



THE MISSING PIECE:

GENDER CONSIDERATIONS IN COLOMBIA'S REINTEGRATION EFFORTS

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THE MISSING PEACE:

Gender Considerations in Colombia's Reintegration Efforts

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
I. INTRODUCTION.....	7
<i>Methodology.....</i>	<i>10</i>
II. PEACE AND SECURITY IN COLOMBIA.....	12
<i>Conflict Analysis.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration in Colombia.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>The Role of Gender in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration</i>	<i>19</i>
III. THE EXPERIENCES OF REINTEGRATION IN COLOMBIA.....	25
<i>The men.....</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>The women.....</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Summary</i>	<i>52</i>
IV. CONCLUSION	53
APPENDIX	60
<i>Study Participants</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>DDR Challenges in Colombia.....</i>	<i>62</i>
<i>DDR Programs and Services in Colombia</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>A Visit to the ZVTN, La Paz.....</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>Internally Displaced Persons</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>Tables.....</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Figures</i>	<i>70</i>
ABBREVIATIONS	71
ENDNOTES.....	72

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“What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it.”

—Gabriel García Márquez

*“Campo y ciudad juntos porque vamos de la mano.
Todos somos colombianos.”*

—Jhon Esteban Perez (FARC rapper)

“Transcending violence is forged by the capacity to generate, mobilize, and build the moral imagination . . . Stated simply, the moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies.”

—John Paul Lederach

“Memory rescues from the past the traces of identity that it needs with respect to the present; therein lies its potential for change.”

—María Eugenia Vásquez Perdomo (M-19 and author)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Globally, over 60 disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes have taken place in more than 40 countries since 1979, and in some cases, countries have seen multiple iterations of DDR.^{1,2} From the 1990s onward, DDR processes, especially with international assistance, have grown rapidly. Though there has been a recognizable increase in the implementation of DDR processes (since the mid-1990s) in conflict settings, the existence of DDR programs is not necessarily an indicator for reaching or sustaining peace, as numerous examples (including Colombia) indicate.³ In fact, a 2008 article on the demobilization of the AUC in Colombia asked the very poignant question “Can Colombia demobilize its way to peace and stability?,”⁴ illustrating the benefits as much as the shortcomings of DDR processes.

And while the formal recognition of reintegration as a key component of DDR has been slow to catch on, the inclusion of a gender perspective has been selective at best. With the passing of UN Security Council resolution 1325 in 2000, more emphasis has been placed on ensuring DDR processes—in conjunction with post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding—are gender-sensitive.

In particular, the resolution called for greater awareness of women’s inclusion and participation in disarmament and demobilization because decisions in this respect affect female combatants and non-combatants alike. And global evidence suggests that the inclusion of a gender perspective is vital to reaching and sustaining peace, and a peace that enables both civilians and ex-combatants to enjoy their rights to fully participate and contribute politically, socially, culturally, and economically.⁵ This understanding of how gender plays out in conflict and post-conflict settings eventually translated into the creation of comprehensive manuals for DDR such as the UN’s Operational Guide for DDR processes.⁶

In Colombia, however, women have been virtually absent in peace processes. Despite their substantial contribution to and participation in different armed groups, Colombia’s female combatants and women have been neglected in peace negotiations and DDR processes until recently. During the peace negotiations from 2012–2016 in Havana between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government of Colombia, a Subcommittee on Gender was established in 2014.



FARC guerrilla fighters line up at the Front 34 Alberto Martinez encampment in Vegaez municipality, Antioquia department, Colombia on January 1, 2017. Colombia’s Congress passed a law granting an amnesty to the Marxist FARC rebels as part of the country’s peace deal, a development the government hailed as ‘historic.’ Photo: Raul Arboleda/AFP/Getty Images

It was a direct outcome of several consultations between the negotiating parties and representatives of women's rights groups and civil society organizations, as well as groups of victims. Their activism and advocacy ensured that gender would be mainstreamed across the peace agreement and would include relevant language and stipulations on women's rights. The participation of female ex-combatants from different countries played an equally important role, as their experiences and suggestions were streamlined in recommendations put forward to the negotiation delegations.⁷

Part of this success is based on the gradual growth of women's active participation in the public policy domain in Colombia, especially when provisions on women became anchored in the 1991 Constitution.⁸ Over the years, Colombia has translated international norms and values on women's rights into a comprehensive list of laws, policies, and national strategies. These documents underscore Colombia's commitment to normative frameworks that link gender equality to peace and security. In a practical sense, women's activism in peace and security ensures that on the sub-national and local level, international strategies are implemented that will benefit the reintegration of ex-combatants in the larger scheme of building peace in Colombia.

