to drill a simplified version of its political platform into the minds of its soldiers. To ensure unity and to justify its violent actions, the FARC has demonized the government by depicting it as the “enemy of the people,” in opposition to the rebel group as “the protector of the people.” It undertakes symbolic actions aimed at engendering sympathy from the communities it relies on. For instance, on the 2nd of July 2015, the FARC detonated explosives on the Marayal bridge which connected the two municipalities of Guamal and San Martin in the Meta department, located close to the center of the country and to the east of the Andean mountains. According to Maria, the bridge was in such a deplorable state that it was extremely unsafe for civilians to keep crossing it every day; for many years, authorities had
failed to examine and repair it. In response to the state’s neglect, the FARC decided to destroy the bridge so that “the government would have no excuse not to build a new one.”

As we have seen, the FARC relies on a strategy of presenting itself (both to the public and to its own ranks) as the only solution for poor communities in Colombia. This narrative is made possible by the failure of the government to fulfill its obligations to provide basic goods and services and to extend secure control to its entire territory. For these reasons, the discourse of ‘heroism’ and ‘justice’ within the FARC is complemented by a discourse critical of the government, which has failed to effect change and impose law, order, and justice. These discourses have taken root relatively effectively. Eloisa, for example, claims that notwithstanding the many “errors” committed by the FARC, they have at least succeeded in their efforts to “protect the people and to impose justice.” Unlike the government that often “lets many thieves and rapists go free [from jails],” the guerrilla has “a more effective” judicial system in place for the civilian population. “They give three opportunities to people, and if they do not change, they give them one day to leave the town. If they do not comply, they are killed,” she adds. These accounts illustrate that although women may not have a complex appreciation of the political-ideological platform of the FARC, they are undoubtedly made conscious of Colombia’s social injustices as they begin to define themselves as social actors capable of making a difference. In other words, these processes (of propaganda, education and symbolic action) that give meaning to ‘social practices’ within a collective also create specific values attached to their actions, and contribute to the creation of a cohesive, integral fighting force.

In addition to the demonization of the government, another practice that aims to propagate a coherent image of the FARC as a unified and serious organization for the
achievement of particular political aims is the use of war names. As part of the FARC’s political ideology, new recruits are given specific battle names as soon as they enter the camps and are no longer allowed to use their old identities. The purpose of using these ‘nom de plumes’ is twofold: first, the names evoke a particular spirit within the combatant of their being part of a larger movement, and second, they hide the real identities of the soldiers in case they are captured by the army. The use of ‘war’ names alludes to a particular culture of struggle and revolution, and induces a sense of continuity with heroes like Simon Bolivar and Che Guevara. According to Orland Villanueva, coauthor of the book “Alias y apodos en la historia Colombiana” (Aliases and Nicknames in Colombian History), during the period of The Violence, most nicknames were related to animals (take, for instance, the nickname “Mono Jojoy” or “white, fat worm” given to Jorge Briceño Súarez, a member of the Secretariat). He argues that this practice has changed considerably since 1966. Today, most names contain both first and last names. This is indicative of the FARC’s intention to successfully hide combatants’ real identities, but also of their efforts to reflect “respect, appraisal, and self-esteem within the organization.” It is worth noting that in addition to using first and last names, the FARC now prohibits the use of animal names (or any names that degrade the soldier). This serves to reinforce the FARC’s internal cohesion and to entrench a value system based on respect and prestige, which helps to legitimize the rebel group as a formal political actor.

In the subsection “Women’s Roles and Responsibilities,” the FARC’s stated commitment to equality in military promotions was explored. Many combatants maintained

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229 "FARC- Rebels with a Cause?,” (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2010).
230 "Practices of Self-Legitimation in Armed Groups: Money and Mystique of the FARC in Colombia," Pg.113
231 Ibid.
that any soldier (both male and female) would in theory be able to climb the ranks of the FARC’s chain of command based on merit and allegiance. In addition to promoting soldiers who excel in their roles, the FARC also has a ‘reward system’ intended to enhance the morale of the soldiers. Such rewards may include membership in strategic companies, participation in specialized training courses (such as a nursing course or communications course), and even permission to visit nearby towns or villages. According to FARC commanders, the prospect of earning those rewards and the recognition of senior officials is important for the group’s morale, as well as for facilitating a symbiotic relationship between the soldiers and the organization’s leadership.

However, despite the FARC’s attempt to portray its command structure as ‘an internal democracy’ and a meritocratic system, it has largely failed to create an environment in which strong incentives exist to escalate up the ranks (as discussed in previous sections). In addition to the aforementioned factors inhibiting women’s ambitions to become high-level commanders, the government has offered large financial rewards for the heads of FARC leaders, especially if delivered by one of the organization’s own members. The case of Ivan Ríos is one example. In 2008, Ríos, a member of the FARC’s Secretariat, was killed by his own chief of security (known as Rojas) who gave Colombian authorities the leader’s severed hand as proof of this accomplishment. The Colombian government announced the death of the commander, but Rojas’ motives remained unclear to the general public. According to an unclassified Wikileaks cable, Rojas claimed that he murdered Rios due to “his fear of an imminent Colombian military attack on the 47th FARC front, his discontent over the front’s

232 Ibid.
233 Ibid.
234 Fox News, "Colombia rebel commander Ivan Rios reported killed; Cross-border tensions rise," Fox News, March 7 2008. Pg. 1-2
lack of supplies, [and the] reward offered by the government.”235 According to the same source, the Ministry of Defense paid Rojas a portion of the five billion Colombian pesos ($2.7 million USD) promised for information on the location of the unit, and for Rios’ computer, USB sticks, and other information. This shows that over and above commanders’ additional responsibilities and liabilities, higher-ranking positions also mean being at risk of targeting both by the army and by members of the FARC itself. The lack of a strong incentive to climb the ranks of the movement explains, in part, the FARC’s need to enforce internal cohesion through strict disciplinary practices.

Many women referred to other soldiers as “brothers,” “sisters,” “comrades,” and “family.” These words allude to the sense of closeness and solidarity that reinforces their commitment to the organization. Relationships between fellow guerrillas are described as being founded on equality, respect and interdependence. For example, during armed confrontation, soldiers have to put their own lives at risk in order to protect others. Soldiers’ daily tasks of standing guard over the camp or working as “centinelas” (guarding the commanders) also require sacrifice and a strong camaraderie. Arianne describes her relationship with Ramirez, her front commander, as one based on “respect and care,” recounting how the two of them would spend hours talking about their lives and aspirations. As a show of affection, Ramirez would call Arianne by the nickname “mi flacuchenta” or “my skinny girl.” “He was always looking out for me,” said Arianne, “so of course other people would spread rumors that I was sleeping with him, but that was not true. He actually cared for me and wanted to protect me.” Like Arianne, many women express a feeling of solidarity with fellow members of the rebel group. Johanna describes her experience in the guerrillas as “a big change” from her life as a civilian:

There was always food, medicine, and I always had my own personal things. There [in the front] I never saw anyone insulting another comrade, there was always respect. Everything I did was commanded to me, but with respect. Among the entire guerrilla, it is normal to have problems, but there is also a bond that emulates family. If you needed something that the other has, then we would share. If you were going out, the other would look out for the ‘caleta’ (belongings in the camp). I would often say ‘Oh my goodness! These people are not my family and yet they treat me better than my own.’

Johanna’s testimony reflects the ways in which FARC combatants become an integrated family, whose members care for one another and ensure their collective wellbeing. This is predicated on a dependence on other members of the group for survival. As soon as they join the FARC, new recruits are expected to break ties with their families, friends and anyone else who formed a part of their former lives as civilians. This is an important aspect of guerrilla culture, as soldiers are made to depend on the organization for everything: shelter, food, clothing, medicine, weapons, and support. All of the FARC’s resources are termed ‘collective property’ and must be shared equally among the soldiers. This equitable system of distribution prevents the emergence of inequalities between members, and reinforces feelings of fraternity and shared value as ‘equals.’ Abuse by relatives strengthens women’s dependence on and perceptions of a familial bond with the organization. As detailed in chapter three on women’s motivations for joining the FARC, this is the case for many female combatants in the movement. Johanna was traumatized by a group of paramilitaries who ransacked her house, and abused at the age of 13 by her stepfather who had raised her since she was an infant. These two episodes, however, were the first of several incidents of violence and neglect in her life. As the eldest daughter, Johanna was expected to take care of her siblings from the young age of 15. With no educational or employment opportunities available

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236 Borch and Stuvøy, "Practices of Self-Legitimation in Armed Groups: Money and Mystique of the FARC in Colombia."
to her, Johanna describes having had no choice but to have sex with her cousin in exchange for money to feed her siblings. Understandably, these abusive experiences filled her with “resentment” and “bitterness.” As a result of such extreme trauma, women like Johanna who have been victimized by their own families develop stronger bonds with their peers in the FARC and a particular commitment to the organization.

Nonetheless, even those female combatants who have not been similarly victimized during their time as civilians are influenced by the FARC’s shared values and identities. Despite the organization’s strict adherence to a military discipline, the FARC also recognizes the importance of cultivating loyalty, solidarity, and satisfaction among all of its members. Some women mentioned the fact that the FARC organizes celebrations of Colombian traditional holidays such as Christmas, New Year’s Eve and Independence Day, and even acknowledges personal birthdays. Lucia describes how some of her male peers would give female fighters small gifts on special occasions. Spaces for socialization existed and were encouraged by the command, as a means of stimulating the morale of soldiers and of strengthening group cohesion. Besides these social practices, the FARC uses recurrent symbols to transmit shared values within the group and to increase the movement’s visibility in the outside world. These include a flag (the national Colombian flag with crossed arms at its center) and an anthem, the “Marcha fariana.” The FARC has even developed a website, “FARC-EP International,” which is offered in three different languages (Spanish, English and Dutch) and includes short films portraying guerrillas as war heroes marching to a background of Colombian traditional music.237

These symbols and social practices together serve to strengthen soldiers’ belief in and loyalty to the rebel movement and its political objectives, which in turn reinforces group

237 Ibid. Pg.114
cohesion not only as a military institution, but also a social movement. In political psychology, social identity theory suggests that empowerment can be a product of collective action.238 In this regard, the values and emotional support derived from collective action and membership of a group appear to encourage women to take control over their own lives. The process of engaging in political and social activities with a group of peers who share similar values and personal experiences allows combatants to develop a sense of belonging and a feeling of importance. This was evident in most of the women’s testimonies, as they described the pride they took in their social roles and contributions to the group. As a radio operator, Angela asserts that “not everyone is trusted with such information. The knowledge I had was secret because only the commander and his chief of staff knew about it. At the same time it put me in a dangerous position,” she says confidently.

The process of participating collectively in the effort to secure a goal of historical importance for Colombia gives women fighters a sense of meaning while in the movement. For some of them, joining the FARC is the first chance they have to effect change and to be recognized for their efforts. Nonetheless, I found that many women ultimately become disillusioned with the FARC’s ideals and objectives. “I don’t believe them anymore,” said Maria. “The FARC and the army are alike, they both kill innocent people,” she added. While intensive indoctrination and propaganda are effective at first, a disappointment with the organization’s means of obtaining its goals, together with the hardships of guerrilla life, are among the prime reasons for many women’s desertion. A clear pattern emerges from the testimonies: women initially embrace the ideology of the FARC, and feel a keen sense of solidarity with their comrades, but gradually become wearier of life in the movement as time

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progresses. However, the fact that these women eventually deserted implies that they exercised agency in taking control of their lives by making their own decision to leave the group despite the numerous risks involved. The process of engaging in a collective, and the experience of support from fellow comrades, seems to have encouraged women to become more confident and assertive and to question the ideas and norms that they had initially conformed to. At the age of 16, Lucia decided to escape from the FARC after almost three years in its ranks:

> I knew it was treason, and I knew that we [Lucia and her partner] could not fail, that’s why it took us two months to plan and prepare our flight. Nobody told me to do so and nobody forced me. I was sick of that unjust war, where I would never succeed. I believe that as a woman, one should aspire for more. So we left all the ammunition and ran for four hours nonstop. A family in the village helped us take a bus to Ibagué (capital city of Tolima department located in the center of the country).

Despite the positive experiences that result from soldiers’ shared experiences, values, and identities – their sense of fraternity, solidarity and belonging – a number of factors work in unison to weaken allegiance to the organization and to dilute the trust and familial bonds between guerrillas. Although descriptions vary across FARC fronts, some women described a growing atmosphere of competition and distrust among the fighters. This is a result, in part, of the constant fear that all soldiers have for their lives, not only as targets of army attacks, but also as targets of their own peers within the organization. In recent years, the FARC has grown paranoid about the possibility of the existence of CIA or Colombian army infiltrators within its ranks. The organization believes that the most effective means of detecting (and eliminating) those infiltrators is by looking out for any sign of rebellious behavior toward the organization’s rules and strict discipline. Consequenly, members live in constant fear of

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being indicted if they share any doubt or criticism of the FARC’s ideology, actions, or motives. “I saw how one time, a woman who was jealous because her ‘socio’ (partner) had broken up with her, accused the new girlfriend of being a spy from the army,” reported Eloisa. The commander immediately reacted to this allegation and chained the accused woman to a tree for weeks until he could investigate further. “I learned not to trust anyone, and to keep some emotions to myself. They said I was unfriendly, but that is just because I didn’t want to get in trouble with anyone,” Eloisa explains.

