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Guerrilla Governance: Troubling Gender in the FARC

Kimberly Theidon

“We need to prepare our [FARC] women to deal with this society. We have changed—society has not.”¹

—Victoria Sandino, member of the FARC negotiating delegation and the Gender Subcommittee, Peace Talks, Havana

ABSTRACT

All armed groups have internal regulations, and these regulations frequently involve the governance of affect, intimacy, and reproduction. Drawing upon

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1. Victoria Sandino, Remarks at Experts Mission to Colombia on Gender and Transitional Justice contracted by UN Women and the Colombian Ministry of Justice (Feb. 6-10, 2017).

my ethnographic research with female former combatants from Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), I explore the gendered aspects of these governance regimes. How was intimacy dictated and policed by commanders and peers? What are the tropes regarding women and violence, and how are these frequently eroticized? What forms of reproductive governance were exercised within the ranks? For women who chose to leave the FARC, either informally or via official Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration programs, to what extent does reintegration involve the redomestication of “transgressive” women?

I. INTRODUCTION

On September 25, 2016, the *Guardian* headline announced, “[t]he Che Guevara era closes as Latin America’s oldest guerrilla army calls it a day.”² After years of negotiation between the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), guerrilla members agreed to lay down their weapons.³ From an estimated high of twenty thousand combatants during the early 2000s, the FARC had dwindled to some seven thousand combatants who would begin their transition back into civilian society.⁴ As with other wars, formal negotiations, signed pieces of paper, and televised handshakes belie tidy before and after stories: days become months which, in turn, become years as the lingering legacies of armed conflict require their own reckoning.

Since 2005 I have conducted research with former combatants from the paramilitaries, the FARC, and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). I have conducted over two hundred semi-structured interviews, a dozen focus groups, and sustained participant observation to explore the challenges of turning former combatants into civilians, into neighbors.⁵ In this article, I focus on the female former FARC combatants with whom I have worked. I began interviewing combatants who were enrolled in the individual Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) program—which preceded the Peace Accords and the FARC collectively laying down weapons—as well as members of the FARC who were living in one of the twenty-three “Zonas Veredales Transitorias de Normalización” (ZVTN) created by the Peace Accords.⁶ The ZVTN were designed to group former FARC combatants in

2. Jonathan Watts & Sibylla Brodzinsky, *Che Guevara Era Closes as Latin America’s Oldest Army Calls it a Day*, *GUARDIAN* (Sept. 25, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/25/farc-che-guevara-era-closes-latin-america-guerrillas> [https://perma.cc/GLA5-3RJB].

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

5. Juan Diego Prieto, *Together After War While the War Goes On: Victims, Ex-combatants and Communities in Three Colombian Cities*, 6 *INT’L J. TRANSITIONAL JUST.* 525 (2012); KIMBERLY THEIDON, *INTIMATE ENEMIES: VIOLENCE AND RECONCILIATION IN PERU* (2012).

6. ERIN McFEE & ANGELIKA RETTBERG, *EXCOMBATIENTES Y ACUERDO DE PAZ CON LAS FARC-EP EN COLOMBIA: BALANCE DE LA ETAPA TEMPRANA* (2019).

zones under United Nations (UN) supervision in order to gather weapons and monitor compliance with the Accords.⁷ The ZVTN were also meant to provide some degree of security to former combatants who were being “picked off” by a variety of armed actors whose motivations ranged from political differences and a sense of betrayal to unsettled scores and lucrative bounties placed on the heads of certain mid-level commanders.⁸

Guiding my research was an interest in guerrilla governance. All armed groups have internal regulations, and these regulations frequently involve the governance of gender, affect, intimacy, and reproduction.⁹ Drawing upon interviews with twenty-seven individually demobilized female combatants as well as conversations and ethnographic research with female FARC members in one ZVTN, I explore some gendered aspects of guerrilla governance. How were sex and intimacy dictated and policed by commanders and peers? What were the forms of reproductive control—which at times veered into reproductive violence—practiced within the FARC and with what consequences? What are the tropes regarding women and violence, and how are these frequently eroticized? What are some of the specific challenges confronting these women as they seek to build civilian lives? Finally, to what extent do DDR programs continue to be based upon gendered essentialisms, such that reintegration assumes the “redomestication” of rebel women?

In exploring these questions, I join feminist scholars who have insisted on the ways in which violent conflict can alter gender regimes, in both destructive and transformative ways for women¹⁰ and yet find that the period euphemistically labeled post-conflict may see a resurgence of gender inequality and an increase in gender-based violence.¹¹ By centering women’s experiences within the FARC, I aim to demonstrate the importance of un-

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.*

9. Luisa María Dietrich Ortega, *Looking Beyond Violent Militarized Masculinities: Guerrilla Gender Regimes in Latin America*, 14 INT’L FEMINIST J. POL. 498 (2012); JEREMY WEINSTEIN, *INSIDE REBELLION: THE POLITICS OF INSURGENT VIOLENCE* (2007); THEIDON, *supra* note 5.
10. MARIE E. BERRY, *WAR, WOMEN AND POWER: FROM VIOLENCE TO MOBILIZATION IN RWANDA AND BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA* (2018); Judy El-Bushra, *Fused in Combat: Gender Relations and Armed Conflict*, 13 DEV. IN PRAC. 252; FIONNUALA NÍ AOLAÍN, DINA FRANCESCA HAYNES & NAOMI CAHN, *ON THE FRONTLINES: GENDER, WAR, AND THE POST-CONFLICT PROCESS* (2011).
11. JELKE BOESTEN, *SEXUAL VIOLENCE DURING WAR AND PEACE: GENDER, POWER AND POST-CONFLICT JUSTICE IN PERU* (2014); Niall Gilmartin, “*Without Women, the War Could Never Have Happened*”: *Representations of Women’s Military Contributions to Non-state Armed Groups*, 19 INT’L FEMINIST J. POL. 456 (2017); Martha Cecilia Herrera & Carol Pertuz Bedoya, *Narrativas Femeninas del Conflicto Armado y la Violencia Política en Colombia: Contar para Rehacerse*, 53 REV. DE ESTUD. SOC. 150 (2015); SHEILA MEINTJES, MEREDETH TURSHEN & ANU PILLAY, *THE AFTERMATH: WOMEN IN POST-CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION* (2001); Johanna Nilsson & Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, “*People Constantly Remind Me of My Past . . . and Make Me Look Like a Monster*”: *Re-Visiting DDR Through a Conversation with Black Diamond*, 15 INT’L FEMINIST J. POL. 110 (2013); Prieto, *supra* note 5; CYNTHIA ENLOE, *MANEUVERS: THE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS OF MILITARIZING WOMEN’S LIVES* (2000); CAROLINE O.N. MOSER & FIONA CLARK, *VICTIMS, PERPETRATORS, ACTORS?: GENDER, ARMED CONFLICT AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE* (2001); THEIDON, *supra* note 5.

derstanding guerrilla governance and its gendered legacies in the lives of women who have laid down weapons yet continue to struggle.