This development speaks to the gains women have been able to make to ensure their voices and concerns are being heard and addressed in peacemaking and peacebuilding. The peace negotiations in Havana therefore offered an opportune moment to reflect on past peace processes in Colombia and to examine the impact of gender-blind DDR processes on male and female ex-combatants.

Colombia has administered several peace processes over the past 30 years. With them came the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of tens of thousands of combatants. Given the scale of insurgency groups in Colombia's five decades of armed violence and the high percentage of women in these groups, it seemed pertinent to examine how the previous generations of ex-combatants (prior to 2016) experienced their respective DDR processes. More specifically, how did gender play into these experiences, and to what degree did female ex-combatants' experiences differ from men's?

The question of gender here is important for three reasons. First, Colombia's guerilla movements—like many armed groups in Latin America⁹—registered high numbers of female combatants (between 30 and 40 percent) in active combat and in leadership positions, which stands in sharp contrast to their absence in past peace processes. Second, understanding the intricacies of experiences inside armed groups can offer valuable insights for targeted activities and interventions for male and female ex-combatants. Last, any analysis that looks at the experiences of members of an armed conflict needs to take into account the differential impact of war, peace, and security on women, men, boys, and girls in that group because changes in power dynamics between and within the sexes have major implications for conflict and post-conflict settings.

The report explores these issues by analyzing and contextualizing the challenges and experiences of generations of Colombian ex-combatants. Their combined experiences indicate that overall, reintegration in Colombia continues to be a challenging endeavor, especially where gender is concerned. Indeed, except for a few female FARC combatants and politically active female ex-combatants, the understanding of gender equality¹⁰ and knowledge of women's rights as enshrined in Colombia's 1991 Constitution and in several legal documents and policies have not permeated beyond the borders of Colombia's urban centers. The periphery of Colombia is still a vast land of (missed) opportunities that has evaded state control; this much has been a political and socio-economic axiom for decades, and has—to a large degree—influenced DDR, especially reintegration efforts.

However, this report will extend beyond whether women and girls are simply being accounted for. In the absence of a clear understanding of the gendered nature of conflict and gender dynamics within armed groups, DDR programs generally tend to neglect the role of gender identities, whereby both men and women may struggle to live up to the expectations that their culture may place on them. In this context, there is the persistent, binary association of men as perpetrators of violence and woman as victims. When their experiences do not match the cultural expectation, men and women face difficulties with acceptance of their attitudes and behaviors.

This simplistic approach hurts men and boys and women and girls because reintegration strategies run the risk of perpetuating existing gender stereotypes that may aggravate tensions in the transitional phase from combatant to civilian.¹¹ Many, if not most, male ex-combatants discussed the urge and struggle to provide for their families. Coupled with notions of masculinity that valorize status, authority, and power, male ex-combatants are thus significantly more likely to engage in all forms of recidivism.^{12, 13}

Unlike their female counterparts, male ex-combatants never profoundly shed their identities as Colombian men. While joining an armed group was liberating for most women and did impact their gender identities, men have been clinging to an essential component of their identity: manhood. As such, they have been unable to see that their role as the sole provider is part of gendered expectations that render them easily vulnerable to frustration and open avenues for gangs to prey on ex-combatants' dissatisfaction. In particular, where notions of masculinity, such as power, status, and authority link directly to the identity of a guerilla or fighter, male ex-combatants are at high risk of recidivism.¹⁴ The former boy soldiers alluded to that fact, and