To summarize, the FARC’s ideological and political indoctrination of its members still plays a central role in the movement’s cohesiveness and its legitimization as an actor with specific political and social objectives. Soldiers do seem to be aware of the FARC’s broader mission of fighting social injustice. The narrative that defines the FARC as ‘the people’s army and protector’ has served to legitimize its violent actions and to reinforce internal social coherence within the armed group. The FARC has also used a wide range of techniques to harmonize soldiers’ identities with that of the organization. The prevalence of collective symbols and forms of soft power has effectively influenced members’ understanding of their contribution to a collective. Though FARC guerrillas comprise soldiers from diverse backgrounds, the organization has been successful, to some extent, in providing them with a sense of shared belonging, companionship, sacrifice and self-worth that strengthens group bonds. Nevertheless, a combination of external and internal factors has increasingly compromised the group’s ability to maintain the loyalty of all of its members. Most interviewees describe a gradual breakdown of trust, and an incremental disillusionment with the methods and practices of the organization. As a result, the FARC has become increasingly
militant and disciplinarian, strictly policing its members in an atmosphere of tension, competition and suspicion.

**Women, Relationships and Sexuality**

“In the FARC there is more equality than in civil society, but not more freedom.”
- Juliana

As explored in previous sections, the FARC has officially committed itself to gender equality by allowing an equal distribution of roles and responsibilities to male and female combatants. However, the organization’s control of women’s sexuality, romantic relations and reproductive rights directly contradicts this theoretical egalitarianism. The following section will explore a different angle on gender relations within the organization in order to determine whether or not discrimination and disempowerment shape women’s experiences as combatants. In particular, it will show that the management of romantic relationships within the FARC has significant gender implications that negatively influence women’s overall sense of emancipation. Female combatants are required to take on additional roles that reinforce traditional gender norms, and are denied agency over their bodies, sexuality, maternal choices, and reproductive rights. In enforcing a rigid formal conception of equality within its ranks, the FARC as a militarized institution often ignores important biological and psychological differences between men and women, which ultimately results in members being denied their social identity as women and mothers.

According to the FARC’s official policy and the internal norms that dictate the day-to-day life and behavior of its members, overt gender discrimination is not tolerated. For instance, rape is an offense that is punishable by death, and female fighters are, in theory, free
to refuse sex.\textsuperscript{240} This extends to female guerrillas of all ages. However, as part of its strict military discipline, the FARC is well known for regulating intimate relationships. Long-lasting and stable romantic relationships between members are generally not condoned, because they are viewed as a potential threat to the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the organization. FARC commanders argue that romantic love for another person weakens a guerilla’s love for and commitment to the revolution. It is not uncommon for couples to make the decision to desert as they aspire to begin a family together as civilians.\textsuperscript{241} As such, commanders are responsible for strictly controlling and supervising romantic relationships across all FARC units. While marriage was commonplace in many other Colombian armed groups, such as the ELN and the M-19 movement, in the FARC short-term ‘open relationships’ are the norm.\textsuperscript{242}

If two soldiers want to spend the night together, they have to follow a rigorous procedure. First, some interviewees revealed that new recruits are not allowed to be intimate, at least not during their initial three months in the camps. More importantly, the couple must request permission from the commander (before 5pm) and, if the commander agrees, they are allowed to sleep in the same bed that night. Although not a widespread practice, some women indicated that their commander would “read aloud in front of the entire group the names of the couples that had been granted permission.” Once requests are granted there is no opportunity for soldiers to change their minds - from that moment on, it becomes an order.\textsuperscript{243} In a recent \textit{New York Times} article, Nicholas Casey writes that when two soldiers want to have sex, “they

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{240} Herrera and Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta’–the role of female fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP.” Pg.622
\item \textsuperscript{241} Gjelsvik, "Women, war and empowerment: a case study of female ex-combatants in Colombia."
\item \textsuperscript{242} See Appendix D (a) for a photograph of a ‘couple’ in FARC camps.
\item \textsuperscript{243} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
tell the commander and then slip off into the woods, with palm fronds for bedding.”

Although it is true that relationships in the FARC are common, the specifics of how, when, and where these relations occur are not unsupervised but rather heavily regulated. Since sexual activity or romantic relations must not get in the way of military operations or everyday responsibilities, a typical FARC unit will set aside two days a week (usually Wednesdays and Saturdays/Sundays) for sexual relations. These days are referred to colloquially as “dias de Mercado” or “market days,” and are meant to turn any romantic relations into unemotional, systematic transactions to fulfill certain biological needs. In theory, commanders are also allowed to deny permission to a couple if they believe that their emotional attachment could compromise their ideological and military duties.

In most testimonies, the figure of the commander is repeatedly mentioned as an important actor in charge of regulating women’s romantic relations and sexuality. However, the rule-enforcing figure of the commander contrasts starkly with the abusive and authoritarian figures of ‘fathers’ and ‘brothers’ in their own families, who exercised cruel, malicious power over them. In this sense, some women perceive a divergence between their family life and the guerrilla’s social order in terms of the imposition of patriarchal norms. Again, unlike the exploitative environments in their own families, the guerrilla officially forbids many forms of abuse. As such, many women seem to believe that the strict regulation of their intimacy was fair, protective, and respectful, a mere application of rules formulated for the objective good of the movement. For some of them, this was the first time that they had the ability to decide – for themselves – whether or not they wanted to have sex and with

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244 Nicholas Casey, Andrew Glazer, and Ben Laffin, "In a Rebel Camp in Colombia, Marx and Free Love Reign," *The New York Times*, March 19 2016. Pg.4

245 Hernández and Romero, "Adolescent girls in Colombia's guerrilla: An exploration into gender and trauma dynamics."
whom. Eloisa and Lauren, for instance, both confidently stated that women are never abused in the FARC. “During one of our sessions here in ACR, I heard one comrade tell the doctor that she had been raped. But that’s not true… that’s all a lie because rape doesn’t happen in the FARC, you always have to ask permission from the commander,” said Eloisa. Similarly, Lauren asserted that, “rape is forbidden, the FARC hates rapists… so I was respected and never forced to do that [have sexual relations].” In this regard, the FARC’s social environment and strict regulation of romances may prevent, in some cases, abuses of women. At the very least, the fact that these rules are put in place consistently conveys a sense of protection and fairness that most women did not previously enjoy. In addition to these measures, women in the FARC constantly carry their own guns, which influences power relations based on the perceived ‘control’ that women acquire through an ability to defend themselves. Johanna describes how during one of the December celebrations, a drunken comrade tried to abused her. Fortunately, she was carrying her gun and made use of it to defend herself.

We also have parties with alcohol and music, especially around Christmas when the army is having their own celebrations and leave us alone. That one time when the comrade tried to cross the line, I had to defend myself with the rifle. I didn’t kill or injure him, but I fired the gun into the air so that he would go away and to call the guard on duty. Unfortunately, they didn’t take any measures against him, they didn’t sanction him or anything because he was a commander.

Johanna’s testimony shows that, to a certain degree, female soldiers rely on their weapons for security and to ensure their wellbeing. Nevertheless, it is also clear that despite the FARC’s norms and regulations, sexual violence is still pervasive in the organization. For these reasons, notwithstanding the various and contradictory ways in which agency and power relations are structured in the organization, most of the literature portrays women as
vulnerable and passive victims of sexual violence. According to Amnesty International’s report on Sexual Violence Against Women in the Armed Conflict, the FARC regularly carries out gender-based violence: “By sowing terror and exploiting and manipulating women for military gain, bodies have been turned into a battleground.” The report argues that the FARC exerts particular pressure over civilian women living in territory under its control, who are often victims of sexual assaults and killings. In these areas, women and girls who are associated with army soldiers or police are considered ‘military targets’ by the FARC, and in some cases sexual abuse is seen as punishment and strategy of war. Moreover, violence against female combatants within the organization should not be overlooked. Violence, sexual harassment and rape do, in fact, occur within the camps. In particular, women are relatively more vulnerable when it comes to commanders or other male soldiers in the groups’ hierarchy. As a 12-year old, Daniela experienced sexual harassment three times during her four years as a FARC guerrilla, all of which occurred while she was standing guard at night. The first of two lower-ranking soldiers who attempted to rape her was killed in a court martial, after he confessed his intentions. The other soldier, who was tied to a tree for a few weeks after his capture, managed to escape before his trial. In the following narration, Daniela tells the story of the time the commander came into her tent and abused her:

For two consecutive nights I could hear someone walking into my tent and sitting next to my bed watching me sleep. But I pretended I was sleeping and did nothing. The third night, I woke up, turned around and saw the commander. But immediately afterwards he covered my mouth and I just remember a strong smell, nothing much after that.

When I reacted I was screaming and screaming, my shirt was torn… I had the bad habit of not sleeping with my camouflage [uniform], I liked taking my

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246 Denov and Ricard-Guay, "Girl soldiers: towards a gendered understanding of wartime recruitment, participation, and demobilisation."
[uniform] shirt off and just sleeping holding my camouflage in my hands…I felt a strong pain and then I screamed to try to push him away. Because of all the noise, the comrades came over and protested to the commander when they found out. They shouted, ‘if it had been a razo (or low-level guerrilla) you would have shot him already.’

When I woke up the next day, I saw the commander tied to a tree, but I was being taken out of the camp to a clinic. Two days later I didn’t want to return, I was scared that the other men would also jump on me. We had meetings and the commander confessed it all, he had previously been a Marine soldier and had even taken videos of us [female soldiers]. We killed him during the war council after that.

Even though some women (like Eloisa, Lauren and Lucia) argue that rape is not allowed by the FARC and claim that those women who say they have been harassed “are just playing their roles as victims to get more benefits,” we cannot dismiss or overlook Daniela’s testimony and experiences. It is especially useful to illustrate the vast differences across different FARC fronts and how official rules and norms are not always respected or enforced. Rules cannot themselves prevent violence; and the commanders, who are supposed to enforce the rules, are often themselves perpetrators. This seems to be the case especially during times when army attacks disrupt communication between the central leadership and the independent FARC units. Studies have shown a direct correlation between an increased autonomy of regional commanders who are no longer ‘accountable’ to FARC superiors, and a rise in the number of cases of gender-based violence.248

Following on the previous argument that the FARC’s official regulations offer female combatants the freedom to refuse sex, there seems to be a combination of ‘formal rules’ and simultaneous ‘informal standards’ within the group that dictate women’s sexuality and choices. On the one hand, women’s apparent freedom to select partners is restricted by the standards that FARC imposes on their ‘promiscuity.’ That is, there are limits to women’s

248 Gjelsvik, "Women, war and empowerment: a case study of female ex-combatants in Colombia."
number of partners and the frequency with which they can have intimate relations. On the other hand, however, the organization’s custom seems to encourage women to have sexual relations with their male counterparts so as to raise the morale of the group. Under these contradictory circumstances, women who do not have regular partners are often labeled as ‘troublemakers’ and reprimanded for ruining their own reputation and that of the FARC. In this regard, female sexuality is caught up in a double standard. Female guerrillas are simultaneously encouraged to submit to the male gaze and cater to male desires, and scorned as ‘promiscuous’ if they actually follow through with this expectation. In this sense it is not surprising that most of the women interviewed attempted to navigate that line by choosing to stay with two or three partners during their time in the guerrilla group. In Arianne’s own words, by choosing to have “more than one partner, but less than five,” women avoided criticism from both the leadership and their own peers. This informal gender-based treatment within the group is also related to gender imbalances in the movement. The greater number of male recruits has resulted in women being transferred frequently across fronts; and, unlike their male counterparts, women are not allowed to pursue sexual companions among the civilians that live in FARC-controlled territory.

In addition to the tight control that commanders maintain over guerrilla soldiers’ relationships, the FARC also has a widely acknowledged official policy in relation to contraceptive methods, which are rigorously applied to female guerillas alone. Testimonies of former combatants and commanders, including that of the well-known guerrilla alias ‘Karina,’ are evidence of the regular forced contraception methods used to prevent women from having children. Pregnancy in the guerrilla camps is strictly forbidden for two main reasons. Firstly, having a baby inherently puts in danger the lives of all the soldiers in the camp. For instance,

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249 Herrera and Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta’–the role of female fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP." Pg.622
Lauren described the time when her front was hiding from the army forces and she saw one of her female comrades drown her own newborn baby because the mother could not manage to calm her crying baby, thus putting the lives of everyone else at risk. Secondly, children distract female soldiers because their commitment and dedication to the rebel cause shifts towards love and care of the child. In this study, all interviewees expressed an awareness of the FARC’s uncompromising position with regard to family planning. During her 12 years with the FARC, Lauren claims that every single recruit was informed about these planning methods, and, upon joining the organization, every one of the recruits had to consent and sign a paper agreement to this effect.

The statutes, those we cannot trespass…zero…we have to be perfect there. They told us about the planning method. As women we planned every month, and the FARC had many different methods like the pill, injections, and intrauterine, so if one didn’t work on you they gave you another one. If you go there, you know you cannot have a family and the second you step foot there, they tell you that. If you want a family, they allow you to leave. But once you sign the paper with the statutes, then you cannot leave anymore…Of course there are women that try to camouflage it [the pregnancy] because it is a method to escape, so they become friends with the nurses and avoid contraception.