II. ACCORDING TO PEACE: GENDER TROUBLE?

December 15, 2015 was not just any other day in Havana, Cuba. The group gathered in El Laguito, the site of the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC, prepared to announce the results of the forty-fifth cycle of peace talks that had begun three years ago.¹² Previous accords had been reached on rural development, political participation for former guerrillas, the elimination of illicit crops, and transitional justice measures, including a Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition, tasked with clarifying and establishing the truth about Colombia's conflict.¹³ Now the negotiations had turned to reparations for victims of the longest-running war in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁴ They produced a controversial yet crucial accord that includes both judicial measures to investigate and sanction violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, and extrajudicial measures such as truth-seeking, locating the disappeared, and providing individual and collective reparations to victims of the conflict.¹⁵ Listening to members of the government delegation, representatives of the FARC, and spokespersons for the victim's delegation reminded the audience of a litany of painful facts: more than fifty years of armed conflict; 220,000 people killed and another 50,000 disappeared; vast expanses of land grabbed up and some 5 million people internally displaced; and 8.4 million registered victims to date.¹⁶ The atmosphere was both somber and optimistic, reflecting the hopes, doubts, and controversies that have shadowed the peace process.¹⁷ Ending the day on a hopeful note, the government's lead negotiator, Humberto de la Calle, insisted: "Peace is possible. The time has come to believe in peace."¹⁸ Or so it seemed.

From 2012 until 2016, the Colombian government and delegates from the FARC met in Havana, Cuba to discuss a peace agreement.¹⁹ They began by signing a preliminary General Agreement that functioned as a framework for their lengthy negotiations, an agreement that defined which demands could be made and which could not.²⁰ One clause in that agreement stipulated

12. Kimberly Theidon, *Peace in Colombia: Time to Believe?*, 115 CURRENT HIST. 51 (2016).

13. *Id.* at 51.

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.* at 53.

17. *Id.* at 56.

18. *Id.* at 57.

19. *Id.* at 58.

20. *Id.*



Figure 1. Peace Negotiators in Havana, Cuba (photo credit Associated Press).

that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.”²¹ By limiting the agenda to six key issues, the negotiators hoped to avoid yet another failed laundry list of insurgent demands; by holding the talks in Cuba, they hoped to buffer the process from the daily events of war and the vagaries of contentious politics in Colombia.²²

“Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”²³—and everything seemed to line up on September 26, 2016, in Cartagena, Colombia. The signing ceremony was televised, attended by the UN Secretary-General and visiting international dignitaries, and almost three thousand guests.²⁴ To see President Juan Manuel Santos shaking hands with rebel leader Timoleón Jiménez (AKA Timochenko) and to have Timochenko publicly ask for forgiveness for all the pain the FARC had caused during the war was an astonishing day.²⁵ Maybe de la Calle was right: the time had come to believe in peace. All that remained was a referendum, an opportunity for war-weary Colombians to vote on the accords. And they did.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.* at 51.

23. See Renata Segura, *Colombia's Landmark Agreement: The End of 50 Years of War?*, GLOB. OBSERVATORY (June 27, 2016), <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2016/06/colombia-farc-peace-havana-santos-jimenez/#more-11296> [<https://perma.cc/VNW2-RPV9>].

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.*

On October 2, 2016, Colombians (or at least 37 percent of them) headed to the polls to vote on the peace accords.²⁶ After four years of negotiations in Havana, all that remained was a referendum on the 297-page peace agreement. How hard could it be to “sell the peace” after a fifty-two-year war?

The words on the ballot were straightforward: “Do you accept the final agreement to terminate the conflict and build a stable and lasting peace?”²⁷ After a half-century of armed conflict, it was almost inconceivable that anyone would vote “No” on this proposition—but they did. Sixty-three percent of the population abstained, some due to inclement weather, others due to apathy, and others (I suspect many) due to the prevailing sense that a “Yes” vote was virtually assured.²⁸ Of the ballots cast, the outcome hinged on some fifty thousand votes in a country with fifty million people. The final tally was 50.2 percent versus 49.7 percent.²⁹ The peace accord was voted down. It would take several frenzied weeks of renegotiations before the final revised accord was approved by both houses of the Colombian Congress—no more risky referendum business.³⁰

For those Colombians who voted “No,” *what* were they saying no to? Let’s consider some possible answers to that question. For some constituencies within the “No” camp, anything less than lengthy jail time for FARC combatants—especially commanders—was anathema. This position, which I call “maximalist intransigence,” resulted in Human Rights Watch ending up on the side of a “No” movement comprised of former president Alvaro Uribe, and conservative factions of the Catholic and Evangelical Churches.³¹ However, the voting patterns indicate that Colombians living in those areas most impacted by the armed conflict voted “Yes” on the referendum, suggesting that victims of the conflict were embracing the peace accords not for their perfection but for their promise. Part of the promise was gender equality and the recognition of sexual diversity. The moral panic generated around the erosion of “family values” was in part a cultural backlash against recent gains by women and the LGBTQ communities.³² Concerns that a “gender ideology” was part and parcel of the peace accords added to the cultural backlash, and suggests that an embrace of Colombia’s “gender focus” by international actors met with domestic resistance among conservative sectors as reflected in one of former President Uribe’s inflammatory tweets: “Saying

26. Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace, Colom.-FARC-EP, Aug. 24, 2016, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/wview/1845/Final%20Agreement%20to%20End%20the%20Armed%20Conflict%20and%20Build%20a%20Stable%20and%20Lasting%20Peace> [https://perma.cc/PM3J-586A].

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

29. *Id.*

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

that one is not born female or male, but that this is defined by ‘society’ is an abuse of minors, a disrespect of nature and of the family.”³³ Gender Trouble!

I wish to *trouble gender*, in the negotiations and beyond. To look at the photos from the peace negotiations in Havana, one could assume that war is the business of men, who in turn become guardians of the peace.³⁴ Halfway through the negotiations, a Gender Subcommission was formed to ensure the accords would have an “adequate gender focus,” but the Subcommission was something of an afterthought, and gender was synonymous with “women.”³⁵ Mostly women appeared in the photos when the Victim Delegations arrived, the masculine state confronted by a feminized civil society.³⁶ From the images, it would be easy to forget that 30-40 percent of FARC combatants were women.³⁷ Why do women belong at the peace table? Certainly not because of their “essentially” peaceful nature.³⁸ These women, and others, belie essentializing arguments that assume women are naturally peace-loving and exert a pacifying influence on those around them. Women belong at the peace table because they had a stake in the conflict and thus a stake in its resolution. We need to move beyond considering the impact of war *on* women to understanding women *in* and *at* war. Their experiences could tell us a great deal about how to transition from war to the construction of a sustainable and more equitable peace.³⁹

III. DISMANTLING THE “MACHINERY OF WAR”: DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION, AND REINTEGRATION

In the glossary of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding, three terms are omnipresent: disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration.⁴⁰ In the

33. See Roxanne Krystalli & Kimberly Theidon, *Here’s How Attention to Gender Affected Colombia’s Peace Process*, WASH. POST (Oct. 9, 2016), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/10/09/heres-how-attention-to-gender-affected-colombias-peace-process/> [https://perma.cc/5NFN-WAM4].

34. *Id.*

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.*

37. See Débora Silva, *From Combatant to Civilian Life: Women of the FARC*, NACLA (Sept. 29, 2016), <https://www.iwfm.org/reporting/from-combatant-to-civilian-life-women-of-the-farc/> [https://perma.cc/853R-8LWP].

38. Christine Bell & Catherine O’Rourke, *Peace Agreements or Pieces of Paper? The Impact of UNSC Resolution 1325 on Peace Processes and Their Agreements*, 59 INT’L COMPAR. L. Q. 941 (2010); Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, *Women, Security, and the Patriarchy of Internationalized Transitional Justice*, 31 HUM. RTS. Q. 1055 (2009); Alex McAuliff, *Peace Negotiations as Sites of Gendered Power Hierarchies*, 28 INT’L NEGOT. 1 (2022).