Comuna 13, Medellin, April 2017 photo: Alexandra Amling

it would partially explain why the Colombian agency in charge of reintegration projects that the population at risk for recidivism is 56 percent and mostly involves male ex-combatants.^{15, 16}

DDR processes, therefore, require consideration for the experiences of both male and female ex-combatants in order to design interventions and strategies that mitigate post-conflict interpersonal and communal conflicts,¹⁷ but also reduce the risk of providing opportunities that are based on gender stereotypes and might not match with the economic realities as well as the ex-combatants' aspirations and expectations. Stigmatization of former combatants compounds the problem of reintegration even further and evidently seems to hold Colombia hostage. Quite a lot of ex-combatants, especially those who were able to find and retain employment, said that despite their gains and accomplishments they will never feel completely integrated.

Arguably, decades of armed violence have left an indelible mark on people and contributed to the creation of a collective memory that favors one narrative at the expense of another. Navigating this maze where trauma converges with historical facts and individual experiences is no easy task, for either ex-combatants or non-combatants. When combined—such as ex-combatants feeling socially ostracized and simultaneously harassed by the military, targeted by another armed group, and unable to find work—these different layers

of stigma can make ex-combatants extremely vulnerable, with repercussions that extend into society at large.

This does not excuse past behavior by ex-combatants, especially when directed against civilian populations, but it goes to show the complexity of DDR and the vulnerabilities inherent in post-conflict settings. In a country with a past history of intractable conflict, stigma can seriously impede efforts toward better accountability, trust in governance, empowerment, and reconciliation. This is particularly true for women. Many female ex-combatants mentioned that despite the widespread gender inequality in civil society, women have had it slightly easier transitioning back in terms of job security, physical security, and community acceptance. Despite their different roles, interviewees told us, women were less linked to armed warfare and atrocities, which made it a little bit easier.

However, there was more nuance to it since women were often severely hampered in their ability to hold on to the identities they had morphed into in their armed groups, becoming fighters and/or commanders with a considerable amount of autonomy and authority that did not exist in Colombian society. For the most part, once demobilized, most women had to revert to culturally expected roles (as mothers and caregivers), thereby sharing the same problems many of their female comrades have faced in other countries. What stood out, however, was the way in which the female ex-combatants were dealing with these myriad problems. Instead of letting the outside world dictate all the terms, many female ex-combatants found ways to adjust without having to revert completely to their expected roles. For example, some female ex-combatants were able to reintegrate without having to fully submit to the gendered expectations by using their political education from the armed groups and past experiences to influence their communities and families.

The problem with reintegration programs that have been primarily measured against statistics that demonstrate the number of people completing the programs rather than honing in on gender relations and their impact on reintegration has been a recurrent issue. In combination with other factors that influence and determine the personal outcome of reintegration, the transition from combatant to civilian is far more complex and long-term than a timed program can capture. After all, reintegration is not an isolated phase of time in a country that has experienced decades of violence and illicit activities. It is part and parcel of a process of recovery, reconstruction, rehabilitation, and reconciliation.

Developing and implementing programs that take all of these issues into account requires knowledge and capacity that is often unavailable or put aside at the expense of more pressing issues, as was identified by several ex-combatants. Furthermore, a peace agreement with gender-relevant stipulations is not worth the paper it is written on if the implementation of them is nonexistent. Indeed, talking to people in Colombia who have worked with the FARC in the past few months indicated that there is very little capacity among the staff of various entities to ensure gender is properly mainstreamed in all activities.

Last, some of the FARC camps are located in very remote areas, making it difficult for any service provider to access them and deliver the services and programs promised to these former fighters. Anecdotal evidence from Colombia suggests also that as time has passed and the reality has settled in, the political vigor of the FARC has dialed down considerably. Experience from refugee camps worldwide indicates that restriction of mobility often creates economic, social, and political paralysis. And the FARC will not be immune to the monotony of camp life if viable alternatives remain unattainable. Such frustrations coupled with uncertainty, as recently reported to the author, have led to cases of domestic violence inside camps which suggest that the FARC's feminist rhetoric needs to take root among its ranks first if they intend to change the attitudes and behaviors that have driven violence against women in Colombia.