A comprehensive Human Rights Watch report supports Lauren’s testimony by stating that, as soon as new recruits arrive in the camps, many FARC units insert a hormonal intrauterine device (IUD) such as a ‘Mirena’ or ‘Skyla.’ These are both small t-shaped plastic devices that contain hormones and are inserted in women’s uteruses for an effective duration of 3 to 5 years. Even though they are perhaps one of the most efficient and safe forms of contraception, condoms are less likely to be used. Again, the moral responsibility seems to be placed on women alone. Women are generally held responsible for the couple’s actions, even if their male partner refused to use condoms as a contraceptive method. Not only are

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250 Brett, "You'll Learn Not to Cry: Child Combatants in Colombia."
women judged by their peers for becoming pregnant; their own partners often reject them once they undergo a forced abortion, referred to as “el degradó” or “the downgrade.”

Arianne, for instance, did not realize that she was pregnant until three months later. As soon as the commander found out, he forced her to abort the following month. Rather than giving her his support, her ‘boyfriend’ blamed her for the baby’s fate and immediately ended the relationship. “After having ‘el degradó’ I fell very sick with anemia and fever, my skin was very yellow,” Arianne explains. Besides her sickness, she also felt very lonely and unhappy because her ex-boyfriend started seeing another girl.

In practice, almost all guerrilla groups have a special committee in charge of supervising family planning methods. Nonetheless, if these contraceptive methods fail the committee is also held responsible for conducting forced abortions without taking into account the mothers’ will. “It is an animal’s life,” says Angela. “Being a woman in the FARC means that you have to carry heavy loads, walk with wet clothes, have sex with old men, and have abortions,” she adds. These abortion procedures take place in the FARC’s specialized medical facilities, which conduct regular checkups and handle the more complicated procedures during late-term pregnancies. “Around the third month, they gave me an injection. It was so quick that I didn’t realize what it was for,” Angela emphasizes. Even though injections were among the most common methods used on my interviewees, other studies have shown that contraceptive pills are also widespread. Over the course of seven or eight months, pregnant women are given large doses of contraceptive pills such as Cytotec or Norplant. Despite the FARC’s claims of its effectiveness, the manufacturer of Cytotec, a drug that is usually used to treat ulcers, wrote a letter to health care practitioners in August 2000, warning that pregnant women should not be using the drug. Dr. Bernard Nathanson stated that
“because [Cytotec] is frequently ineffective, the pregnancy often only partially detaches itself from the womb and excessive bleeding can occur.”251 As a result, “women bleed for hours…having terrible cramps, and end up in emergency rooms,” he added. Nevertheless, despite these unreliable results and the prospect of severe medical complications, FARC leaders deem late-term pregnancies as indication of a plan to desert, and thus in many cases authorize forced abortions with or without the mother’s consent.

These policies of forced abortions and contraception leave very little room for female guerrillas to exercise agency and control over their bodies and to make decisions regarding their reproductive and sexual rights. Under very rare circumstances, women succeed in hiding their pregnancy until it is advanced. After the fifth month, FARC regulations state that women are no longer forced to abort and are allowed to give birth. This concession is granted on the condition that after birth they must hand over the baby to a relative or a peasant family. Among my interviewees, Juliana was the only one who managed to hide her pregnancy for 7 months, until she decided to escape from the camps in the hope of being able to keep her baby. Juliana escaped together with her friend – the camp’s nurse – who had helped her to hide the pregnancy. Her testimony illustrates how commanders often blame and punish women for their pregnancies by forcing them to carry out arduous physical tasks, expecting that women will eventually have a miscarriage. Ultimately, commanders’ fears of pregnant women wanting to desert the group have been proven true. Despite extremely slim chances of survival, the following excerpts of Juliana’s testimony illustrate her physical resilience, courage and determination to give herself and her baby the chance to live:

I became pregnant when I was sixteen from the partner that I had since the beginning, but as time passed by it became extremely difficult… the nurse would tell me that my body wouldn’t sustain the pregnancy, but I begged her to

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let the baby stay inside. She insisted that it was very difficult to hide a pregnancy from them [the commanders]. I convinced her and she gave me the corsets to hide my belly…

…The commander could see it in my eyes, that I was pregnant. I would always say ‘no, no, I’m not pregnant,’ but he hardened the work for me. ‘Today you have to clean the equipment, lift this and that, go stand guard for two more hours please,’ he would tell me. One day a couple of kidnapped boys arrived to the camp and I had to take care of them, which meant I had to dig the holes in the ground for the bathrooms, it was very hard! It was extremely hard. Another day, one of the girls wanted trouble, but I knew I couldn’t fight back, so I just let it pass…

…I was bleeding a lot and thought the child would die inside me, so I wanted to die myself. By the sixth month I could hardly resist the pain, I was very weak and the army was chasing us so we couldn’t stop moving.

In the seventh month the nurse told me we had to leave. We escaped at 1am and the others found out around 3am when they started chasing and shooting at us. They shot my friend in the leg, but we carried on… they wouldn’t have let us escape alive because we had too much information, and we knew about the drug shipment that was arriving into the camp that day… We were both bleeding, and I was having my cramps already. The hardest decision was leaving her behind dying alone next to the riverbank, but I had to continue if I wanted to live.

After three days of constant hardship walking and running with no food or medicine in the midst of one of the deadliest and most dangerous jungles in the world, the Amazon rainforest, Juliana arrived at the home of a peasant family who saved both her life and that of her newborn. Her story is one of resilience, courage, and hope. Nonetheless, many other women are not as lucky. Most women are not able to hide their pregnancies successfully, and those who do are often unable to escape the camp. Finally, the special status given to commanders’ partners in terms of roles and responsibilities also reflects in their sexual lives. These women are exempted from the strict regulations governing contraception. While protection is encouraged, if the commander’s woman becomes pregnant and wants to have the baby, she is allowed to give birth in an adequate village clinic and her baby is given to her own relatives.
In sum, female soldiers initially seem to experience some degree of sexual freedom within the FARC, as they tend to believe that they have a choice over with whom, when, and where to have intimate relationships. In this sense, the FARC’s egalitarian principles are supposed to guide regulations of romantic relationships between members. Particularly for young women whose families imposed harsh taboos and restrictions on their sexuality, the FARC’s social order can convey a relative sense of agency, control, respect, and autonomy. It is common for traditional, rural, Catholic households to fear a girl’s sexuality. As Johanna puts it, once a girl loses her virginity, she becomes ‘quemada’ (burned) and shunned by society. The belief that the girl has brought shame or dishonor upon her family gives rise to the associated stigma and loss of social status. As a result, most women are raised in family situations were authoritarian male figures forbid them from exercising their sexuality at all. The FARC regulations can be perceived as an improvement on this extreme restrictiveness. Nonetheless, in practice, the FARC’s control over women’s romantic relationships, sexuality and bodies negatively affects women who are expected to conform to very similar traditional gender roles to those they would be in their civilian lives. In this respect, women within the group are subjected to severe physical and emotional abuses. The ‘unwritten rules’ of the FARC, its social customs and value systems, give continuity to a patriarchal social order. Despite the existence of theoretical equality, additional standards and expectations are imposed on women alone. By forcing women to undergo abortions, the FARC denies them the opportunity to make their own decisions, while also putting their lives in great danger. In this regard, Enloe argues that the notion of ‘motherhood’ is fundamentally incompatible with

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252 Denov and Ricard-Guay, "Girl soldiers: towards a gendered understanding of wartime recruitment, participation, and demobilisation."
rebel groups.\textsuperscript{253} Her argument holds true for the FARC’s case, where ‘egalitarian principles’ are based upon a masculine standard and are not sensitive to women’s needs or desires, which can hardly be seen as positive for women’s emancipation. Controlling women’s reproductive rights cannot be viewed as an attempt to create greater equality within the movement, but rather as an attempt to uphold a masculine culture in which women lose agency over their bodies and social identities as ‘women’ and ‘mothers.’

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that, while the FARC’s official policy suggests that men and women are treated equally in all aspect of their lives within the movement, the reality faced by female combatants falls well short of this ideal. The organization’s stated commitment to gender equality is particularly attractive for women who have been victims of various forms of abuse by family members and who seek greater independence, respect, and freedom – including sexual freedom and an opportunity to take control of their lives, to make important decisions for themselves, to become part of a larger collective project, to prove their worth to themselves and others, and to establish long-lasting relationships with other individuals with shared values, identities and personal experiences. While this chapter attempted to dissect women’s roles and experiences as female fighters within a male-dominated military organization, their own testimonies have revealed that these experiences are far from simple. Many women have expressed the positive experiences and benefits they gained from their involvement in an organization that allowed them to depart, to some extent, from traditionally gendered roles. By taking on a multitude of roles and responsibilities alongside their male

\textsuperscript{253} Enloe, *Maneuvers: The international politics of militarizing women's lives.*
counterparts, many women gained skills, confidence and a sense of achievement and satisfaction. Their participation as ostensibly equal members playing a crucial role in the collective gave them a higher social status, power, and respect when compared to their civilian lives. Their military experience as combatants on the frontlines gave them physical and mental strength, resilience, courage, maturity, discipline, a strong character and an ability to fend for themselves. Similarly, their social interactions with other members who shared their ideologies and aspirations increased their autonomy, responsibility, leadership skills, pride and solidarity. Some women claimed to have enjoyed increases in their capability, particularly in terms of their literacy level, and their consciousness of social and political issues. Their experiences as nurses and radio operators, for instance, have encouraged many women to pursue technical degrees in medical sciences and business management during their reintegration process. In all of these ways, it is evident that many women in the FARC experience some form of empowerment (properly conceived).

Nonetheless, women have also paid a high price for joining a militarized rebel group in the midst of a violent and sustained conflict. When asked to reflect upon their overall experiences, most gave a predominantly negative assessment. Disillusioned by the FARC’s inability to fulfill its promises, many of them have lost faith in the idea of a ‘socially just war’ and agreed that “war is not worth anything.” Many women felt the need to adopt masculine behaviors as members of the organization, and surrender their social identities as ‘women’ and ‘mothers’ in order to survive and climb the ranks of the group. In contrast to the FARC’s official egalitarian principles, in practice many women are marginalized, exploited and disrespected on the basis of their gender. Sexual violence, while officially sanctioned, is widespread in the FARC camps. Rigid control of intimate relationships reduces women’s
privacy, dignity and autonomy, and a policy of forced contraception and abortions is a direct violation of their bodily integrity. Rather than a supportive and caring environment, guerrilla units are sometimes filled with mistrust, fear and extremely high risks of death and persecution, which weakened the prospects of any lasting positive relationships. Additionally, the hardships of life in the jungle cannot be understated; most women complained about “the lost years buried in the jungles,” which pushed them further apart from their dreams to study and begin a family of their own.

Against this backdrop, it is evident that any attempt to define female combatants according to the binary categories of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ is rendered impossible. The experience of most women in the FARC is one of simultaneous empowerment and disempowerment, the two forces operating in different areas of life and to different degrees. Women are degraded, violated and subordinated in ways that their male counterparts are not. At the same time, though, women derive new and unique forms of agency from their participation in the conflict. In some ways, they are given vastly more autonomy and power than they would otherwise enjoy, and are treated as the equals of men in many key tasks and functions. The emergence of hybrid gender identities is made possible by the transcendence of rigid traditional gender roles in certain areas. All of these conditions exist and exert themselves on women at the same time, making the experience of female combatants one of extreme complexity, ambivalence and ambiguity – the product of a multitude of interrelated factors that simply refuses to be reduced.
CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS FOR A SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

Colombia has suffered a decades-long armed conflict between insurgent rebel groups, paramilitaries, government forces and even international actors. This conflict has cost thousands of lives, generated tremendous insecurity, diminished economic growth and prompted massive internal and cross-border displacement. According to statistics released in 2013 by the Colombian government’s Center for Historical Memory, the war has left almost 220,000 dead and has resulted in more than 5.7 million internally displaced people (IDPs).\footnote{June S Beittel, "Peace Talks in Colombia," \emph{Current Politics and Economics of South and Central America} 6, no. 2 (2013). Pg.7} An additional 45,000 people have disappeared during the conflict, and the casualty rate from landmines is the second-highest in the world, surpassed only by Afghanistan.\footnote{Ibid. Pg.2} All parties in the conflict have been responsible for committing a number of serious human rights violations and crimes under international law, including unlawful killings, torture, forced disappearances, death threats, forced displacement and rape. According to Amnesty International, approximately 70,000 people have been killed in the past 20 years alone, and the vast majority of casualties have been unarmed civilians.\footnote{Amnesty International, "The State of the World's Human Rights," (London, UK: Amnesty International, 2016). Pg.15-17} Nevertheless, the past four years have seen several positive developments. The ongoing peace talks between the FARC and the government continue to make significant progress, raising expectations that Colombia’s violent struggle may soon come to an end.