39. Gilmartin, *supra* note 11; CYNTHIA ENLOE, *TWELVE FEMINIST LESSONS OF WAR* (2023).

40. Sami Faltas, *DDR Without Camps*, in BICC CONVERSION SURVEY (2005); Dyan Mazurana et al., *Gender and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration: Reviewing and Advancing the Field*, in THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF GENDER AND CONFLICT (Fionnuala Ní Aoláin et al. eds., 2018); Kimberly Theidon, *Reconstructing Masculinity: The*

context of peace processes, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UNDPKO) defines disarmament as the collection, control, and elimination of small arms, ammunition, explosives, and light and heavy weapons from the combatants and, depending upon the circumstances, the civilian population.⁴¹ Demobilization is the process in which armed organizations (which may consist of government or opposition forces, or simply armed factions) decrease in size or are dismantled as one component of a broad transformation from a state of war to a state of peace.⁴² Generally, demobilization involves the concentration, quartering, disarming, management, and licensing of former combatants, who may receive some form of compensation or other assistance to motivate them to lay down their weapons and re-enter civilian life.⁴³ Finally, reinsertion or reintegration consists of those measures directed toward ex-combatants that seek to strengthen the capacity of these individuals and their families to achieve social and economic reintegration in society.⁴⁴ The reinsertion programs may include economic assistance or some other form of monetary compensation, as well as technical or professional training or instruction in other productive activities.⁴⁵

In its traditional formulation—and implementation—DDR was squarely located within a military or security framework, centered on “dismantling the machinery of war.”⁴⁶ That “machinery” was assumed to be male.⁴⁷ This approach failed to give sufficient consideration to the host communities, as well as to the need to consider local, cultural, and gendered conceptions of what constitutes the rehabilitation and re-socialization of ex-combatants. Recent UN Integrated DDR Standards (UNIDDRS) underscore the deficiency of reintegration efforts and emphasize the need for measures to be developed and implemented in consultation and collaboration with all members of the community, recognizing that the “R” remains the weakest link in the DDR chain.⁴⁸

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia, 31 HUM. RTS. Q. 1 (2009); Peter Croll, *Voces y Opciones del Desarme: Enseñanzas Adquiridas de la Experiencia de Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC) en Otros Países*, DEPARTAMENTO DE CIENCIA POLÍTICA, UNIVERSIDAD DE LOS ANDES 49 (2003); Mark Knight & Alpaslan Özerdem, *Guns, Camps and Cash: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reinsertions of Former Combatants in Transitions from War to Peace*, 41 J. PEACE RSCH. 499 (2004).

41. Theidon, *supra* note 40, at 2.

42. See *Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration*, United Nations Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/disarmament-demobilization-and-reintegration> [<https://perma.cc/3XEW-5D6G>].

43. Knight & Özerdem, *supra* note 40, at 501.

44. See Theidon, *supra* note 40, at 6.

45. Faltas, *supra* note 40.

46. *Id.* at 2.

47. *Id.*

48. *Id.*

In Colombia, DDR has been used with various armed groups, which prompts me to suggest the “R” could stand for “recycling” armed actors into new groups and configurations of violence.⁴⁹ During the negotiations in Havana, delegates from the FARC rejected the language of demobilization, arguing that it carried two unacceptable connotations: military defeat and a retreat from political engagement.⁵⁰ The FARC insisted they were “laying down weapons,” not abandoning the cause.⁵¹ As commander Victoria Sandino told us in February 2017, “I am a combatant of the FARC. I say combatant because we remain combatants to ensure that what we agreed upon is implemented.”⁵² For her, the struggle continues but without weapons; the battle now is to “*cambiar el chip*”—to change the mental hardwiring of Colombia’s patriarchal, sexist society.⁵³ Agreed, but did the FARC *really* offer a space for gender equality? That question calls for a discussion.

IV. AFFECTIVE REGIMES: REGULATING INTIMACY

“We always performed equality. Men and women have the same rights and the same duties, and we undertake the same missions.”

—Patricia, FARC former combatant⁵⁴

In her insightful comparative research on guerrilla organizations in El Salvador,⁵⁵ Colombia,⁵⁶ and Peru,⁵⁷ Luisa María Dietrich Ortega argues that these organizations actively intervene to form “insurgent femininities and masculinities” that are functional to the armed struggle.⁵⁸ One objective is minimizing differences between militants to foment unity and cohesion within the troops and to impose a hierarchical chain of command.⁵⁹ I agree that armed groups establish their own gender regimes, and these regimes

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49. For an overview of these multiple DDR efforts, see SERGIO JARAMILLO, YANET GIHA & PAULA TORRES, *TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND DDR: THE CASE OF COLOMBIA* (2009); JOSÉ ARMANDO CÁRDENAS SARRIAS, *LAS PARIAS DE LA GUERRA: ANÁLISIS DEL PROCESO DE DESMOBILIZACIÓN INDIVIDUAL* (2005).
 50. Sandino, *supra* note 1.
 51. *Id.*
 52. *Id.*
 53. *Id.*
 54. See *Militants Have a New Plan for the Country, and It's Called "Insurgent Feminism,"* CONVERSATION (July 3, 2017), <https://theconversation.com/colombian-militants-have-a-new-plan-for-the-country-and-its-called-insurgent-feminism-77148> [<https://perma.cc/SHN5-3NXZ>].
 55. Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.
 56. Ejército Popular de Liberación; M-19; Ejército de Liberación Nacional.
 57. Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru (MRTA); Partido Comunista del Perú—Sendero Luminoso (PCP-SL).
 58. See Ortega, *supra* note 9, at 493.
 59. Luisa María Dietrich Ortega, *La "Compañera Política": Mujeres Militantes y Espacio de "Agencia" en Insurgencias Latinoamericanas*, 80 *COLOMBIA INT'L* 83, 95 (2014).

are riddled with contradictions.⁶⁰ Ortega also claims that these organizations do not care so much about the private realm, leaving that sphere to individuals.⁶¹ The FARC offers evidence to bolster the first claim, and to question the second.

In all my interviews with female former combatants who had individually demobilized, they asserted that men and women were treated equally in the FARC, a statement spoken with conviction yet strikingly at odds with details they subsequently shared during our conversations. The FARC ideology of gender equality belied a double standard that was magnified by rank. Treating everyone the “same” does not mean “equal” because people are different. The regulation of intimacy reveals the gender discrimination that infused the affective regime and was one factor prompting women to desert from the FARC.

Sandra⁶² had spent six years in the FARC, and I met her when she was housed in one of the individual DDR program’s residential sites. Former combatants in the individual demobilization program all shared a history of dramatically escaping from the FARC at great risk of being captured and killed for having deserted the ranks. While this may have reflected a certain formulaic escape narrative designed to prompt compassion in their listeners, such histories resonate with the findings of other researchers and would be consistent with Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Francy Carranza Franco’s gendered genealogy of the FARC and the organization’s increasing use of severe discipline and lifetime membership.⁶³

Sandra planned her escape around her allotted bathing time, heading to the river with her rifle carefully wrapped in a towel. She managed to stall a bit and, while the guards were distracted, she ran into the jungle. Trudging knee-deep in muddy water gave way to running as fast as she could up one mountain and then another, leg muscles cramping and her boots increasingly heavy as they filled with sand. The skin on her feet was chafed and bleeding when she finally came to the curve of a road and saw soldiers everywhere. She crouched down and dropped back off the road, relieved when she realized the FARC guards pursuing her had backed off due to the heavy military presence. She waited until the soldiers moved on and then crawled up an embankment to the road.

60. *Id.*

61. *Id.* at 107.

62. Pseudonyms for the women I interviewed are used throughout this article to protect anonymity.

63. Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín & Francy Carranza Franco, *Organizing Women for Combat: The Experience of the FARC in the Colombian War*, 17 *J. AGRARIAN CHANGE* 770, 774 (2017).