Though such violence may speak predominantly to the problem of violent masculinities and the lack of programs that could help transform these gender identities into positive masculinities, women who have been reunited with their children or are currently giving birth to children have also been involved in cases of violence, mostly against their children. Having fought in the conflict and having never embraced the role of mother or caregiver, women—like men—appear to struggle tremendously with the transformation of their gender roles and gender identities.

As such, looking backward to move forward is essential for implementing peace and driving reconciliation in Colombia. While not insurmountable, a few key issues stand out that offer insights on how to drive the implementation of the peace process with the FARC but also on how to advance progress for DDR processes generally. The following points are based on the findings themselves as well as conversations with those involved in DDR in Colombia. While the general guideline of the UN divides DDR activities into “gender-aware” and “female-specific,” the authors refrained from this distinction because “gender-specific” allows the inclusion of issues that pertain specifically to male or female ex-combatants and does not elevate the needs of one group at the expense of another. The “gender-aware” recommendations, on the other hand, list ideas that apply to both male and female ex-combatants without suggesting ex-combatants have experienced gender-specific discrimination. Rather, the recommendations require awareness of the differential needs of male and female ex-combatants:

RECOMMENDATIONS

Design gender-aware programs

- Validate and enforce gender capacity and knowledge among implementation teams
- Evaluate prevalent gender norms in civil society to mitigate tension between ex-combatants and resettlement communities
- Evaluate gender-specific vulnerabilities as they pertain to masculinity and femininity in order to manage expectations of ex-combatants vis-à-vis civil society and the labor market
- Create space and forums for active political participation, especially for female ex-combatants, to ensure women are not forced to revert to reproductive roles only
- Provide workshops and trainings to prepare long-term ex-combatants for living in a modernized society

Design gender-specific programs

- Assess and document the contributions of women and girls to armed groups to ensure programs do not reinforce gender stereotypes or jeopardize the physical and economic integrity of women and girls in post-conflict settings
- Engage female ex-combatants at all levels of camp management and community outreach
- Implement programs that address and mitigate causes of intimate partner violence and domestic abuse in demobilization camps, including training on violence against children for male and female ex-combatants
- Support male ex-combatants through workshops on positive masculinities

Address structural inequalities and grievances upon which armed groups have historically thrived

- Invest in educational programs, especially higher education (where applicable)
- Ensure physical security for ex-combatants and their communities
- Ensure employment opportunities, vocational training, skills, and expectations match economic realities
- Provide infrastructure projects that link remote areas of demobilization with urban centers to ensure equal access to markets
- Expand and enforce community outreach to eradicate stigma against ex-combatants

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I. INTRODUCTION



*FARC guerrillas spend their final days as an armed group inside a demobilization camp and carry on with their daily routine as usual, remaining optimistic about the future and prospects of peace before reintegrating into society.
Photo: Kaveh Kazemi/Getty Images*

“ Thank you for addressing the issue of reintegration. . . . We are grateful to you for taking us into consideration and for your concern for the process. ”

—Male ex-combatant (AUC), Córdoba, March 2017

“ It is a pleasure for us to tell you our story, and to have you know that those who participate in this struggle are men and women of flesh and bone, that we are people with feelings and a very big heart. Our hearts ache when we see children die of malnutrition or when we see people who are sick and in need of help waiting at the hospital entrance and not getting any help because they are poor. That pains us, and those are the very things that gave us even more purpose, because we wanted to continue in the struggle in order to change that. Those things outraged us and gave us the courage to continue in the struggle. ”

—Female FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

“ I would like for . . . countries . . . to see the reality, but not through the existing media outlets. I would like for them to see us for what we are, to see what we want, to understand how we dream of changing Colombia. Colombia is a free country, with equal social rights. I would really like for the world to see us in our true light. ”

—Female FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

On September 26, 2016, one of the longest-standing insurgencies in the Western hemisphere, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), signed a historic peace agreement with Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos. A symbolic handshake in Cartagena between the leader of the FARC, Rodrigo Londoño (alias Timochenko), and President Santos sealed the end of more than five decades of armed violence in Colombia. It took four years of negotiations in Havana, brokered by Norway, to get to that point. The challenge now is to implement the peace agreement.