Successful peace negotiations would forge a new path for significant land reforms in rural provinces, as well as a political avenue for members of the left-wing guerrilla groups to participate in government. Current Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos began formal
peace talks with the FARC leadership in Oslo in October 2012, and they continue today in Havana. These negotiations, mediated by international ‘actors,’ are the first attempts in a decade and the fourth in the last three decades. Some scholars argue that current conditions are more conducive to a peace agreement than ever before. This claim is based on the firm commitment expressed by FARC and government negotiators to the conclusion of an agreement. However, despite the optimism of diplomats and commentators, the Colombian public remains skeptical about the possibility of achieving a meaningful peace settlement and, more importantly, the successful reintegration of all ex-combatants. Public opinion in Colombia has been hardened by the failure of past efforts to end the conflict through dialogue. Over the past 50 years, each successive president has attempted either to achieve military victory, or to lay the groundwork for peace negotiations; none of these initiatives has led to a final resolution of the war.

The process of recovering from a lengthy, violent armed conflict and rebuilding political, social and economic structures within society is a difficult one in any context. States emerging from conflict must ensure that efforts for recovery and reconstruction focus on both immediate and long-term imperatives. Any post-conflict agenda includes two essential components: first, the rebuilding of political, economic and government institutions, and second, the consolidation of broad improvements in living standards and reconciliation efforts aimed at reducing social tensions and the risk of renewed war on the other. Despite national and international efforts to support post-conflict reconstruction, many states have struggled to avoid slipping back into conflict. The difficulties of ending on-going hostilities and rebuilding peaceful societies are evidenced by the experience of countries around the world, including

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257 Beitel, "Peace Talks in Colombia."
South Sudan, Sierra Leone, East Timor, Afghanistan, Haiti, Rwanda and El Salvador (among others). According to the World Bank, an overwhelming forty percent of states emerging from intercommunal violence have, in fact, regressed back into conflict within a ten-year period.\textsuperscript{259}

To ensure an effective transition in war-torn countries with fragile states, the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants must lie at the heart of any peace-building effort and post-conflict reconstruction agenda. DDR programs often comprise multifaceted policies that range from encouraging combatants to lay down their weapons, to helping the host communities that welcome – or reject – these demobilized fighters. Various contradictory pressures complicate the DDR process; as Kimberly Theidon puts it, “at each level, these transitions imply a complex and dynamic equation between the demands of peace and the clamor for justice.”\textsuperscript{260} In other words, besides the military and security objectives of peace-building processes, a successful transition relies upon the sustainable social and economic reintegration of former combatants and must address concerns with justice, reparations and reconciliation. The demobilization and disarmament of former combatants has often been the focus of peace agreements, while their reintegration has been underemphasized or overlooked. It is imperative to acknowledge the vital roles that the reintegration of ex-combatants and reconciliation between affected parties play in the demilitarization of post-war societies and the prevention of future conflict. In this regard, the creation of an environment of trust and security, which is indispensable for the sustainability of any peace process, depends on the ways in which ex-combatants are assimilated into mainstream civilian society.

\textsuperscript{260} Theidon, "Transitional subjects: The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants in Colombia." Pg.66
Ex-combatants are perceived as a security threat because of their tendency to re-engage in violence. However, there is a direct correlation between recidivism and the manner in which former combatants are released and integrated into civilian life. Social tensions arise from the fact that during armed confrontation, combatants often commit crimes against innocent civilian populations as well as military targets. As such, during post-conflict scenarios, reconciliation between perceived perpetrators of violence and local communities remains a major obstacle. The question of whether families, host communities and the wider population will embrace or ostracize former combatants is what ultimately determines the likelihood of re-engaging in violence and slipping back into conflict, rendering peace-building efforts impossible. If former combatants are shunned and marginalized by civilian societies and reconciliation efforts are not prioritized, the potential for continued political tension, social unrest and instability increases.

Post-conflict reconstruction efforts face complex and diverse challenges shaped by their specific historical, political, social and geographical contexts. Colombia’s path to recovery is made considerably more difficult by the fact that a final peace agreement is yet to be reached. In these circumstances, existing DDR processes are being carried out in the midst of an ongoing-armed conflict; what might be called a ‘pre-post-conflict’ context. This means that security – one of the necessary preconditions for a successful DDR program – is largely absent. Clearly, a transition in the midst of conflict raises additional obstacles to breaking the cycle of violence, allowing combatants to disarm and integrate into civilian life, and ensuring reconciliation between opposing parties. Despite President Santos’ optimism about the

prospects of peace, the likelihood of inducing thousands of FARC members to relinquish their arms and their involvement in highly lucrative criminal activities remains tenuous. An additional complicating factor relates to issues of acceptance and legitimacy. Left-wing rebels are no longer viewed as rebels fighting against social injustices. Instead, public discourse has begun to replace the term ‘guerrillas’ with that of ‘terrorists’ and ‘criminals,’ which fosters resentment within Colombian society and the international community. In 2005, for instance, during a new wave of paramilitary (AUC) demobilization, the popular Colombian magazines *El Tiempo* and *Cromos* expressed fierce resistance to AUC reintegration, demanding that the government relocate former combatants “far away” from the public in the outskirts of Bogota.

Therefore, although violence has de-escalated in recent years and the potential for a peace agreement appears promising, it is critical to remember that peace is not yet an inevitable conclusion, with fear and resentment running high.

The United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Center (UNDDR) define DDR as a “complex process with political, military, security, humanitarian and socio-economic dimensions.” As such, DDR lays a foundation for protecting and sustaining the communities into which former combatants return while also rebuilding national capacity for lasting peace, security and development. ‘Disarmament’ is the first of the three key components of the process, and consists of the “collection, control and disposal of arms, ammunition, explosives” or other weapons from former combatants or the civilian population. ‘Demobilization’ refers to the formal process of demilitarization in which armed groups decrease in size as active combatants are discharged. Demobilization is often accompanied by financial incentives or other compensation to prompt former combatants to

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263 Alexandra Guáqueta, “The way back in: Reintegrating illegal armed groups in Colombia then and now: Analysis,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 7, no. 3 (2007). Pg.419
264 Ibid.
lay down their weapons and transition into civilian society. Finally, ‘reintegration’ is an “open time-frame” process by which former combatants regain their status as civilians and their place in the community.265 It is geared towards individuals who seek to strengthen their capacity, and that of their families, to achieve social acceptance and economic assimilation through employment and income generation. Some observers have made a distinction between ‘reintegration’ and ‘reinsertion’ arguing that while the former is a long-term process, the latter occurs prior to reintegration and comprises immediate assistance offered to ex-combatants during demobilization, ceasing as soon as the reintegration process begins.

The Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) is the government agency responsible for facilitating reintegration in the current DDR process of former FARC and ELN guerrilla combatants. The agency originated in 2003 as a special administrative unit under the Ministry of Interior and Justice. Under Santos’ administration in 2011, the unit was expanded and formalized as the ‘ACR,’ operating on an annual budget of approximately $56 million (93% of which comes from government funds).266 (See Appendix D (a), (b) and (c) for photographs of the ACR center in Cali, Colombia). Alejandro Eder, general director of the ACR in 2010, explains that the agency initially designed its peace-building program based on United Nations and World Bank prototypes, but adjusted the reintegration process according to Colombia’s special needs. In his words, “The ACR ‘Colombianized’ the [reintegration] framework to fit the exceptional circumstances of the country.”267 Eder’s insistence on a unique Colombian model arises from the challenge of conducting reintegration efforts during an ongoing conflict. Colombia’s DDR process is distinct in its pursuit of two different types

267 Eder, "Wellesley Student."
of demobilization: a collective demobilization resulting from peace agreements, and an individual demobilization based on combatants’ personal decisions to desert an armed group. Moreover, unlike most states seeking post-war reconstruction, Colombia’s government has assumed full official responsibility for the reintegration of former combatants.

According to Andrea Barrero (ACR Social Communication Director), ‘La Ruta de Reintegración’ (The Reintegration Route) is a six-and-a-half-year-long program that helps demobilized ex-combatants to return to civilian society. However, the duration of the program varies greatly from one person to another. In most cases, former guerrillas have very little to no education and limited skills that could allow them to find decent employment. Eder describes how some individuals lack common knowledge about basic social conventions necessary to function in mainstream society: “You have to teach people how to stand in line at the bank, or how to pay [in a store].” Therefore, to help demobilized ex-combatants in their transition to becoming productive, law-abiding citizens, ACR’s reintegration model comprises eight crucial dimensions that together promote successful integration.

As a broad overview, the ‘personal, health, family and habitability’ dimensions seek to address the psychological effects of participation in conflict and allow former combatants to re-learn social norms and to build their self-esteem. These dimensions are broken down into specific steps, such as emotional care for the demobilized individual and their family, provision of healthcare services, and counseling that helps them to re-enter society. The ‘education, productivity and citizenship’ dimensions offer education and vocational training to all participants, thereby assisting them to become productive and self-sustaining economic actors. Specific aspects of these dimensions include, for instance, business development and

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268 Andrea Barrero, interview by Savitri Restrepo, December 20 - 23ibid., Oral Interview.  
269 Alejandro Eder, interview by Savitri restrepo, December 20-31ibid., Phone Interview.
employment support, education about the duties, responsibilities and rights of citizens, training in technical skills and community service. By focusing on volunteering and social work, the reintegration route aims to foster reconciliation between affected local communities and former combatants. In this regard, every person undergoing reintegration is required to commit to and perform at least 80 hours of community service that may include a wide range of activities such as the repair of public spaces (bridges, parks, roads etc.), environmental protection and assistance in recreational, artistic and cultural activities, among others. The reintegration program also provides economic support to prevent participants’ recidivism. The stipend amount provided to ex-combatants is purposefully below the average minimum wage (approximately $230 US) to encourage participants to become self-sufficient through employment. Finally, the ‘security’ dimension aims to safeguard all individuals who have completed the disarmament and demobilization steps and are in the process of reintegration. In cases where individuals are in imminent danger, the ACR offers financial support for relocation in a different city. This support cannot exceed 2.5 times the minimum wage and the benefit can be awarded only once. As such, unless they face imminent danger, former combatants are often left to fend for themselves and are instead encouraged to contact local authorities, if they feel that their safety is compromised.

Although the ACR reintegration program has changed in recent years to better address the specific needs of demobilized ex-combatants, its practical approach to assimilating combatants after demobilization and preventing their recidivism remains contested. In addition, several challenges to the process exist, one of which is popular opposition. Former President Alvaro Uribe, a right-wing politician, has been vocal in his rejection of the

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270 See Appendix E (d) for a photograph of ACR participants doing volunteer work.
271 Guáqueta, “The way back in: Reintegrating illegal armed groups in Colombia then and now: Analysis.” Pg.420
process. Since his 2014 election to the Senate, Uribe has continued to spearhead conservative and hardline opposition to the reintegration of thousands of demobilized ex-combatants. Public opinion, especially within Colombia’s urban middle class, has largely sided with his view. Widespread skepticism about the process is fueled by four main concerns. While sources vary, the current size of the FARC is estimated to be 8,000-10,000 combatants. As such, critics have raised concerns regarding economic and logistical challenges of reintegrating such a large number of former combatants. According to the Colombian Comptroller General’s Office, the cost of an eventual demobilization and reintegration of the FARC to Colombian taxpayers could be between $754 million and $1.1 billion, which would have to be spread over the course of at least ten years. This estimate is higher than the $350 million calculated by the government, which failed to include the additional cost of dismantling the guerrilla organization’s military apparatus and its activist support networks.

Another major source of opposition arises from the process of economic reintegration that would take place primarily in urban centers. Despite the interest of private industry in the peace process, many businesses are reluctant to hire ex-combatants. The ACR claims that half of the program’s participants have found employment successfully in either the formal or the informal sector. Companies such as Coca-Cola, Electrolux, Coltabaco and Exito have agreed to employ reintegrated ex-combatants. Nevertheless, a pervasive stigma against ex-combatants within Colombia remains obstructive to integration and many communities have

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272 “El Ministro del Interior Juan Fernando Cristo explica el Plebiscito por la paz.”
273 Adriaan Alsema, "Demobilizing and Reintegrating FARC fighter could cost $1.1B: Colombia's comptroller," Colombia Reports, January 27 2015. Pg.1
274 Ibid.
275 Aldwinckle, "How Colombia Plans to Turn 32,000 Ex-jungle-dwelling Guerrillas into Useful Members of Society."
sought to protect their own jobs by refusing to employ former guerillas over ‘good’
community members. Similarly, despite the education and vocational training provided during
the reintegration program, many ex-combatants still lack the necessary productive and social
skills to enter the workforce successfully. Another contested issue relates to the prospect of
FARC leaders entering the political arena as regular members of congress, which has sparked
suspicion and alarm within the electorate which remains angry at the organization’s record of
massive human rights abuses, corruption and involvement with illicit activities.\footnote{Enzo Nussio and Kimberly Howe, "What if the FARC Demobilizes?," \textit{Stability: International Journal of
Security \\& Development} 1, no. 1 (2012).}

An area of perhaps the greatest dispute among practitioners and policymakers alike
concerns the power vacuum and concomitant insecurity that will be created in FARC-
controlled territories following the reintegration of former combatants. Previous experiences
with the collective demobilization of paramilitaries in 2005 have inspired fears of the
resurfacing of post-demobilization armed groups or criminal bands (BACRIM). The extensive
drug networks and other illegal activities relied on by the FARC to fund its operations may be
co-opted and continued by criminal groups, or by former FARC combatants now without the
support of the organization. Again, this is made more likely by the alienation of ex-
combatants from society. Without support, demobilized people are unable to find jobs,
housing and food to provide for themselves and their families, which ultimately leads them to
resort to illegal activities or to take up arms to survive. Many in the public fear the possibility
of a similar outcome, if the peace negotiations are successful and a massive FARC collective
demobilization follows.