I came across a mototaxista and asked him to get me out of there—take me to town. He was really afraid to help me so I pulled out my rifle and told him to give me the mototaxi. I told him I was turning myself in, that there was a military checkpoint further up the road and that I was going to turn myself in. I scared him enough that he took me to the first checkpoint. Oh, I turned so pale, completely pale and started trembling when I saw the soldiers. I thought they would kill me any minute. I told them I had no papers and they told me to continue on to town. I was terrified but kept going. An old man asked me what I was doing in those parts, and I told him I had deserted and hadn't eaten anything. I was afraid he was a spy. I kept thinking I would be killed any minute, but he had me sit down in a little restaurant and drink some aquardiente with beer. I kept look around to see if he was selling me out. Suddenly the Defensor del Pueblo walked up and said so “you're looking for the priest, right?” I didn't say anything and he smiled. “We know who you are and that you arrived here demobilized, a deserter.” Shit, I got even paler. But he contacted the priest and the priest contacted the battalion. The battalion showed up on a small boat [chalupa]. I thought “oh god, now they're going to kill me, chop me up and throw my body parts in the river.” Total fear. They walked me to the boat with one soldier behind me and I was very attentive to that soldier. When we got on the boat I was wondering what they had planned for me. But then they saw my feet and took me back to town. I figured if they were buying me clothes then maybe they wouldn't kill me. We arrived at the base around 8 at night. That flock of soldiers—young recruits just kept asking me questions. They wanted to know all about how it was out there.⁶⁴

And how was it out there? What had prompted her to risk her life to leave the FARC? Sandra's reasons resonated with other women who had individually demobilized, as we shall see. But first, I want to clarify a few points to avoid being misunderstood. Women had complex motivations for joining the FARC and, in many cases, staying in the guerrilla for years. I do not endorse explanatory frameworks that systematically erase women's political reasons for taking up arms. Too much literature focuses on female combatants joining up to escape abuse at home; to deviance; to being “engañadas” (duped) by armed groups and their propaganda; or to the hackneyed refrain that “a woman can't resist a guy in a uniform” (which I refer to as the Swoon Explanatory Framework).⁶⁵ What *did* I hear in Colombia? Certainly, women talked about escaping an abusive home environment, of wanting

64. Interview with the Director of a DDR Site, in Medellín, Colombia (Jan. 30, 2006).

65. For discussion and critique, see Sheri Lynn Gibbings, *No Angry Women at the United Nations: Political Dreams and the Cultural Politics of United Nations Security Resolution 1325*, 13 INT'L FEMINIST J. POL. 522 (2011); NIAL GILMARTIN, *FEMALE COMBATANTS AFTER ARMED STRUGGLE: LOST IN TRANSITION?* (2018); ALEXIS HENSHAW, *WHY WOMEN REBEL. UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ARMED REBEL GROUPS* (2017).

adventure, of seeking to avenge the murder of someone they loved. Some joined in place of their brothers or fathers to spare them, while still others went because it was a quasi-family tradition to join the guerrilla. Some wanted to fight for social justice: they had grown up seeing only poverty around them, while others loved holding a gun and “getting respect.” In some regards, their reasons were not so different from the male former combatants with whom I have spoken. For many, they *did* consider themselves to be political actors, however much one may deplore their means and ends.

My interviews also challenge the standard forced recruitment narrative that would imply people were hauled off at gunpoint and issued a uniform. The spectrum of consent and coercion is more nuanced. In an impoverished rural setting with scant access to food, education, health care, and a full range of life options beyond that of motherhood by default, women and girls may look to an armed group to get the hell out of their (patriarchal) small town.⁶⁶ These “push” factors figure in the literature, and in the conversations I have had.⁶⁷

Women who individually demobilized also cannot be assumed to have had the same experiences as those who were part of the post-Peace Accord collective process. The women who deserted the ranks to enroll in the DDR program were undertaking a dangerous exit strategy and provided compelling reasons for doing so. To what extent were they the exception? To what extent were the experiences they recount common across FARC fronts? I cannot determine that but will discuss points of convergence between these women and the former FARC combatants with whom I spoke in the ZVTN. This should illuminate some patterns.

Lillian was twenty years old when we sat across from each other in dusty plastic chairs in the DDR program. She had spent five years in the FARC before escaping into the jungle. I was curious to hear more about the commanders and how they behaved with the rank and file. She rolled her eyes.

They're not all the same. Some are considerate but others . . . well, they grab you and want to have relations with you whether you want to or not. It's hard when “ni te apatecen” [when they don't provoke your appetite]. Some respect women, but the majority of those commanders—they just give them a slap on the wrist.

66. ERIN BAINES, *BURIED IN THE HEART: WOMEN, COMPLEX VICTIMHOOD AND THE WAR IN NORTHERN UGANDA* (2018).

67. *Id.*; Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, *Gendered Political Violence: Female Militancy, Conduct and Representation in Contemporary Scholarship: A Review*, 20 *INT'L J. POL.* 274 (2018); Sanne Weber, *From Gender-Blind to Gender-Transformative Reintegration: Women's Experiences with Social Reintegration in Guatemala*, 23 *INT'L FEMINIST J. POL.* 396 (2021); Gilmartin, *supra* note 11; Roos Haer, *Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past*, 40 *THIRD WORLD Q.* 74 (2019).

“Did any of those commanders abuse woman?” She nodded emphatically.

What woman’s not going to be sad when a man grabs her when she doesn’t like him, when he doesn’t appeal to her. He grabs her anyway to have sex with her without her having any desire. What can she say? Her compañeros can’t say anything because they can beat them up, even kill them.⁶⁸

I wanted to hear more and asked if it was easy to have “relaciones afectivas” in the guerrilla. As she explained, before having relations, you had to obtain permission.

The guards have to talk with the commander and ask for permission to formalize it. And that’s really bad. Imagine: 500 men and they say, “you, go with permission with so and so.” It’s ugly. It’s really ugly how that works.

And what about a long-term relationship?

That takes 2-3 days of negotiation. The commanders first separate the two people for 8-9 months—send them to different fronts and if they still want to be together and remain loyal to the FARC, then they can obtain permission.⁶⁹

There are several themes here that warrant further discussion. In their work with former combatants, Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch argue that a “female presence in the ranks attracts and retains male guerrillas because they provide a supply of sexual partners to what would otherwise be a corps of forlorn, largely celibate male insurgents tempted to abandon the cause at the first whiff of perfume,” further citing a former commander who asserted that female guerrillas were essential for the morale and stability of the organization.⁷⁰ Women were clearly more than sexual personnel, but what are the underlying assumptions here?

As with many other state and non-state fighting forces, the heterosexual male sex drive is treated as something potentially volatile and as such must be managed, must be “serviced.”⁷¹ The permissions followed this gendered arc and clearly some female former combatants felt obligated to have sex in the name of lifting the *esprit de corps*—of the men. The FARC fostered a “hook-up” culture in which access to sex was largely regulated by men.⁷² The men were soldiers; the women were frequently described (by male

68. Interview with Lilliana, former FARC combatant, in Sasaima, Colombia (June 5, 2007).

69. *Id.*

70. Natalia Herrera & Douglas Porch, “Like Going to a Fiesta”: The Role of Female Fighters in Colombia’s FARC-EP, 19 *SMALL WARS & INSURGENCIES* 609, 614 (2008).

71. Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Variation in Sexual Violence During War*, 34 *POL. & SOC’Y* 307, 310 (2006); see JELKE BOESTEN & LURGIO GAVILÁN, *PERROS Y PROMOS: MEMORIA, VIOLENCIA Y AFECTO EN AL PERÚ POSCONFLICTO* (2023).