This particular peace process stands out not only for ending decades of armed violence that has displaced millions and led to the death and disappearance of hundreds of thousands of civilians; it also featured women as active participants during the negotiations. Historically, women have been virtually absent in Colombia's peace processes. Despite their substantial contribution to and participation in different armed groups, Colombia's female combatants and women from civil society organizations have been neglected in peace negotiations and DDR processes until recently.

During the peace negotiation process in Havana, a Subcommittee on Gender was established in 2014. It was a direct outcome of several consultations between the negotiating parties and representatives of women's rights groups and civil society organizations as well as groups of victims. Their activism and advocacy safeguarded stipulations on gender that were mainstreamed across the peace agreement and would include relevant language and provisions on women's rights.

This development speaks to the gains women have been able to make to ensure their voices and concerns are being addressed in peacemaking and peacebuilding. The peace negotiations in Havana therefore offered an opportune moment to a) reflect on past peace processes in Colombia, and b) examine how gender has affected the DDR process for male and female ex-combatants.

Colombia has administered several peace processes over the past 30 years. With them came the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of tens of thousands of combatants. Given the scale of insurgency groups in Colombia's five decades of armed violence in general, and the Colombian socio-economic context in particular, it seemed pertinent to examine how the previous generations of ex-combatants (prior to 2016) experienced their respective DDR processes. More specifically, how did gender play into these experiences, and to what degree did female ex-combatants' experiences differ from men's? The question of gender here is important for three reasons.

1. Colombia's guerilla movements registered high numbers of female combatants, whether in a support or combat role. While Colombia is in no way unique in having women and girls among the ranks of its armed groups, the percentage in active roles as combatants and in leadership positions stands in sharp contrast to their absence in past peace processes.

2. The ability to harness the experiences of male and female ex-combatants is increasingly at the heart of evaluation and design of DDR processes. Understanding the nuances behind the motivations for people to join armed groups or understanding the opportunities that armed groups provided can offer valuable insights for targeting activities and interventions for male and female ex-combatants.
3. Any analysis that looks at the experiences of members of an armed conflict needs to take into account the differential impacts of war, peace, and security on women, men, boys, and girls in that group. The way interpersonal relations as well as power dynamics between and within the sexes are shaped by gender norms and gender stereotypes has major implications for conflict and post-conflict settings.

Approaching the study of DDR processes in Colombia from a gender perspective allows us to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the activities, experiences, challenges, and needs of male and female ex-combatants and how these have differed between and among them. For example, armed groups may exploit or manipulate existing gender stereotypes for recruitment purposes, but they may also offer new avenues for women and girls to escape oppressive gender hierarchies in society. Even if the armed group holds misogynistic views and adheres to existing gender stereotypes, female ex-combatants may experience and perceive their roles very differently from how civil society and their male comrades do. Underestimating, or worse, neglecting these experiences can have negative, long-lasting consequences for individuals and how they relate to society at large in post-conflict settings and DDR processes.

What that difference in experiences was, or rather, whether male and female ex-combatants perceived any differences, form the theoretical basis of this report. To the latter point, male and female ex-combatants often did not think of gender-specific differences in their group settings. In fact, most ex-combatants in this study did not say in their own words that the (in)ability to properly reintegrate was based on gender norms. Despite the lack of gender-specific vocabulary, though, the concepts were basically known; all ex-combatants were technically aware of the permutations of gender identity and relations that are seemingly endless given the different stages combatants go through.

As such, individual accounts and anecdotes indicated that while most ex-combatants did indeed share similar experiences and challenges, gender often amplified these experiences. For example, security was identified as crucial across most focus groups. Peeling off the different layers, for men the gender-specific security concern was mostly associated with their physical integrity as male ex-combatants. For women, security was more closely associated with fears of having to revert to traditional roles or being ostracized from communities because they were female ex-combatants.