In this section, I draw upon the findings of my study to offer recommendations for
strengthening the crucial phase which has been the weakest link in Colombia’s DDR process:
the reintegration of female former combatants into mainstream civilian life.\textsuperscript{277} Despite important advances that have been made over the past decade towards the inclusion of women in conflict prevention, peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction, I believe that the social reintegration of female ex-combatants and the effects of their reintegration on the success of DDR processes has been overlooked by scholars and policy-makers. The inability to recognize and accept women’s numerous and often contradictory roles during armed conflict has negatively affected the design and implementation of reintegration channels that fail to acknowledge women’s agency and their experience of simultaneous dis/empowerment. As such, the following recommendations arise from the notion that accepting women’s potential for agency in armed conflict, alongside their victimhood, is the first step towards reforming gendered stereotypes and improving the outcomes of the reintegration process. Efforts to achieve long-term demilitarization and effective peace-building will be contingent on the ability of reintegration programs, and Colombian society as a whole, to embrace the new and unique gender identities that emerge out of women’s active participation in war.

Previous chapters in this thesis showed that attempts to define female former combatants based on the rigid binary categories of ‘victim’ and perpetrator’ are misleading and fail to acknowledge the complex and ambiguous experiences of most women in the FARC. Women’s participation has allowed them to take on a multitude of roles and responsibilities alongside men, while also being subjected to multiple forms of abuse and violence. However, this nuanced understanding of women’s ambivalent roles and experiences is rarely evident in the DDR process, for which these distinctions pose a challenge. The Colombian Constitutional Court has ruled, in line with widespread international practice, that

\textsuperscript{277} Theidon, "Transitional subjects: The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants in Colombia."
minors who participate in conflict must be considered as victims of forced recruitment and absolved of *criminal responsibility* for their actions under law. This point is emphasized by ACR attorney Andres Felipe Stapper, who defends the organization’s characterization of female combatants who enlisted while minors as ‘victims.’

However, there is a risk that a legal exemption from responsibility is carried over into a general treatment of female ex-combatants as victims devoid of agency, when in fact this is not the case. As this study has shown, for instance, it is possible that despite the means of their recruitment, combatants may later decide to actively participate in military actions during the conflict. A distinction should be drawn between criminal liability and subjective experience, or else the planning and implementation of adequate reintegration programs that incorporate women’s specific needs and capabilities will be distorted.

Perceptions of women’s victimhood are further reinforced by their experiences of sexual violence in guerrilla camps. As explored in this study, these abuses take the form of rape, forced contraception, forced abortion and forced sterilization (among others). As a result, the ACR’s ‘gender-focused approach’ to reintegration has concentrated on addressing discrimination and violence against women. The ACR has been effective in ensuring that the specific sexual and reproductive needs of women and girls are acknowledged and met by providing both psychological assistance and counseling to rebuild their self-esteem. Similarly, it has offered support to women who have given birth – often as a result of sexual abuse – during their time as guerilla fighters. While necessary and constructive, this is only one aspect of a holistic gendered approach to reintegration. If not complemented by other considerations, it risks emphasizing a single dimension of women’s experiences of conflict –

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278 Andres Felipe Stapper, interview by Savitri Restrepo, 2015, Oral Interview, Cali, Colombia.  
279 Schwitalla and Dietrich, "Demobilisation of female ex-combatants in Colombia."
their victimization – to the exclusion of others. Perhaps unintentionally, reintegration programs which focus narrowly on women’s victimhood subtly encourage women to assume a ‘victim’ identity that feeds into traditional stereotypes of women as devoid of agency and as not having control over their actions.

At the other extreme, there are still many sectors of society, which view the FARC as ‘terrorists’ and refuse to recognize their status as ‘victims.’ Powerful voices opposing the conclusion of a peace deal worry that the FARC, which they blame for committing the bulk of war atrocities, will go unpunished for its crimes. By the end of 2014, the government had already recognized 6.7 million victims of the conflict, about the population of Massachusetts. However, social recognition as ‘war victims’ has been limited mainly to the maimed, orphaned and displaced. Many Colombians, who have witnessed and suffered abuses and endured violence for almost a lifetime, dismiss the complex and ambivalent circumstances that led guerillas to join the movement. This study has revealed that many guerrilla fighters are young, uneducated peasants who grew up in contexts where alternatives to war were invisible. Furthermore, for many of them, their high expectations were shattered by the hardships and grueling realities of life in FARC camps, from which they could not escape. Many women and girls in particular have been marginalized, exploited and degraded on the basis of their gender. Edgar Bermudez (35), who was blinded by an anti-personnel mine in a 2005 attack by FARC guerrillas while he was working with the army on a coca eradication program, acknowledges the limited choices that many guerrilla fighters face and admits that if he had been born in a different part of the country, he might have found himself fighting for the other side. “For Christ’s sake, they’re from here, who am I to judge someone

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280 Juan Manuel Barrero Bueno, "As Colombia pursues peace, victims of the conflict struggle with forgiveness," Miami Herald, October 20 2014. Pg.2
for becoming a guerrilla? However, unlike Bermudez, many Colombians desire only revenge and demand that all FARC guerillas, regardless of their age, gender or individual circumstances, pay for their crimes in jail. As a result, feelings of hatred and anger have worked in unison to polarize the country and to reinforce the false dichotomy that categorizes guerillas fighters as either ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators.’

By exploring key questions related to female combatants’ experiences in armed conflict, this study attempted to illustrate the many facets of women’s involvement and participation, and the importance of relinquishing a simplistic binary of victimhood and culpability. Based on a close examination of women’s roles, responsibilities and interests throughout their lives as civilians and combatants, I argue that most – if not all – women fall somewhere along a continuum that adequately captures the complexity and nuance involved in each case. Though placing female ex-combatants within a continuum as opposed to dichotomous categories will require more complex and sensitive policy mechanisms within Colombia’s DDR framework, it is crucial for informing more successful reintegration programs in the future. To ensure a holistic gender-focused reintegration of female former guerrillas, it is imperative to understand the complex picture that emerges from their participation, in which forms of emancipation and freedom coexist with those of degradation, abuse and differential treatment. Over past decades, the absence of gender-focused mechanisms in DDR programs has resulted in increased experiences of disempowerment and marginalization during post-conflict transitions. In the remainder of this chapter, I draw lessons from my interviewees’ experiences and the findings of this study in order to propose

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281 Ibid.
five specific recommendations that will improve their reintegration into civilian society. As the peace process moves forward, it is important to imagine new ways to repair the social and economic fabric of the country. Through these recommendations, I hope to offer insights into how reintegration programs can move beyond merely ‘demobilizing combatants’ to actually facilitating sustainable social reconstruction. Finally, although it is beyond the scope of this study to provide a comprehensive analysis of the reintegration programs in place, I plan to raise awareness about the unique and intricate needs of demobilized women and girls as they find their way back into Colombian society.

**Recommendations for the Reintegration of Female FARC Ex-Combatants**

1) **Acknowledging the roles and capabilities of women**

This study has illustrated that female combatants have occupied essential positions, including military, operational, tactical, judicial, and recruitment tasks, and are generally required to learn skills similar to those of their male counterparts in the FARC. The reasoning behind this apparent equality in the distribution of organizational roles and responsibilities is twofold. First, complex and important military and combat roles are not automatically reserved for men alone, and second, both men and women are required to perform daily household tasks that would ordinarily be assigned to women in society. As a result of their participation in combat, many women transgress gender norms in lifting the veil of normativity and challenging the boundaries of the feminine realm. Some female combatants even have the opportunity to occupy middle-ranking leadership positions. The new identities and roles that arise from their
military involvement can ultimately translate into feelings of accomplishment, equality and empowerment. However, this expansion of freedom and blurring of normative boundaries hardly ever carries over into women’s new lives as civilians. Reintegration programs typically reinforce a traditional gender-based division of labor by providing vocational training for women in what are perceived as ‘feminine’ skills.\footnote{Ibid.} These include, for instance, cooking, cleaning, tailoring, hairdressing, cosmetology and weaving, which are perceived as abilities that will be more effective in helping women find employment. However, instead of facilitating a successful return of female ex-combatants to society, these vocational training courses reinforce existing gender stereotypes and overlook the diverse skills and strengths that these women may have developed in the camps, and upon which they could draw in their new lives.

To prevent reintegration programs from becoming counterproductive and increasing women’s recidivism, it is crucial to begin by giving women equal access to all types of educational and vocational training. Vocational programs should be designed to accommodate the particular reasons why women joined armed groups and the experiences they gained as members. This is especially critical for women like Eloisa, who was captured by the army and had no choice but to demobilize. Women who rise to leadership positions or who perceive value in their military training and use of arms are more likely to reject stereotypically female-coded jobs with limited upward mobility.\footnote{Robin Arnett, “Women in Conflict,” \textit{Columbia Social Work Review} 6, no. 1 (2015).} I propose that reintegration programs should therefore focus on non-traditional skills and abilities that women gain through their experience as guerrillas so as to find more appropriate employment opportunities that will allow them to maintain themselves and their families financially and to improve their status in
society. Women who were empowered as active combatants should be allowed to capitalize on the valuable skills they gained through combat by taking on roles in the state and private security sectors as police officers or security guards, for example. Besides military tasks, many women in the FARC (like Angela, Lucia, and Lauren) are assigned strategic and logistical functions such as radio operators. These women have developed important additional skills that could be better channeled through training in marketing, advertising or communications. Other women are trained as nurses in the camps, and can pursue careers in the medical field. Arianne and Maria, for instance, are currently pursuing technical degrees in medical science. When not at school, Maria works as a home-care nurse for the elderly. Many women who received training as nurses during their time as fighters should be encouraged to apply their knowledge and experience to help victims of war and the wider Colombian society.

2) Managing interactions with traditional gender norms

The transgression of traditional gender norms that occurs during conflict as women transcend the limits of the ‘feminine’ and ‘private’ spheres has further ramifications in how these women’s new identities interact with social conventions in civilian life, particularly in rural areas. Unlike men, female combatants seem to face a double discrimination in their transition from illegal combatants to fully integrated citizens. First, demobilized women face the condemnation of their families and communities, which view their participation in armed conflict as an encroachment on traditional female roles and reject their assumption of ‘male’ roles and their presumed sexual activity. In the eyes of a patriarchal society, female
combatants’ association with weapons and death reflects their loss of ‘femininity’ and the abandonment of social order with regard to family care, sexuality and reproduction.\textsuperscript{285}

Second, as Johanna points out, even male former combatants discard their previous “acceptance” and understanding of women’s non-traditional roles once having re-entered society, and begin to favor “more feminine” civilian women. As a result, many women are ultimately ostracized both by their communities and by their former comrades, and are left alone to support children born before their demobilization. A few months before her interview for this study, Eloisa decided to file a divorce from her husband (a FARC ex-combatant) because they “didn’t understand each other.” She explains that despite fighting side-by-side in the guerrilla ranks, after returning to civilian society her husband began to beat her regularly and refused to continue to treat her as an equal. Complaining about Eloisa’s “aggressiveness” and “obstinacy,” he seemed to have suddenly re-adopted society’s endemic patriarchal and sexist values.

These gender-related stigmas pose a significant barrier to women’s attempts to reintegrate back into their communities. The focus of current reintegration programs has been to ‘de-masculinize’ former female combatants in an effort to ‘free’ women from the FARC’s model of an ideal combatant, which is viewed as a masculine archetype that disregards feminine values.\textsuperscript{286} For instance, ACR officers believe that many women do not understand the notion of maternity and tend to abandon their babies who were conceived in the camps; they view the restoration of maternal responsibility as a necessary part of rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{287} Similarly, Theidon has argued that one of the greatest challenges to combatants’ reintegration is their association of privileges and power with guns, in particular when combatants lack

\textsuperscript{285} Giraldo, "Demobilized Women Combatants: Lessons from Colombia." Pg.7
\textsuperscript{286} Gjelsvik, "Women, war and empowerment: a case study of female ex-combatants in Colombia." Pg.65
\textsuperscript{287} Barrero, "ACR Social Communication Director."
access to “civilian symbols of masculine prestige” such as education, income and housing.\(^{288}\)

As such, another goal stressed by existing DDR processes is the ‘demilitarization’ of models of masculinity adopted by both men and women. While both of these strategies aim to help former combatants to leave experiences of war behind by recuperating their social identities as women and mothers, as well as their bodily integrity and reproductive rights, I argue that they should be augmented by offering an opportunity for women to recast their own stories in a more nuanced way than social expectations may allow.