72. Interview with Melina, former FARC combatant, in Meta, Colombia (May 28, 2017).

former combatants I interviewed) as “muy puta” (whorish) for having “slept around.”⁷³ The charge of promiscuity was leveled at the women, leaving the men untainted; after all, they had “permission.” Consensus veered at times into coercion, in the name of keeping up the men’s fighting spirit and commitment to the FARC.

Additionally, certain privileges accrued to those higher up the ranks in a very hierarchical organization. Milena had been active in the FARC for four years when she deserted, tired of the rigors of life in “el monte,” compounded by missing her family terribly.⁷⁴ She was also disillusioned by the arbitrary application of rules and sanctions within the ranks.⁷⁵

For example, out there you can’t drink, but there are people who commit errors and they are covered up. If a commander drinks, gets drunk, raises shit—kills civilians and all that. They can quarrel and quarrel, but it’s covered up and they don’t punish the commanders. But you know what made me the angriest? Let’s say you’re a combatiente raso [rank and file combatant] and you are giving it your all. You’re killing yourself to obey the orders. Risking your life knowing the army is nearby and at any minute they could shoot you. You are running around with no underwear, nothing. But then! You head up to the camp where the commanders are and their women have nice clothes, nail polish and all of that. So while you’re out killing yourself, they’re sitting there enjoying life. They’re young, pretty—they like a comfortable life. They’re the commanders’ partners. Oh, it just makes you furious!⁷⁶

Privilege could provoke resentment; it could also be enticing, and some women responded to the inducement. Women who slept with commanders were referred to as “las rangeras.” “Ranga” is “rank,” thus “rangeras” implies these women slept their way up the hierarchy to secure benefits.⁷⁷ Partnering with a commander could also keep the other men at bay, a protection strategy employed in other contentious settings.⁷⁸ Importantly, the privileges of rank extended beyond underwear and a coveted maxipad. Herrera and Porch offer a wonderful aphorism to sum up the FARC’s stance on biological reproduction: it was not a “family friendly policy.”⁷⁹ I turn next to reproductive violence.

73. *Id.*

74. *Id.*

75. *Id.*

76. *Id.*

77. See Herrera & Porch, *supra* note 70, at 622 (following a similar logic of privilege, but evidently without the taint).

78. See MARTA HILLERS, *A WOMAN IN BERLIN* (2005) (providing rich details on this issue, and how sleeping with an officer also meant access to food).

79. See Herrera & Porch, *supra* note 70, at 612.

V. REPRODUCTIVE GOVERNANCE, REPRODUCTIVE VIOLENCE

Reproductive governance refers to the mechanisms through which different historical configurations of actors—such as state, religious, and international financial institutions, NGOs, and social movements—use legislative controls, economic inducements, moral injunctions, direct coercion, and ethical incitements to produce, monitor, and control reproductive behaviours and population practices.⁸⁰

One cornerstone of guerrilla governance was the regulation of sexual relations, contraception, and abortion. In 1993, the FARC adopted a policy for the control of reproduction, making contraception compulsory for female combatants so they could fulfill their military duties.⁸¹ At the Ninth Conference held in 2007, the FARC Secretariat decided to standardize the use of contraception, and Norplant was selected as the method to be administered to all female combatants.⁸² Both individually demobilized female combatants as well as women in the ZVTN showed me their implantation marks and described the “contraception days.”⁸³ Commanders of their front would call the women together and inform them that they would be given contraceptive implants en masse.⁸⁴ According to the women, there was no individual counseling or medical exam, nor was there a discussion of possible side effects, which may include heavy or irregular menstrual bleeding, cramps, pelvic pain, and headaches.⁸⁵

Important for this discussion is the possible failure rate: “If you’ve just had your implant fitted and you are in the first five days of your period then you are immediately protected from pregnancy. Any later and you will need to use additional birth control for seven days.”⁸⁶ This helps to explain, at least in part, the pregnancies that did occur: there was no individual tailoring to where a female combatant was in her menstrual cycle, and the women did not mention any “additional birth control” provided for those days during which Norplant was not yet in effect.⁸⁷ I do not know what the pregnancy rate was for women in the FARC, but a report from the Office of the Attorney General on sexual violence perpetrated by the FARC-EP estimated that more

80. Morgan Lynn & Elizabeth Roberts, *Reproductive Governance in Latin America*, 19 *ANTHROPOLOGY & MED.* 241, 241 (2011).

81. National Center for Historical Memory, *LA GUERRA INSCRITA EN EL CUERPO* 175-76 (2018).

82. *Id.*

83. *Id.* at 173.

84. *Id.*

85. See generally, Norplant System Side Effects, *DRUGS.COM*, <https://www.drugs.com/sfx/norplant-system-side-effects.html> [<https://perma.cc/5YNA-Q3E4>].

86. See Hatty Wilmoth, *Can You Get Pregnant on the Implant? What Happens If It Expires?*, *LOWDOWN* (Oct. 13, 2022), <https://thelowdown.com/blog/can-you-get-pregnant-on-the-implant> [<https://perma.cc/2WXW-FL23>].

87. *Id.*

than one thousand forced abortions were likely to have taken place each year.⁸⁸ I have heard numerous stories about these forced abortions, which figured prominently in the life histories of those women who had individually demobilized. I share one interview here; the conditions this woman describes resonate with what others reported. This conversation took place at a DDR facility outside of Bogotá.

Out there [allá], look, people have abortions. They make you abort—always trying to make women abort. It's a big pain. They give pills and shots to start contractions. Some pills they put in your vagina, others you swallow. The drugs they gave me—I started having contractions around 6 in the morning and at 7 in the evening I aborted.

Sandra, how did you realize it was happening?

I didn't know anything. I had no idea what was happening. I started to have contractions and at first thought it was cramps. I thought the cramps were going to kill me and I asked them for some pills to help with the pain. They told me no, that I could not take any more pills or it might kill me. I kept asking for pills and they kept saying no. They just stood there watching me while I rolled around in a cot on the floor. I kept rolling around and screaming. I wanted to vomit, to urinate and defecate all over myself. All day long like that. Finally around 7 in the evening I was able to rest a bit and the pain lessened a little. Suddenly I crouched down and felt something burst, like a lake. I was scared and stood up, and the pain came again. I felt water flowing. I was even more frightened and thought I was going to defecate. I crouched down again in pain and that's when the baby fell out onto the floor. I screamed out loud. I tried to stand up. I was all alone when I started to scream and the nurse arrived. I told her something had come out of me. What was it? She told me that I was pregnant and they had given me an abortion. I told them they were motherfuckers—I told them off, un poquito [implying she was a bit embarrassed by the language she used]. I don't know, but I just told them off. I didn't know I was pregnant, they gave me a test. But I didn't know it was a test. They called me early that morning; I was standing guard that morning. It was very early, I had not yet had any coffee—nothing. They called me in and said, “we need some of your urine.” I asked them why but they just said they needed some of my urine. I told them I had already peed, but they told me to force myself. But why do you need my urine? I told them that if they needed urine they should ask one the older women to give them some! Why did they need mine?! So they kept me there until I could force myself to pee. If they had told me I was pregnant, I would never have let them make me abort. No way—not if they punished me or threatened to kill me. It was dark out when it came out of me. I had no idea what had come out of me. When the nurse told me what had happened, oh god, I cried and cried. Oh how I told them off. I called them motherfuck-

88. See *Las Violaciones a los Derechos Reproductivos en las Farc*, HACEMOS MEMORIA (Oct. 16, 2019), <https://hacemosmemoria.org/2019/10/16/las-violaciones-a-los-derechos-reproductivos-en-las-farcwomens-link-worldwide-informe-jep/> [<https://perma.cc/HJL3-JDFS>].