In short, gender influenced the way experiences and challenges were lived and interpreted differently despite their similarities. The way gender determined but also amplified the outcomes of DDR indicated that in the absence of a gender perspective in the previous peace agreements, women were on average more disadvantaged because their needs were not adequately addressed. However, gender-specific here does not exclusively apply to women. Men and boys underwent reintegration programs that neither questioned nor addressed notions of masculinity beyond, perhaps, notions of violent masculinities. It is precisely this failure to understand that gender-sensitive DDR is more than just ensuring women and girls are not being neglected that shows how little is understood about the roles and characteristics ascribed to men and women in any given society.

However, this report is not an evaluation of institutions or interventions that deal with DDR in Colombia. While the services obviously play an important role when it comes to reintegration, the intention of this report is to capture the personal experiences and challenges of ex-combatants as a way to complement reports that evaluate the technical aspects of service delivery, such as the number of ex-combatants attending school, recidivism rates, job placements, etc.

This kind of data, while informative, often leaves out the nuances of gendered experiences of DDR that go beyond short-term assistance. Moreover, such technical reports do not always account for socio-economic developments and geographical realities as well as deep-rooted historical grievances that played a big role in the accounts of the ex-combatants interviewed for this study. In fact, the lack of understanding around the history, structure, and culture of each armed group often seemed to have led to the creation of reintegration packages that were basic in nature and lacked long-term strategies.

The sample, while small, constitutes a reasonable illustration of the impact of DDR on combatants, especially where gender considerations were neglected. In fact, the findings for this research project correspond with global data on DDR experiences from other geographical contexts, especially where women and girls are concerned. For the Colombian context, this meant that the provision of short-term services in past DDR processes ignored the fact that male and female ex-combatants have differing needs. In addition, female ex-combatants had embraced new roles that contrasted with the roles that society expected them to take on. Underestimating such dynamics has had long-term consequences for many female ex-combatants.

Methodology

This report is based on 13 focus groups that took place over a span of four weeks in March and April of 2017 in different locations in the departments of Valle del Cauca, Antioquia, Córdoba, Sucre, and Cesar in Colombia. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the exact locations in these departments will not be mentioned.

An initial scoping exercise to validate the idea of the research project and to identify important stakeholders took place in August of 2016. Meetings and conversations in Cali and Bogotá with representatives of the Colombian reintegration agency (called ACR at the time), academics, and civil society as well as women's organizations suggested that focus group discussions would be a useful tool for gauging the gendered aspects of reintegration in Colombia.

The questionnaire was developed by the research team and vetted by the PASO Colombia team in Cali to ensure the questions were both relevant to the Colombian context and also coherent. Indeed, a few questions had to be reworded, as certain vocabulary—such as gender—was deemed incomprehensible to those who have never heard of certain concepts. The research team also did not want to thwart responses by using contested terminology.

To understand the dimensions of DDR in Colombia and the gendered nature of that experience, the ex-combatants were asked about the time spent in their respective communities, how they left their armed group, to what degree they felt



ZVTN "La Paz", Cesar, April 2017 photo: Alexandra Amling

integrated in their community, whether they felt treated differently due to their sex or gender, what programs they were able to access, the difficulty level of finding work, and what they think was missing or should be added that could have made reintegration easier.

The qualitative data was supported by demographic information and three questions that asked the ex-combatants to rank their experiences from one to ten for the difficulty of transitioning to civilian life in their respective communities (1 – not difficult at all; 10 – very difficult), the degree to which training matched the ex-combatants' aspirations (1 – not difficult at all; 10 – very difficult), and the difficulty of finding work (1 – not difficult at all; 10 – very difficult).

With support from PASO Colombia, academics from the National University and Javeriana University in Bogotá, local activists, and a network of personal contacts, the participants for the focus groups were randomly selected. All focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and translated; confidential information was anonymized or erased by the research team prior to transcription and translation.

Once translated, the texts of each focus group were uploaded to the qualitative research software NVivo. To avoid bias, two researchers coded the focus groups separately to look for patterns and themes. After an initial comparison of the data, the researchers independently refined the variables once more. After this second round of coding, the researchers agreed on a set of factors (see Table 2, page 32) that indicated the ease or difficulty of reintegrating in Colombia.