Chapter four demonstrated that despite a male-dominated context, women do not necessarily ‘become men’ by adopting certain behaviors perceived as masculine. On the contrary, their roles as equal fighters in relation to their male counterparts have encouraged many women to transform their own understanding of traditional gender norms. Rather than adopting masculine traits in a simplistic sense, female fighters’ identities diluted gendered dichotomies by also retaining aspects of their femininity, creating hybrid gender identities in the process. Reintegration programs should support women like Eloisa and many others, who have chosen to assert these identities and to confront injustices and exploitation in a patriarchal society. Rather than emphasizing society’s expectations for women to become housewives and mothers, reintegration programs should allow female ex-combatants to define their own needs and desires. In this way, women who were left with a sense of power, pride, status, control and self-confidence through their involvement in the movement will not be forced to conform back into highly rigid social standards. Moreover, the reintegration of thousands of female combatants who experienced increased freedom and some degree of empowerment should be directed towards the transformation of discriminatory social norms.

\(^{288}\) Theidon, "Transitional subjects: The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants in Colombia." Pg.76
that remain persistent and pervasive in Colombian society. The reintegration process in fact represents a rare moment of social change and restructuring, an opportunity that should not be missed. Therefore, rather than attempting to force women back into traditional female roles in the name of ‘rehabilitation,’ the greater autonomy and equality that women experience in the FARC – in short, the transgression of fixed gender roles – should be carried over into civilian life, and their reintegration seized as a way to promote attitudes and practices that embrace new gender identities.

3) Creating an environment for support networks based on trust

Given the ongoing nature of the conflict, demobilized women often feel threatened, and are at risk of being targeted, tortured or killed by remaining active members of the FARC, demobilized paramilitaries, emerging criminal bands (BACRIM) and even ordinary civilians who blame them for the atrocities committed during wartime. This state of fear and mistrust, and perception of imminent danger, restricts reintegration programs from providing adequate psychosocial support to demobilized guerrillas who have been victims of war-related violence. Even though ACR offers mental health and post-war trauma assistance, counseling sessions are typically conducted on an individual basis because larger support groups are not always feasible – participants often fear that informants might be present as they recount their personal stories, and the resulting sense of vulnerability hampers constructive discussions.\cite{289}

This, combined with the increasing number of demobilized combatants and the limited budget available to the ACR, therefore reduces the effectiveness of the sessions. Despite these challenges, the crucial role of peer groups in helping combatants come to terms with the past

\cite{289} Arnett, "Women in Conflict."
and coexist peacefully with one another should not be discounted. Many women in this study described feelings of “loneliness,” “emptiness,” and nostalgia for their communal life and the comrades they left behind. In conjunction with security risks, these women live in fear of being rejected and judged harshly by society for their criminal past. The combination of these two factors often prevents women from sharing their stories or concerns with anyone.

Johanna, for instance, describes how different she feels from other civilian women and how much she wishes she could speak to other demobilized female combatants:

[Civilian] women often make you feel different because they are so feminine, and you can see it in their voices, touch, looks, the softness of their hands and their ways of doing things. My hands, for example, have scars and I do not have their fragility.

They judge me because I speak and express myself differently, I am not afraid to say exactly what I think and feel, so I tend to offend other people. I was there [in guerrilla camps] for almost 8 years and a half, that's a lifetime and it is very difficult to confront this new world by myself. I feel like an ant in a huge world, I do not know where to go, and there is no one that can help me.

I propose that a successful reintegration program should first and foremost ensure the personal safety of all participants, and reassure them that they are in a protected and supportive environment. The ACR trains a number of community leaders and former combatants who have completed their reintegration route as ‘reintegradores,’ responsible for accompanying newly-demobilized guerrillas as they begin the process. This group of reintegradores should be allowed to play a greater role in guaranteeing the safety and wellbeing of their own peers. The civilian population often views former combatants with fear, suspicion and resentment, and public authorities do not always react to ex-combatants’
needs in a timely or sympathetic manner. Moreover, many former guerrillas adapting to their lives as civilians still fear any encounter with government forces, whom they regard as an enemy. Having access to a dedicated ‘mentor’ with whom demobilized ex-combatants could empathize might offer an alternative channel for communicating fears, anxieties and concerns to a trusted confidante, who could then facilitate better support and protection for vulnerable women.

Equally important for effective reintegration is the creation of safe spaces where female ex-combatants can form peer support networks to share and discuss their experiences of war. Various studies have shown the potential of group-based counseling to address psychological trauma and rebuild a sense of community and camaraderie, especially when facilitated by skilled professionals. For their safety and that of their families, most women are relocated to large urban centers such as Cali and Bogota where they can maintain anonymity while completing the reintegration process. This means that they are uprooted from their former communities and social networks, and cannot rely on traditional support systems. As such, even though former combatants feel lonely and distanced from their peers, they are conscious of the need to prioritize their security. “I try to have the least contact with other demobilized people,” says Johanna, while admitting how “pleasant” it would be for her to have the opportunity to sit down and talk to someone who has shared her experiences. “It would be fun because then I could just speak the way I do, which is very different to the way professional and educated people do. They simply do not understand many things,” she adds.

290 Rose Lander, "Why not all FARC guerrillas will demobilize of peace in Colombia is reached," Colombia Reports, November 17 2015.
291 Arnett, "Women in Conflict."
One model available to reintegration centers would be to form smaller groups of 5-10 combatants who come from different FARC regional fronts to allow participants to share their experiences, and listen to the stories of others, without revealing specific identifying references to their unit or their personal identity. Beyond the limited scope of individual counseling sessions, the purpose of these groups would be to promote ‘social healing’ and facilitate the creation of supportive peer networks. These peer networks would reduce feelings of loneliness and alienation while filling the vacuum left by the dissolution of social networks and emotional support derived from participation in a collective movement. In addition to the crucial role of current reintegradores, a greater number of community counselors called ‘promotores’ should be trained to lead these smaller peer sessions. Although this proposed model of peer counseling has been applied extensively in a number of countries undergoing post-conflict reconstruction, in Colombia its implementation has been limited only to survivors of armed conflict in small and rural communities that have been severely affected by violent crimes. Its extension to the reintegration process will promote a greater sense of security and belonging, lessen the fear and insecurity experienced by many women, and allow for a quicker and more durable recovery from trauma.

4) Accommodating the needs of disabled ex-combatants

The adoption of a holistic reintegration approach requires an acknowledgement of and sensitivity to the special needs that ex-combatants with disabilities may have in order to successfully return to civilian society. In this context, the term ‘disability’ is used to refer to

all types of impairments, functional limitations and handicaps that may have resulted from participation in the war.\textsuperscript{294} Rather than applying a homogenous reintegration plan to all combatants, which may exacerbate the marginalization of former combatants with disabilities, it is crucial to focus on their specific social, economic, medical and psychological needs that differ from those of their able-bodied counterparts. Eliana began the DDR process in 2007 when she was 19 years old. During her time in the FARC as a landmine expert, her hands caught on a trip wire and a mine exploded. She lost both hands, sustained serious injuries to her skull, and lost sight in one of her eyes. The ACR reintegration program supported her in graduating from high school, but these educational programs did not prevent Eliana from suffering discrimination in searching for employment. Eliana has been actively looking for jobs for the past eight years in order to provide for herself and her 5-year-old daughter, who is about to begin her school. Her testimony shows that disabled female soldiers are often the most difficult to reintegrate, as they are relegated to the margins of society and perceived as a dual burden.

Existing reintegration programs have not provided adequate capacity-building programs targeted at women with disabilities, who struggle to achieve financial independence and are vulnerable to poverty and social stigmatization.\textsuperscript{295} Even though the ACR provides a slightly higher financial support for ex-combatants with disabilities, this assistance does not address the more complex long-term challenges to full economic and social integration. Eliana’s main frustration stems from the reintegration program’s disregard of her condition as a disabled ex-combatant. On several occasions, her résumé has been sent to a prospective employer who has called her back without knowing about her condition. “When I arrive to the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{294} Amanuel Mehrteab, "Assistance to War Wounded Combatants and Individuals Associated with Fighting Forces in Disarmament, Remobilisation and Reintegration Programmes," (2007).
\item \textsuperscript{295} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
interviews, they [employers] are shocked when they see me, and then they dismiss me because they were not told that I was impaired,” explains Eliana. It is imperative that reintegration programs be cognizant of disabled female ex-combatants’ special needs, and adjust their programs in a more deliberate and inclusive way that allows disabled participants to benefit from all services in the same manner as their able-bodied peers.

5) Advancing a better public understanding of demobilized ex-combatants

The success of any peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC will ultimately rest on the possibility of national reconciliation and forgiveness. Given widespread public suspicion and resentment of the FARC, it is no surprise that this appears especially challenging. Even if thousands of ex-combatants are disarmed and demobilized, their return to civilian society will not be sustainable unless lingering fears and deep-seated anger are confronted. Anticipating the need for reintegration, the peace process has encouraged Colombian society to pursue forgiveness and reconciliation as mechanisms of social cohesion. The notion of forgiveness has been stressed through the ‘Plan Perdón’ or Forgiveness Plan, which is premised on the belief that victims and perpetrators will eventually be able to build trust and understanding to overcome the divisive legacy of the conflict.296 However, those who claim that forgiveness will pave the way for impunity and impede justice for victims have viewed these calls for reconciliation to achieve a sustainable peace with distrust.297

Without engaging in detail with what is a highly contested and ongoing debate, I argue that

296 Rodrigo Uprimny and Nelson Camilo Sánchez, "Law and Reconciliation in Colombia," Americas Quarterly 8, no. 4 (2014). Pg. 2-4
rather than promoting a simplistic ideal of ‘forgiveness’ by victims of war as a goal in itself, the purpose of reintegration programs should be to inform and raise public awareness about the complex nature of the experiences of demobilized ex-combatants. Demanding that victims leave the past behind and forgive the atrocities committed against their families risks alienating support for reintegration and feeding into a public perception of state efforts as insensitive or ahistorical. A more effective way to help citizens to overcome organically the resentment that fuels conflicts is to facilitate an understanding that, in most cases, the very ‘perpetrators’ of the conflict have also been ‘victims’ of violence themselves.

For the reasons articulated above, I propose that reintegration programs should not only focus on helping former ex-combatants return to society, but also need to simultaneously help Colombian society to overcome the hatred and fear caused by years of conflict. To achieve this, the public needs to understand the complicated and intricate reasons that motivate many young, rural peasants to join the FARC, and the reasons that drive them to stay. For many years the FARC has been demonized and its members dehumanized by its opponents, a natural consequence of a brutal and violent war. Hence, to enable peaceful coexistence, it is crucial for local communities to acknowledge that there is rarely a case in which a guerrilla’s decision to join an armed group is absolutely free from elements of coercion. Similarly, the experiences of guerilla fighters are influenced by a complex interplay between empowerment and agency on the one hand, and denigration and abuse on the other. Without denying the broad spectrum of roles that women play during their participation in the conflict, the public needs to recognize that they, too, are often victims of human rights violations and sexual abuse.\textsuperscript{298} A public reassessment of women’s roles and a greater awareness of their personal stories is necessary to challenge preconceived notions about their

\textsuperscript{298} Ibid.
victimhood and criminal responsibility. To achieve this, the model of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) might serve as a useful exemplar. The TRC listened to the testimony of approximately 21,000 applicants in order to create a detailed report on the structural and historical background of apartheid, individual cases of abuse, regional trends, and the broader institutional and social environment of the apartheid system. More importantly, 2000 personal testimonies were widely broadcasted on national television through hour-long episodes, over and above live hearings held every week. Providing a public space for these stories to be shared allows for a national conversation about the legacy and experience of apartheid, and enabled a common acknowledgement of the humanity of the ‘other.’ By bringing former combatants’ personal stories to light, society’s prejudices and preconceptions could be challenged by new social constructions of guerrillas’ identities. At the local level, truth-telling and personal interactions between victims, ex-combatants and their surrounding communities could help to repair a frayed social fabric; the same logic applies (and could have an even greater impact) at the macro-level of transitional justice and national reconciliation mechanisms. The powerful stories of female ex-combatants have the power to challenge stereotypes and break down barriers in a fractured society. In this regard, the public should be engaged as a key actor in the reintegration process, and a greater understanding of women’s complex experiences should be advanced.

Post-conflict reconstruction, while often a difficult and fraught process, is crucial in order to prevent the reoccurrence of violence and to allow a country to move forward socially and economically, rebuild trust and enhance social cohesion. The continued progress of

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peace negotiations between the FARC and the government, coupled with an increasing number of individual demobilizations in recent years, has sparked debates around the prospects of a peaceful transition in Colombia. The future return to mainstream civilian society of the FARC’s almost 8,000 remaining soldiers, close to 40% of who are women and children, poses a critical challenge. Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs lie at the heart of peace processes as they aim to effectively reintegrate ex-combatants in host communities in a way that decreases the likelihood of recidivism and renewed tensions. In order to ensure a durable and stable co-existence, former combatants must be meaningfully integrated into their new communities. In this sense, ‘meaningful’ integration implies ex-combatants’ ability to provide financially for themselves and their families while developing the new skills and strengths they acquired through their experiences in the conflict. Returning home can be especially challenging for women and girls who have transgressed gender norms and experienced some forms of emancipation as active combatants, but are later forced to abandon these values so as to fit back into a highly patriarchal society governed by gender-coded norms and expectations. This chapter has underscored the need for reintegration programs to recognize the extent to which women are empowered by transcending traditionally feminine domains and lifting the veil of ‘normativity’ that restricted their behavior as civilians. Viewing women only as ‘victims’ risks ignoring crucial aspects of their experience and distorting efforts to assist them; likewise, viewing them only as perpetrators denies the ways in which they have been traumatized and need help. Accounting for female combatants’ complex experiences, new identities and value systems should improve the design and implementation of reintegration programs that build upon the confidence and empowerment that these women have
developed without ignoring their particular needs as victims of gender-based human rights violations. Finally, women’s meaningful inclusion in DDR programs is key to a successful transition to peace and to a progressive transformation of Colombian society as a whole.
CONCLUSIONS

Very well then, I contradict myself; I am large, I contain multitudes.

- Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

For generations, Colombia has experienced violent and destructive conflict for generations, so that neither I nor my parents – nor even my grandparents – have witnessed a single day of peace in our lifetimes. Lasting approximately seventy years, the Colombian civil war is the world’s longest continuous armed conflict, and has left a trail of death and devastation in its wake. However, for the first time in decades, despair is being replaced by cautious hope that Colombians will soon see peace in their country. Current peace negotiations with the FARC, Colombia’s oldest left-wing armed guerrilla group, seek to pave the way for an enduring peace in which forgiveness and national reconciliation lie at the heart of the broader post-conflict project. This is not the first time, though, that Colombia has attempted to broker an end to armed struggle. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, negotiations between the government, right-wing paramilitaries and a handful of left-wing guerrilla groups such as the M-19 offered former combatants comprehensive reintegration programs to facilitate their return to society. Notwithstanding significant advances, many former female combatants have been, and still remain, invisible in Colombia’s Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) processes and transitional justice mechanisms.

As a result of the FARC’s purposeful recruitment of women over the past two decades, female combatants are said to comprise roughly 40% of the estimated 18,000-member organization, with some fronts approaching 50-60%. These remarkably high numbers make female combatants a very important group of actors in Colombia’s armed conflict. As the
government and society as a whole take their first steps toward achieving a sustainable peace, acknowledging the complexities of women’s participation in conflict, and ensuring that subsequent DDR programs are designed with these in mind, becomes an ever more pressing concern. In this regard, any attempt to negotiate a peace deal and implement an effective and inclusive reintegration plan must rely upon a true understanding of the perspectives, experiences, roles and needs of almost half of the insurgent group’s membership. The best, and perhaps the only, way to holistically appreciate female combatants’ myriad experiences in conflict, without falling into potentially misleading and dangerous over-generalizations, is to listen to the voices of the women themselves.

After examining closely the literature on women’s participation in various armed conflicts around the world, as well as some of the most influential works written on Colombia’s armed conflict, I came to realize that scholars and policymakers have traditionally portrayed women and girls as the inevitable victims of war, “suffering at the hands of men” who are characterized as its sole protagonists. This is especially the case with regard to conflicts in the developing world. Although it is true that women are often disproportionately at risk during armed conflict, and suffer uniquely from numerous forms of sexual violence, their active roles as female fighters should not be considered or portrayed as anomalies. In recent years, a growing feminist literature has argued for the integration of a gender perspective into the formulation of post-conflict policies and reconstruction agendas. This body of literature has stressed the importance of understanding how male and female soldiers may be positioned differently, and may experience war in distinctive ways. A handful of scholars have attempted to defend women’s agency and capacity by showing that women, too, can be active combatants and perpetrators in war. However, by categorizing women as either

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300 Chris Coulter, Mariam Persson, and Mats Utas, *Young female fighters in African wars* (Citeseer, 2008). Pg. 28
‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators’ of war, the current literature seems to assume a simplistic contradiction between these two opposing, absolute categories. An unfortunate polarization has emerged, with authors either elaborating on female victimhood or rejecting this characterization and asserting women’s agency instead.

In this study, I proposed a mediation or synthesis of these positions to contribute a new perspective to fill a critical gap in this literature. It is crucial to move away from calcified and reductive notions of victimhood and agency. Accepting a one-dimensional and unyielding characterization of women as either victims or perpetrators fails to incorporate and embrace the voices and experiences of thousands of women who do not fall neatly into either of these categories. By analyzing the testimonies of former female combatants of Colombia’s defunct and active left-wing guerrilla movements, this study has argued a more nuanced approach that stresses women’s roles as active participants without denying their victimhood. As such, an effort to elucidate female combatants’ ambivalent, complex and often-contradictory experiences has been primordial. This study’s objectives have been threefold: first, to question the dichotomization of ‘victimhood’ and ‘culpability,’ which often results in an oversimplification of the reality of women’s experiences; second, to contribute a new perspective to the debate surrounding the peace process, and to ensure that female ex-combatants are not excluded or forgotten at this critical national moment; and finally, to suggest ways of better accommodating women’s special needs through sensitive and inclusive reintegration programs.

In investigating a comprehensive assessment of women’s involvement in armed conflict, this study has focused on two key stages of their lives: first, their experiences as civilian women and the factors influencing their recruitment and decision to join; and second, their
participation in the conflict as active guerrilla members. A close examination of women’s transition from civilian to combatant, and their roles and experiences in armed groups, has offered some key general insights along with five practical recommendations on how to better address the challenges and paradoxes experienced by demobilized ex-combatants in the process of their reintegration into a society fragmented by fear, mistrust and resentment.

The first key question that this study has sought to answer related to the range of reasons, motivations and circumstances that influenced and prompted women’s decision to join an insurgent movement. Are women forcibly recruited into armed groups, or do women join voluntarily and consent to participate in the group’s activities? To answer these questions, I applied a conceptual framework built upon the concepts of ‘consent’ and ‘coercion’ to determine key dynamics of victimhood and agency. In acknowledging the complexity of defining what constitutes ‘meaningful’ consent – as applied generally in the modern legal field – this study has proposed a threefold criteria that outlines the fundamental conditions for consent and the situations in which it can be invalidated. The three criteria include rationality and mental capacity, access to all relevant information, and freedom from external coercive pressures. In addition to this practical standard used to analyze women’s initial decision to join, I emphasized the distinction between ‘initial consent’ and ‘ongoing consent’ to prove that, although entering the FARC is a lifelong commitment, it is still theoretically possible for women to give consent and to participate willingly in the group’s activities.

The FARC claims to adhere to a policy of voluntary recruitment, and its position has been supported by a number of sources which argue that a majority of FARC recruits join of their own volition.  

301 However, despite the low incidence of forced recruitment among the

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interviewees in this study (as evidenced in chapter three), it is important to acknowledge that FARC rebels have, in at least some cases, resorted to kidnapping and extortion as a means of increasing the number female recruits. Moreover, significant evidence shows that few women fall into the extreme categories of ‘willing participants’ and ‘non-consenting victims’ – rather, most interviewees’ stories revealed that elements of ‘coercion’ and ‘consent’ coexist and that the boundary between these categories is often blurred. Unlike many women from the now-defunct M-19 movement for whom ideology was the predominant motive for enlistment, this study showed that, for most female FARC members, perceived social injustices and political ideology were not primary motivations. A majority of former FARC female combatants were low-ranking guerrillas with little formal education, had limited employment prospects and had previously endured domestic abuse. For these women, the leading factor in their enlistment was a perceived lack of viable alternatives. Some were lured into believing that, by joining the FARC, they could improve their living conditions, suffer no abuse, and gain autonomy, social status and power. While these women were seemingly able to make a ‘free’ and ‘autonomous’ decision – they were not explicitly coerced to enter the FARC – this study contended that, in a situation of vulnerability, faced with limited options and incomplete information or under pressure from authority figures, the extent to which their decision reflects ‘meaningful consent’ remains ambiguous. Despite the various environmental factors that inform the decision to enter an armed group, it is crucial to recognize that these do not entirely impair the freedom of the actor, who is still capable of exerting agency to weigh up her options and make a decision. Ultimately, this study reasoned that rather than characterizing female guerrillas as voiceless victims devoid of agency (or, alternatively,
casting them as voluntary actors free from coercive pressures), complex dynamics that drive women’s recruitment should be underscored and appreciated.

Assuming that, once they join, women become active participants in conflict with myriad roles and obligations, this study has explored in great detail the complexities and contradictions inherent in female combatants’ experiences. Are women willing participants? Or are they abused and victimized in the FARC’s male-dominated military movement? The testimonies of former female combatants provided meaningful insights into women’s multidimensional experiences and the factors that determine whether their overall participation was characterized by empowerment or disempowerment. By dissecting the reasons why female fighters demonstrate a willingness to continue to serve in the FARC, this study has illustrated that, in most cases, feelings of fulfillment and personal satisfaction seem to coexist alongside forms of exploitation and abuse. To better understand this apparent contradiction, this study has proposed a conceptual framework that defines ‘empowerment’ as subjective, relational and context-specific, which permitted an analysis and comparison of individuals’ experiences of dis/empowerment and agency in relation to their own unique environments. A discussion of women’s experiences as active FARC members has focused on four main themes, including women’s roles, tasks, and responsibilities, implications of women’s participation in combat, sense of ideological, political and social belonging derived from association with a collective, and restrictions on women’s sexuality and bodily integrity.

Extensive evidence shows that, to a certain degree, the FARC has remained true to its egalitarian ideal allowing equality in the distribution of roles and responsibilities between female and male combatants. Meaningful military and tactical roles are not reserved for men alone, and women have occupied a wide range of positions as nurses, radio operators,

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302 Kabeer, "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment."
explosive experts, specialists in logistics and finance, intelligence, propaganda and security. Gendered considerations, such as physical strength and perceived social attributes seem, however, to assume a greater prominence when assigning combatants’ specialized roles. In addition, despite the FARC’s formal policy of equal opportunity, factors such as lower levels of education, adverse self-perceptions and a heightened aversion to risks and liabilities, in combination serve to discourage women from aspiring to positions of authority in the group’s hierarchy. Nonetheless, without exception, all women interviewed for this study were exposed to combat situations and were trained to use weapons and to fight as soldiers. Most women reported having derived some benefit from their involvement in the conflict through an increase in skills, status, power and access to weapons and a generally greater sense of capability. In some instances, women adopted ostensibly masculine behaviors in order to thrive within a male-dominated and militarized institution. However, their experiences in combat did not reflect the adoption of masculine traits alone. The transgression of traditional roles allowed for a dilution of gender dichotomies and the emergence of a hybrid form of gender identity influenced by both typically masculine and feminine behaviors. Overall, women’s central role in the conflict provided them with a heightened sense of accomplishment and an opportunity to challenge the boundaries of the ‘feminine’ realm. Ultimately, this study has contended that the transgression of traditional gender roles and behaviors could translate into an empowering experience to the extent that it challenges patriarchal, normative social codes.

The FARC was founded on a Marxist ideological platform that still drives its political objectives and plays a role in the maintenance of cohesiveness and morale in the movement. Even though most FARC recruits do not seem to have joined for primarily political or
ideological reasons, this study has shown that their participation in a collective, with shared values and identities, has served to transform many women into social and politically aware actors. The FARC has used a wide range of techniques (including symbolic and social practices) to strengthen soldiers’ belief in, and loyalty to, the rebel cause, which in turn unifies their identities and reinforces group cohesion and commitment to the social movement. However, this sense of solidarity and belonging has been attenuated by the FARC’s paranoia regarding the possibility of army infiltrators within its ranks, which has fueled an increasingly hostile environment of competition, distrust and fear. Finally, the FARC’s strict disciplinarian regime extends to the regulation of romantic relationships throughout the organization. At first, the freedom enjoyed by women to choose their partners and to have some authority in their intimate relations seemed to convey a relative sense of agency, especially when compared to the strict taboos and constraints imposed on them as civilian women. However, a detailed examination has demonstrated that, in reality, the rebel group’s ‘unwritten rules’ or social customs operate ultimately to the detriment of female combatants who are still expected to conform to traditional gender norms. Rigid control over women’s romantic relationships, sexuality and bodies reduces their privacy, dignity and autonomy. In addition, the widespread practice of forced abortions represents a severe form of abuse, and is uniquely degrading of women. On the whole, many female combatants are the victims of sexual violence, invasions of privacy, social stigmas and restrictions of their freedom.

In sum, this study has argued that women’s participation in war as active combatants allows them to take on a multitude of roles and responsibilities alongside their male counterparts, while being simultaneously subjected to numerous unique forms of abuse. Through a close analysis of women’s lives as civilians, the factors that drive their recruitment,
and finally their experiences as active members of armed groups, a complex picture has emerged in which forms of emancipation and freedom coincide with those of inequality, abuse and violence. For this reason, any attempt to categorize women based on a simple and rigid binary of ‘victims’ and perpetrators’ is rendered impossible. This conceptual over-simplification not only fails to acknowledge the complexity and ambiguity of women’s experiences, but also has dangerous implications for their successful reintegration into society.

The progress of ongoing peace talks between the FARC and the Colombian government in Havana underscores the need to include the voices of former female combatants in the Demilitarization, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process. Without recognizing the tensions and contradictions inherent in women’s wartime experience, and the continuum along which they fall, an effective reintegration process will remain elusive.