ers! During those days, oh I almost died. I had to participate in an assault right after the abortion. Two days later. I was hemorrhaging and almost died. I was not eating, I was not taking care of myself. All I could think of was this. I had sharp pains in my head. I could barely walk. Not even a vitamin afterwards. And they had me participate in an assault—can you believe it?⁸⁹

I join other feminist researchers in insisting that we frame reproductive violence as connected to, yet distinct, from sexual violence because the former is an attack on reproductive autonomy and self-determination.⁹⁰ A comprehensive gendered theory of harm must capture the complexity and multiplicative impact of harms that include but exceed sexual violence in order to address the gendered regimes, institutions, cultural norms, and intergenerational legacies of reproductive violence and its consequences.⁹¹ Colombia has taken a step in that necessary direction. In their 2022 Final Report, the Colombian Truth Commission acknowledged the armed conflict had involved sexual and reproductive violence against women and girls that violated their reproductive freedom and human rights.⁹² The acts of reproductive violence included forced abortions, forced pregnancies, and forced sterilization, among others.⁹³ This represented the first time a truth commission had explicitly researched and defined reproductive violence as a category of harm that cannot be conflated with sexual violence. Understanding the specificity of reproductive violence and its consequences—and how reproductive violence is frequently exacerbated in the context of armed conflicts—is crucial to the development of a gendered theory of harm and appropriate redress.⁹⁴

Earlier I discussed rank and privilege, which extended to pregnancy, birth, and childrearing. In her diary, Tania Nimeijer (a well-known Dutch combatant with the FARC) complained that commanders and their partners

89. Interview with Lilliana, *supra* note 68.

90. Ciara Laverty & Dieneke de Vos, *Reproductive Violence as a Category of Analysis: Disentangling the Relationship Between “the Sexual” and “the Reproductive” in Transitional Justice*, 15 INT’L J. TRANSITIONAL JUST. 616, 616 (2021).

91. Ruth Rubio-Marín, *Reparations for Conflict-Related Sexual and Reproductive Violence: A Decalogue*, 19 WILLIAM & MARY J. RACE, GENDER, & SOC. JUST. 69 (2012); Christie Edwards, *Forced Contraception as a Means of Torture*, in GENDER PERSPECTIVES ON TORTURE: LAW & PRACTICE 139 (2018); CHALLENGING CONCEPTIONS: CHILDREN BORN OF WARTIME RAPE AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (Kimberly Theidon, Dyan Mazurana & Dipali Anumol eds., 2023); Ramona Vijayarasa, *Putting Reproductive Rights on the Transitional Justice Agenda: The Need to Redress Violations and Incorporate Reproductive Health Reforms in Post-Conflict Development*, 15 NEW ENG. J. INT’L & COMPAR. L. 101 (2009).

92. See Catalina Martínez Coral, Q&A: *Reproductive Violence and the Colombia Truth Commission*, CTR. FOR REPROD. RTS. (Aug. 15, 2022), <https://reproductiverights.org/reproductive-violence-and-colombia-truth-commission/> [https://perma.cc/5ZZV-E37S].

93. *Id.*

94. See KIMBERLY THEIDON, LEGACIES OF WAR: VIOLENCE, ECOLOGIES AND KIN (2022); CHALLENGING CONCEPTIONS, *supra* note 91; Fionnuala Ní Aoláin’s prolific body of work on these issues.

were given “certain privileges,” one of which was having children.⁹⁵ This is consistent with what I was told. For the female *combatientes rasos*, forced abortions appear to have been common, including late-term abortions. In some instances, women were able to hide their pregnancy and give birth; for the rank and file, they were generally ordered to leave their babies with local villagers and were given “un degrado” (literally degradation, here meaning a sanction and extra labor) for having given birth.⁹⁶ This reflected a continuum of reproductive governance: in an interview with an individually demobilized combatant, she insisted that:

[I]n the guerrilla, when you’re having your period—that’s when they give you extra work. They tell you it’s just a nuisance, that it’s purely psychological. They say women complain because they want to use it as an excuse to stay in the house and be spoiled. They never give you pads, just a rag. You’re not allowed to rest.⁹⁷

The denial of physical pain or the distress of leaving one’s newly born baby bridges the affective and reproductive regimes: combatants were told to forget about their families, whom they might not see for years. They were also forbidden to form families within the guerrilla on the grounds that loyalty to the cause superseded all other commitments.⁹⁸

Yet, again there appears the indulged figure of the commanders’ sexual partners, and the contradictory nature of the guerrilla’s gendered regime. In some cases, these women were allowed to give birth: some took a two-month leave to deliver their babies to family members on the condition they then return to the front. In other interviews, I was told these women were allowed to keep and raise their children, but I do not know how common that was in practice. The resentment these privileges fomented was palpable in our conversations and was one leitmotif in former combatants’ disillusionment with the FARC and its elusive ideology of equality.

VI. THE FEMME FATAL: (FANTASIES OF) WOMEN AND WAR

Although a picture may be worth a thousand words, surely this one warrants a few more. The merging of sex, violence, eroticism, and a woman’s

95. See Tanja Nimeijer, *El Diario de la Holandesa en la Farc*, DENUNCIANDO (July 2006), <https://www.denunciando.com/politica-y-sociedad-85/25673-el-diario-de-la-holandesa-en-la-farc.html> [<https://perma.cc/54YZ-GLAC>]. I thank Herrera and Porch for introducing me to this source.

96. Interview with Celia, former FARC combatant, in Meta, Colombia (May 27, 2016).

97. *Id.*

98. See CHALLENGING CONCEPTIONS, *supra* note 91 (Phoebe Donnelly provides a fascinating counterexample in her work with Al-Shabab. Promises of wives and paternity was a key male recruitment strategy).



Figure 2. “Sexy Colombian Guerilla Costume” for sale by Mask World for 19,99 €.

potential for violence, all for the bargain price of 19,99 euros plus postage and handling. What does this collage invite the viewer to ponder?

In their book, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking about Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, Caron E. Gentry and Laura Sjoberg explore how people—researchers, politicians, journalists, psychologists, social scientists, security specialists, feminists, and others—explain women’s proscribed violence, arguing that the emplotment strategies can be characterized by the three archetypes in their title.⁹⁹ Noting that the image of violent women runs counter to inherited perceptions of women as maternal, emotional, and peace-loving, they offer a cross-cultural analysis of the tropes and their assumptions. Here I focus on the “whores,” those women whose violence is understood to be inspired by sexual dependence and depravity.¹⁰⁰ This approach blames women’s violence on the evils of female sexuality: framed as both extreme and brutal, symptomatic of erotic dysfunction, leaving these women as little more than men’s sexual pawns and possessions.¹⁰¹

99. CARON E. GENTRY & LAURA SJOBERG, *BEYOND MOTHERS, MONSTERS, WHORES: THINKING ABOUT WOMEN’S VIOLENCE IN GLOBAL POLITICS* (2015).

100. *Id.* at 17.

101. *Id.*

Importantly, their participation in political violence is seen as inherently transgressive of typical or ideal femininity.¹⁰²

Female former combatants are situated at the crossroads of various stigmas: transgressive for their use of violence, for their assumed libertinage, for pregnancies aborted and/or babies abandoned. As Jeimy Velásquez, a former FARC combatant insisted, “[p]eople tend to think that women who went to war were promiscuous. It is difficult to regain trust from society.”¹⁰³

Within the FARC, women—those who were pretty, well-spoken, and light complexioned—were considered especially apt for intelligence collection. Herrera and Porch quote a former combatant who assured them that, “we send a good-looking woman, flirtatious, with makeup, and she hooks up with the soldier. The woman is more intelligent than the soldier . . . and he falls in love with her . . . women are the ones who do this work best.”¹⁰⁴ Hovering throughout these comments and my interviews is the image of the guerrillera as a seductress, as apt to give a man a blow job as she is to blow off his head.