In total, 42 ex-combatants and 10 active (at the time) FARC combatants were interviewed in these focus groups; 28 men and 24 women. The FARC members have been counted in the demographic data tables 6 and 7, but the findings of these two focus groups with the FARC will be discussed in a separate chapter because a) they did not identify as ex-combatants, and b) they had very specific views on their roles moving forward with the peace process.

A few last observations; since the focus of this paper is on the experience of reintegration, information on reasons and mechanisms by which combatants demobilized will only be referenced where they pertain directly to factors that describe the ease or difficulty of reintegrating. The reason the question was included in the focus groups was as a tool to start the conversation and ease the participants in.

The research team recognizes the inherent limitations of qualitative research and focus groups; collecting anecdotes and memories will always be tainted with potential flaws. By expressing their opinions, ex-combatants expressed their feelings and emotions, especially in situations where some of them spoke about their experiences for the first time. These nuances, however, complement global and national research by giving a human voice to the mechanical aspects of DDR.

Last, the data collected here is not intended to whitewash Colombia's armed groups; neither does it attempt to gloss over serious human rights violations. In fact, many participants were honest about what they perceived as missteps during their membership in an armed group. In many ways, it is the sincere hope of most ex-combatants—especially women—to have their voices heard and added to the national narrative of five decades of armed violence that look toward inclusive reconciliation rather than backwards at past crimes.

Quite a lot of ex-combatants have never been able to talk about their experiences with reintegration because of the stigma associated with being a former guerilla or paramilitary. This applied almost equally to male and female ex-combatants, although female ex-combatants with political aspirations in particular felt the double burden of being women and ex-combatants.

This report is an attempt to shed more light on these personal histories and to home in on the gendered dimensions of these experiences, and to contextualize them in the broader scheme of DDR in Colombia. As such, the report is as much a testament to decades of conflict, peace, and security as it is a stage to give voice to those who retreated into the shadows of society after demobilization.

II. PEACE AND SECURITY IN COLOMBIA

A close-up photograph of a woman's open palm, held against a dark background. The palm is the central focus, with the word 'Peace' written on it in dark ink. The letters are thick and slightly blurred, suggesting they were just written. A hand holding a black marker is visible on the right side of the frame, with the tip of the marker just finishing the letter 'e'. The lighting is warm and focused on the hand, creating a sense of intimacy and hope.

A woman writes the word 'Peace' on the palm of her hand during the 'Journey for peace in Colombia', in Medellin, Antioquia department, on June 11, 2014. Colombia's government and the country's second largest guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), announced on the eve they have opened peace talks, which adds to those taking place with the FARC. Photo: Raul Arboleda/AFP/Getty Images

The history of DDR in Colombia cannot be understood without also having an understanding of the political and social dynamics of armed violence that produced so many armed groups in the country over a period of more than 50 years. In addition, it is important to understand the various components of DDR, and specifically how the lack of gender-specific efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants in Colombia has developed and shaped the experiences of ex-combatants over several decades.

Several peace agreements resulted in the dissolution of guerilla and paramilitary groups while other groups continued their armed struggle, at times intensifying the violence in their pursuit of control over territories and illegal activities. The political and economic developments within Colombia as well as external factors such as the growing influence of the United States in Colombia often influenced the terms by which armed groups demobilized and reintegrated into civilian life. While only a few administrations were able to strike peace agreements, the approach of these governments toward peace and security in Colombia varied greatly. In addition, as DDR processes were rolled out globally, the way the Colombian government went about reintegrating ex-combatants changed, including the role of women in these processes.

The following paragraphs in this chapter will therefore address the history of the conflict, including its armed actors and the peace processes, paying particular attention to the role of gender. The chapter will conclude with a detailed analysis of DDR processes.

Ultimately, the goal of these subchapters is to discuss the theoretical concepts underlying DDR processes as well as the technical, political, and social challenges associated with the implementation of DDR processes, particularly as they relate to the gendered dimensions of peace and security. It is a way to contextualize the individual experiences of both male and female ex-combatants in Colombia in a set of shared experiences that demonstrate similarities as much as differences globally but also across generations of armed groups in Colombia itself.