This study concludes by showing that efforts to achieve sustainable demilitarization and peace-building are contingent upon the ability of reintegration programs, and Colombian society in general, to embrace the new and hybrid gender identities that emerge out of women’s active participation in war. In past decades, DDR mechanisms have emphasized women’s victimhood rather than adopting a holistic gender-focused approach, resulting in widespread experiences of disempowerment and marginalization during post-conflict transitions. To assist in designing more sensitive and responsive mechanisms as the peace process gathers momentum, this study makes five specific recommendations to facilitate former female combatants’ meaningful inclusion and ensure a sustainable social reconstruction. First, DDR processes must acknowledge the particular roles and capabilities of women in order to focus – through vocational and educational programs – on the non-traditional skills and abilities acquired through their involvement in combat. Second,
reintegration programs must be better equipped to manage the gender-related stigmas and the double discrimination faced by former combatants in their return to families and communities. Rather than forcing women back into traditional roles, their greater independence and equality should be promoted and embraced as new gender identities. Third, reintegration programs should attempt to create an environment conducive to support networks based on trust. Despite the security challenges posed by the ongoing nature of the conflict, the government must ensure the personal safety of all participants and encourage the formation of smaller groups where combatants can share their experiences in anonymity. Fourth, DDR processes must adopt a holistic reintegration approach that is cognizant of the special needs of ex-combatants with disabilities. Through appropriate capacity-building programs and better-targeted vocational training, DDR processes must provide support for disabled female ex-combatants who often face greater challenges regarding economic and social reintegration. Fifth, and finally, a key objective of reintegration programs should be to raise public awareness with regard to the complex roles and experiences of female combatants in order to challenge preconceived notions about their victimhood and criminal responsibility. Providing an open public space for individual testimonies to be shared is a viable and effective means of ensuring a national conversation that can help Colombians from all walks of life to begin to break down barriers in a fractured society.
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Personal Interview Questions [English]

♦ Tell me briefly about your life with your family, and where you grew up.
♦ Are you single, married, divorced or widowed? Do you have kids, and if so, how many?
♦ Did your family know that you enlisted in the FARC? What did they think about it?
♦ What were your reasons/motivations for joining the FARC?
♦ For how long were you a member of the FARC? At what age were you recruited, and how old are you now?
♦ Do you have any formal education?
♦ Do you have a husband/boyfriend? If so, is he also involved in the FARC? Was he part of your same front?
♦ What was your role/job as a guerrilla member?
♦ Did you go into combat? If so, tell me about your experience.
♦ Did you always carry a weapon?
♦ Were you satisfied/happy with your position?
♦ Did you feel others respected your role/job in the FARC?
♦ How would you compare your living standard before you joined the guerillas and while you were living with the guerrillas?
♦ How did you feel about the treatment you received in the FARC?
  o From men in the community?
  o From other women?
♦ Did you ever attempt to leave/quit the FARC? If so, tell me about this.
♦ What skills did you learn while enlisted in the FARC? Did you study?
♦ Were you aware of the peace talks that began in 2012? What were your thoughts regarding the amnesty and demobilization programs offered by the government?
♦ Why and when did you decide to demobilize? What was your experience like?

Personal Interview Questions [Spanish]

1. Cuénteme sobre su vida familiar y el lugar en donde creció. (Edad, ciudad de origen, hijos, ocupación, etc.)
2. ¿Es usted soltera, casada, divorciada o viuda? En caso de tener hijos, cuantos tiene y en donde viven?
3. ¿Estaba su familia informada de su afiliación y trabajo en las FARC? Si la respuesta es “sí,” qué opinaban al respecto?
4. ¿Cuáles fueron sus razones/motivaciones para unirse a las FARC?
5. ¿Durante cuanto tiempo fue miembro de las FARC? ¿Qué edad tenía al integrarse oficialmente y qué edad tiene usted ahora?
6. ¿A su ingreso a las FARC, con que nivel de educación contaba usted?
7. ¿Tiene usted novio o esposo? Si la respuesta es positiva, ¿también perteneció a las FARC? ¿Estaba en su mismo frente? 
8. ¿Cuál era su role/trabajo/ocupación en las FARC? 
9. ¿Fue usted una combatiente (soldado) en confrontaciones contra el gobierno o los paramilitares? Si la respuesta es positiva, cuénteme sobre su experiencia. 
10. ¿Siempre llevaba con usted un arma de fuego? 
11. ¿Estaba satisfecha y feliz con su trabajo/ocupación? 
12. ¿Siente que los otros miembros de las FARC respetaban su trabajo o contribución? 
13. ¿Cómo describiría y compararía sus estándares de vida antes, durante su tiempo en la guerrilla? (Por ejemplo, su nivel de salud, de bienestar, libertades económicas e individuales) 
14. ¿Estaba usted satisfecha o de acuerdo con el trato que recibía en las FARC por parte de a. Los hombres y b. Las mujeres? 
15. ¿Alguna vez intentó renunciar/salirse de las FARC? Si la respuesta es “sí,” cuantas veces y por que? 
16. ¿Estaba usted enterada de las negociaciones de paz que empezaron en el 2012? ¿Cuáles eran sus opiniones respecto a la amnistía y los programas de desmovilización ofrecidos por el gobierno? 
17. ¿Qué habilidades o destrezas adquirió usted durante su tiempo como combatiente en las FARC? ¿Realizó algunos estudios adicionales durante su época de militante? 
18. ¿Cuándo y por que decidió desmovilizarse? ¿Cómo fue su experiencia?

Anonymous Paper Questionnaire [English] 

♦ How many other women were in your ‘front’? 
♦ Did you have any members(s) under your command? If so, how many? And what were they responsible for? 
♦ Did you train any soldiers? If so, what was your role? 
♦ Were you able to send money home to your family? 
♦ How did your wage earned as a guerrilla member compare to your former wage? (Lower, higher, or about the same) 
♦ Do you feel that you had a greater/equal/lesser role in decision-making in your ‘front’ versus in your previous community? 
♦ How well do you feel other members (female and male) of the FARC listened to what you had to say? Do you have an example? 
♦ Do you feel that your experience with the FARC has made you a stronger woman? If so, in what way? If the answer is “no,” can you explain why? 
♦ How well integrated do you feel in your new community after demobilization? 
♦ What members of your new community have been key/important during your reintegration process? 
♦ Are you now a member of any civil society groups or organizations outside of your work? 
♦ What (if any skills) do you think your experience in the FARC has given you that you can use in your job and in daily life
1. ¿Cuántas otras mujeres estaban con usted en su mismo Frente?
2. ¿Tenía usted algún miembro(a) de las FARC bajo su comando? Si la respuesta es “sí,” cuántos y cuál era su función/trabajo?
3. ¿Estaba usted encargada del entrenamiento de algún soldado? Si la respuesta es “sí,” de cuántos y en qué consistía el entrenamiento?
4. ¿Si usted recibía un sueldo, le era posible mandar parte de éste a su familia?
5. ¿Como se compara el sueldo que recibía dentro de la guerrilla, con el salario de antes? (Mas bajo, mas alto o igual)?
6. ¿Siente que su competencia/oportunidad para tomar decisiones era mas alta, baja o igual dentro de la guerrilla en relación con su antigua comunidad civil?
7. ¿Siente usted que otros miembro(a)s de las FARC escuchaban a sus opiniones y sugerencias? ¿Tiene algún ejemplo?
8. ¿Siente usted que su experiencia dentro de las FARC, ha convertido en una mujer más fuerte? Si la respuesta es “sí,” ¿De qué manera? Si la respuesta es “no,” ¿puedes explicar el por qué no?
9. Durante su proceso de desmovilización y reintegración, ¿qué tan integrada o aislada se ha sentido de su nueva comunidad?
10. ¿Quiénes han sido miembros importantes en esta integración?
11. ¿Actualmente es usted miembro de alguna organización o sociedad cívicas por fuera de su trabajo/ocupación? Si la respuesta es “sí,” cual es la organización y qué papel desempeña usted?
12. ¿Siente usted que su experiencia en las FARC le ha proporcionado con habilidades o destrezas que pueden ser “transferidas,” o utilizadas en su puesto actual de trabajo o en su vida diaria? Si la respuesta es “sí,” cuáles?

Additional Questions During Interview [English]

1. What were your reasons/motivations for joining the FARC? Was it your choice, or were there other factors that influenced your decision?
2. What was your life like within the organization? Did the reality match with the expectations that you had generated? Why or why not?
3. How does it feel to be a woman in the FARC (at the personal, employment, and social levels)? Did you feel that you received a different treatment than men (hierarchy, possibility of promotion)?
4. Were there spaces for you to participate in and contribute to the making of final decisions in daily discussions on coexistence, internal organization and political ideology?
5. Have your self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, leadership skills and social and political activity changed? If so, how and in what ways?
6. To what extent do you consider yourself a victim?

303 These questions were not part of the original questionnaire but were naturally raised during the personal interviews and discussed with the interviewees.
Preguntas Adicionales. [Spanish]

1. ¿Cuáles fueron sus razones/motivaciones para unirse a las FARC? Fue un decisión propia, o hubo otros factores que influyeron esa decisión? (Fue una decisión informada? Con consentimiento?)

2. Su vida y responsabilidades dentro de la organización coincidieron con las expectativas que ustedes se habían generado? Por que si o por que no?

3. Como es ser mujer dentro de las FARC? (a nivel personal, laboral, social), ¿Sienten que recibían un trato diferente al de los hombres? (jerarquía, posibilidad de ascenso?)

4. Existían espacios para que ustedes las mujeres participaran y contribuyeran a tomar las decisiones finales en las discusiones cotidianas sobre convivencia, organización interna e ideología política?

5. Como ha cambiado su auto estima, relaciones interpersonales, habilidades de liderazgo y actividad social y política?

6. Me gustaría saber hasta que punto se considera usted una víctima?
Appendix B: Photographs of FARC Interviewees

The following are four side-profile photographs of FARC female ex-combatants who agreed to have their picture taken and included in this study. All of their faces are blurred to protect their privacy and identities. Other interviewees refused to have their picture taken because of security concerns. All four pictures were taken at the ACR center in Cali, Colombia.

“Eloisa” (age 16)  
[Captured by the Colombian army]

“Angelica” (age 21)  
[Individual demobilization]
“Johanna” (age 22)  
[Individual demobilization]

“Maria” (age 19)  
[Individual demobilization]
Appendix C: Maps

(a) **Departmental Map of Colombia**

The department map is color-coded to illustrate guerrilla-controlled territories referred to as “zonas rojas” or “hot spots.” As illustrated above, the Southwestern regions along the Pacific are the most affected by the conflict. The number displayed next to the department’s name indicates the number of illegal actors in that zone as recorded between January 2012 and July 2013.

Most interviewees in this study were recruited while living in these “hot spots:” Lauren and Arianne (Cauca) Eloisa, Angela, and Lucia (Caquetá), Daniela (Nariño), Eliana (Huila), Julia (Boyacá) and alias Karina (Antioquia).

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304 David Baracaldo Orjuela, "¿Cuáles son las zonas ‘rojas’ por violencia en Colombia?," *Kienyke*, Julio 22 2013. Original source: Minotir, Sala de Anteción Humanitaria (OCHA)
This map illustrates the geographical location of active armed groups across Colombia and the intensity of the conflict reflected in the number of affected communities. The orange circles represent FARC armed forces, which have been reduced since 2011. The black color represents ELN groups, and the light brown color represents BACRIM, the emerging criminal bands. BACRIM presence has continuously increased from 2002 (209 affected communities) to 2012 (339 affected communities).

Appendix D: Life in a FARC camp in the northwest Andes

The following photographs illustrate the daily lives of FARC guerrilla fighters inside a secret jungle camp in the department of Antioquia, located in northwest Colombia within the Andes Mountains and extending toward the Caribbean Sea. Associated Press (AP) journalists who made an exceptional three-day visit to the FARC camp in Antioquia in January 2016 took all photographs. AP journalists were guided to a remote meeting point and then escorted on an hours-long trek to the jungle site. The FARC required that the camp’s location not be revealed so as to protect the lives of its soldiers.

(a)

![Image of Juliana, a FARC rebel, and her boyfriend Alexis in their makeshift tent in the jungle.](image)

Juliana, a FARC rebel, sits alongside her boyfriend Alexis in their makeshift tent in the jungle.

(b)

![Image of members of the 36th Front moving in smaller groups.](image)

Members of the 36th Front, comprised of 22 rank-and-file fighters and 4 commanders, move in smaller groups.

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306 Abd, Rodrigo. *Colombia Rebel Camp*, January 16, 2016. Associated Press, Antioquia, Colombia. For more photos visit: [http://www.apimages.com/Collection/Landing/Photographer-Rodrigo-Abd-Colombia-Rebel-Camp/b359f4e25ae84bd59b376353082816b7](http://www.apimages.com/Collection/Landing/Photographer-Rodrigo-Abd-Colombia-Rebel-Camp/b359f4e25ae84bd59b376353082816b7)
A rebel soldier of the FARC serves up a portion of rice, eggs, sausage and beans for breakfast.

Female fighters bathe in a creek near their camp.
Appendix E: ACR Center and the Reintegration Process

The following are photographs of the ACR center taken by the author during fieldwork conducted in December 2015. At this center, former combatants attend monthly meetings with their social workers and receive psychosocial assistance, educational classes, vocational training and financial assistance, among other support.

(a) Wall painting illustrating the reintegration route from guerrilla fighters to law-abiding citizens
(b) Dining Room
Administrative offices

Social work in affected communities

Female ex-combatants at a community-based reintegration center, that aims to support female heads of households by instructing them in trades such as weaving and agriculture.

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