When (re)building civilian lives, these tenacious stereotypes plague the women. The multiple stigmas are not so easy to shake. Of the approximately fifty-three thousand combatants who have participated in the individual DDR program since 2001, 85 percent were male and 15 percent women.¹⁰⁵ These numbers do not match the demographics of the armed groups, certainly not the FARC. Where are the women?

As we have seen, in the individual DDR program former combatants were required to turn themselves in to the military. Several female former FARC combatants told me that they were sexually assaulted by the soldiers at the base, and that sort of experience goes viral on informal information networks. And what of those who made it past the soldiers? Again, being a female former combatant is not an easy identity to manage. In one neighborhood outside of Bogotá, I interviewed two women who had spent years in the FARC. Sonia and Sandra (their *nom de guerre*) were enrolled in the government’s DDR program, but only left their ramshackle house to attend the required meetings and pick up their meager stipend. They were terrified the neighbors would figure out who they were—what they had been—and thus lived in virtual clandestinity. Their situation was common. This resonates with Isabel Lopera-Arbeláez’s findings on rejection and “re-clandestination”¹⁰⁶:

102. See CHRIS COULTER, *BUSH WIVES AND GIRL SOLDIERS: WOMEN’S LIVES THROUGH WAR AND PEACE IN SIERRA LEONE* (2011); Nilsson & Thapar-Björkert, *supra* note 11 (discussing the media’s sexualization of female combatants in Sierra Leone).

103. Silva, *supra* note 37.

104. Herrera & Porch, *supra* note 70, at 621.

105. La Reintegración en Cifras (Reintegration in Figures), AGENCY FOR REINCORPORATION AND NORMALIZATION, <https://www.reincorporacion.gov.co/es/la-reintegracion/Paginas/cifras.aspx> [<https://perma.cc/X3UY-UKAR>] (see stats from 2019).

106. Isabel Lopera-Arbeláez, *Feminization of Female FARC-EP Combatants: From War Battle to Social-Economical Struggle*, 18 J. PEACEBUILDING & DEV. 5 (2023).

“A man with a gun could be seen as a strength, power, status, and family pride. On the contrary, women receive disapproval, shame, and dishonor. That forces them to remain in the private sphere.”¹⁰⁷ I suspect a number of women informally demobilized to avoid the stigma, a move which also means they did not benefit from the stipend, job training, or psychosocial assistance offered as part of the DDR program.

Finally, I want to consider transferable skills. For the male former combatants, their fighting prowess and combat experience make them good candidates for security guards, watchmen, and, regrettably, *sicarios* (paid assassins). The women? Much has been written about the Colombian obsession with female appearance and beauty pageant culture.¹⁰⁸ Note bene: the ad is for the “Sexy Colombian Guerrilla Costume,” partaking of an additional stereotype concerning Colombian women’s beauty as a prized national good.¹⁰⁹ As one former combatant told Lopera-Arbeláez, most of the female ex-combatants “are older women, they are old for everyone [and] we all have physical injuries from the war.”¹¹⁰ In the ZVTN, many women complained about aching backs from carrying heavy equipment, and the residual effects of improperly prescribed contraceptive devices and forced abortions.¹¹¹ As a result of combat, who accrues bodily capital and for whom is it depleted?¹¹²

VII. “LAS MUJERES SON MÁS PROBLEMÁTICAS”: THE WOMEN ARE MORE PROBLEMATIC

A few years ago, I was at a DDR center in Medellín, discussing different aspects of the program with the director. As our conversation wound around, he mentioned that his job was becoming increasingly difficult because the number of women demobilizing was on the rise. As he lamented, “[t]hese

107. *Id.*

108. Cf. Juan Forero, *OUT THERE: Colombia; Who’s the Fairest of Them All?*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 4, 2001), <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/04/style/out-there-colombia-who-s-the-fairest-of-them-all.html> [<https://perma.cc/Q2JS-4EKD>]; Marc C. Viedman, *Colombia: A Nation Obsessed With Beauty*, ODYSSEY (July 18, 2016), <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/colombia-nation-obsessed-with-beauty> [<https://perma.cc/6FSB-BFFH>]; *Colombia’s Beauty Pageant Obsession from All Angles*, RESOLVE (Apr. 1, 2010), <https://blog.livebooks.com/2010/04/colombias-beauty-pageant-obsession-from-all-angles/> [<https://perma.cc/P3J8-GM8T>]; Helen Nianias, *Miss Colombia: Miss Universe Winner Paulina Vega and Colombia’s Murky Culture of OTT Beauty Pageants*, INDEPENDENT (Jan. 26, 2015), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/miss-colombia-miss-universe-winner-paulina-vega-and-colombia-s-murky-culture-of-ott-beauty-pageants-10002895.html> [<https://perma.cc/479K-43YJ>].

109. See e.g., *id.*

110. Lopera-Arbeláez, *supra* note 106, at 11.

111. *Id.* at 4.

112. See Theidon, *supra* note 40 (discussing bodily capital and the political economy of militarized masculinity).

women are aggressive, they start fights. They're really tough! *Ay, las mujeres son más problemáticas* [the women are more problematic]."¹¹³ I am *not* convinced the women are more problematic but do think they may have different problems when they leave their armed group behind and attempt to (re)construct a civilian life.

Without wishing to diminish their agency or protagonism, many of these women do have guilt about the forced abortions, the killing in which they participated, and the families left behind. These issues require skilled therapists, not the psychosocial workshops that many deride for lacking sophistication and a grasp of what these women have experienced. There are also health complications and, I suspect, higher rates of certain cancers due to the reproductive violence visited upon many of the female combatants.¹¹⁴



Figure 3. "Diana Marcela, 28, has spent 13 years with Farc and hopes to finish high school and study photography after demobilising." Fernando Vergara, *Colombia: Farc's Female Fighters, Then and Now—In Pictures*, GUARDIAN (Sept. 16, 2016) (photo credit Associated Press).

113. Interview with the Director of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration site, in Medellín, Colombia (June 12, 2007).

114. *Id.*



Figure 4. “Johana, 19, has spent six years with Farc and wants to study nursing.” Fernando Vergara, *Colombia: Farc’s Female Fighters, Then and Now—In Pictures*, GUARDIAN (Sept. 16, 2016) (photo credit Associated Press).

Additionally, the underlying messages of the DDR program and laying down of weapons process remain steeped in gendered essentialisms, constituting another disservice to female former combatants. These programs focus on turning out seamstresses and hair stylists, leading one to conclude that while male combatants are demobilized, the females are re-domesticated.¹¹⁵ Take a look.

In these before and after photos, look beyond the spandex and lipstick to the age, educational level, and aspirations of these former combatants. The majority joined the FARC when they were in their teens; they may have finished primary school and perhaps a bit of high school.¹¹⁶ Yet they dream of careers in photography, nursing, law, engineering, and medicine: elusive dreams at odds with their rural origins and limited official education. For all the contradictory aspects of their gendered experiences in the FARC, they

115. *Id.*

116. See Miranda Alison, *Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam*, 6 CIVIL WARS 37 (2003) (exploring the insightful concept of “ambivalent empowerment” among women in armed groups).

had training that went beyond what their rural patriarchal origins might have afforded.¹¹⁷ What do we do with aspirations at odds with reality?

I met Claudia in the ZVTN, and after some small talk at the community center, she invited me to her quarters. She had been an active combatant and enjoyed it. She excelled at weaponry and loved the adrenaline rush of combat. We spoke for a bit before she made clear why she had invited me to her room: a friend had loaned her a laptop and computer manual, and she hoped I could help her learn “computación”—computer programming. With trepidation, I told her I would see what I could do. She led me to the dusty laptop on her small desk; it was ancient in computer years, and only certain keys still worked. She handed me the computer manual, which was vintage 2005. We sat beside one another, and I did my limited best. I was able to shift, return, and space, small but appreciated achievements. Opening a new page in Word, I suggested some phrases. She began to type, phonetically. Alphabet ceded to aural capture; words rendered as her ear took them in. Claudia could fight; she could not spell.

One of the key challenges of reinsertion into civil society are these aspirations that too few will be able to realize, as well as the shock of returning to the rural gender regime many women were eager to leave. In the ZVTN, I did see both men and women washing their clothes and cooking together. But as evening fell, the communal space in the center of the zone ceded to men, card games, loud music, and lively conversations over an occasional beer. The women were nowhere in sight, having returned to their quarters. The gendering of public space in full effect, almost as if their lives as fellow combatants steeped in “sameness” was a fading myth. Perhaps it was? As Cynthia Enloe eloquently reminds us, “patriarchy is ingeniously adaptable.”¹¹⁸

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

When speaking about her twenty-plus years of fighting, former FARC commander and current Senator Victoria Sandino stated that “[t]he war doesn’t care if you’re male or female.”¹¹⁹ I am not so sure, despite her conviction. The gender policies within the FARC were contradictory, and they certainly offered no refuge to members of the LGTBQ community. But peace is not gender neutral either; it is also replete with contradictions. So, what do we know? Research by the Institute for Inclusive Security highlights seven myths standing in the way of women waging peace.¹²⁰ These myths include the

117. *Id.* at 52.

118. CYNTHIA ENLOE, *BANANAS, BEACHES AND BASES: MAKING FEMINIST SENSE OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS* (2014).

119. Sandino, *supra* note 1.

120. ALICE NDERITU & JACQUELINE O’NEIL, *7 MYTHS IN THE WAY OF WOMEN’S INCLUSION* (2013).

idea that “women’s issues can wait until later,” after the urgency of halting war has passed.¹²¹ Another is the idea that “women’s issues are discrete, separable topics” that can be added or dropped without broader consequences.¹²² That may limit the creation of an inclusive peace. This we know. We also know that “gender” is not synonymous with “women,” such that addressing a full spectrum of gendered issues and inequalities is central to building an equitable peace.

In her literature review of gender and DDR, Wenche Iren Hauge concludes that “there is a lack of connection between policy discussions and academic findings and discourses.”¹²³ This resonates with other researchers who have noted that DDR programs do a disservice to women and girls by defining them a priori as non-combatants¹²⁴ or, in those cases in which women do participate in official DDR programs, training the women for gendered labor such as hairdressers or seamstresses.¹²⁵ I agree with these critiques and believe they apply to peace processes more generally; recall the image from Havana? Colombian feminists joked that when women appeared in the photos they were “un adorno”—a decoration.¹²⁶ Meaningful engagement remains a challenge: the language of a gender sub-commission implies an afterthought.

Reflecting its roots in security studies and technocratic expertise, DDR operates akin to a black box, constituting a process that is viewed in terms of inputs (combatants) and outputs (civilians) with scant knowledge of its internal workings; similarly, implementation and impact remain opaque, “success” metrics murky. Despite some rapprochement with the transitional justice field, DDR is still squarely part of security sector reform, such that the focus is on managing the “morass of malignant male muscle.”¹²⁷ Women are still an afterthought because they do not trigger the same security concerns.¹²⁸ DDR would benefit from an infusion of gender and queer studies, which could help to upset binary categories and the myopia they induce.¹²⁹ Male/

121. *Id.*

122. *Id.* at 7.

123. Wenche Iren Hauge, *Gender Dimensions of DDR—Beyond Victimization and Dehumanization: Tracking the Thematic*, 22 INT’L J. FEMINIST POL. 206, 222 (2020).

124. SUSAN MCKAY & DYAN MAZURANA, WHERE ARE THE GIRLS? GIRLS IN FIGHTING FORCES IN NORTHERN UGANDA, SIERRA LEONE AND MOZAMBIQUE: THEIR LIVES DURING AND AFTER WAR (2004); CAROLINE MOSE & FIONA CLARK, VICTIMS, PERPETRATORS OR ACTORS? GENDER, ARMED CONFLICT AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE (2001).

125. Kathleen Jennings, *The Political Economy of DDR in Liberia: A Gendered Critique*, 9 CONFLICT, SEC. & DEV. 475 (2009).

126. See Bell & O’Rourke, *supra* note 38 (critiquing the peace processes and the lack of women’s participation).

127. United Nations Development Fund for Women, *Getting It Right, Doing It Right: Gender and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration* 22 (2004).

128. Nilsson & Thapar-Björkert, *supra* note 11, at 115.

129. Roxani Krystalli, *Engage with Combatants as Interlocutors for Peace, Not Only as Authorities on Violence*, in FEMINIST SOLUTIONS FOR ENDING WAR 152 (Megan MacKenzie & Nicole Wegner eds., 2021).

female; combatant/noncombatant; victim/perpetrator; conflict/post-conflict: life is not so tidy. The spectrum of gendered identities exceeds any duality. The definition of combatant versus noncombatant has left too many women and girls reduced to camp followers, nurses, and cooks—folks ignored by DDR programs and the categories of beneficiaries they establish. Men are left as the assumed violent actors, rendering invisible those men who have not and do not practice violence because they escape the security threat framing. As for conflict and post-conflict: if we were to measure transitional justice and peacebuilding by the degree to which they assure guarantees of non-repetition, the scoreboard would be bleak. The exercise would also beg the question: just what sort of violence is not to be repeated? Certainly not gender-based or sexual violence, both of which generally spike during the “post-conflict” phase.¹³⁰

This leads full circle to consider the environment to which these women return. Gender regimes are tenacious and difficult to dismantle. Fionnuala Ni Aolain, Dina Francesca Haynes, and Naomi Cahn found that many women, including female former combatants, experience “peace” as a significant loss of gains they had won during armed conflict.¹³¹ This finding underscores the ways in which armed conflict can be experienced as both destructive and transformative: scripting new gendered opportunities and life projects via DDR and transitional justice processes could ensure that all genders experience peace as a dividend rather than a deficit.

In this article, I have focused on the gendered forms of guerrilla governance and their legacies in the lives of female former combatants. Rather than view female former combatants as a problem to be resolved—as “more problematic”—perhaps their experiences of war and its tentative aftermath provide a critique of the broader Colombian society to which they return. As several women insisted, “[w]e laid down our weapons, but we are not demobilized. The fight now is a political one. We have changed. This society has not.”¹³² If patriarchy is indeed ingenious, then feminist scholars and practitioners need to move beyond the liberal peacebuilding package and its masculinist default to insist on scripting new gendered opportunities for all those who engaged in armed combat, as well as for those who struggled even if they never held a gun.

130. For discussion of “post-violence violence” and the targeting of women and girls, see BOESTEN, *supra* note 11; Herrera & Bedoya, *supra* note 11; MEINTJES, TURSHEN & PILLAY, *supra* note 11.

131. NÍ AOLAÍN et al., *supra* note 10, at 41.

132. Silva, *supra* note 37.