Conflict Analysis

“The Colombian context is singular in its kind, in which war and peace conflate in the same protagonists, the same victims, and the same spaces. Those who support peace remain alongside those who continue to insist on war.”¹⁸

Five decades of armed violence have taken a heavy toll on Colombia’s populations, although rural, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian communities have disproportionately suffered the most.¹⁹ The violence that has engulfed Colombia at different stages and to varying degrees over the past 50 years has produced numerous non-state armed actors. Among them are leftist guerilla groups and right-wing paramilitaries whose actions have led to the disappearances, deaths, and displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.²⁰ The detrimental impact of the conflict on women²¹ is clearly indicated by the high number of women and children constituting more than three-quarters of Colombia’s internally displaced persons (IDPs).²²

Grievances that triggered the formation of and recruitment into guerilla groups are perceived or real socio-economic and political inequalities which include but are not limited to lack of political participation and access to land. For many female ex-combatants, in their own words, the armed groups often provided a space of emancipation as well as escape from gender-based violence and social marginalization.

In the absence of governance structures and services, the FARC in particular became the de facto ruler of large swaths of territory in Colombia. Coupled with the illicit trade routes traversing communities, civilians in these disputed territories—predominantly along the Pacific coast²³—were often caught in the crossfire between the FARC, other armed groups, and the Colombian army.

Many communities were exposed to different forms of violence, often happening at the same time or at intervals, such as massacres of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, selective and targeted assassinations of human rights defenders, sexual and gender-based violence, extortion, kidnappings, forced recruitment, mutilation, internal displacement, and forced disappearances.

At the same time, the dominant focus on victimhood has obscured our understanding of the number of civilians who resisted by non-violent means during times of war, especially in rural populations.²⁴ Recently published research demonstrates multiple examples of civilian resistance in Colombia that was based on “social cooperation and organization.”²⁵ The ability to understand their environment enabled many communities to navigate the set of armed actors that often tried to control their lives.²⁶

As such, the multidimensional nature of the conflict(s) explains why peace initiatives have had only gradual impact. On the other hand, however, the “drugs-and-violence prism through which the world has tended to view Colombia”²⁷ had relegated the FARC

ARMED GROUPS IN COLOMBIA:

1964: ELN

(Ejército Nacional de Liberación – National Liberation Army)

1965: EPL

(Ejército Popular de Liberación – Popular Liberation Army)

1966: FARC

(Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) – became FARC-EP (Ejército del Pueblo – People's Army) in 1982

1974: M-19

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

1982: PRT

(Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores de Colombia – Workers Revolutionary Party of Colombia)

1984: MAQL

(Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame – Quintin Lame Armed Movement)

1993: CRS

(Corriente de Renovación Socialista – Current for Socialist Renovation)

1997: AUC

(Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) formed as paramilitary groups (“self-defense groups”) consolidate into one umbrella organization

to the role of rebel force of narco-traffickers and terrorists that had to be defeated militarily, thereby inhibiting the government from taking the approach of a negotiated settlement for many years. The one-sided focus on demobilization that lacked comprehensive mechanisms to reincorporate many former combatants contributed equally to the continuation of violence despite several peace agreements that were reached with armed groups in the 1990s and 2000s. The very existence of criminal gangs like the BACRIM (Spanish for “bandas criminales”) is a testament to the failure of former peace agreements to dismantle groups not just by the numbers.^{28, 29} On 24 August 2016, the government and the FARC finally signed a comprehensive peace agreement, but it remains to be seen to what degree peace and stability will finally take root in Colombia.

The armed groups

“Government efforts to deal with Colombia’s armed actors have persisted nearly as long as the conflict itself—with intermittent success in varying degrees.”³⁰

The modern history of Colombia is a complex web of multiple violent confrontations between several non-state armed groups and, at times, the Colombian army. No single factor can be ascribed to have triggered the insurgencies. However, the origin of organized political violence can be traced back to La Violencia, a term that describes a de facto civil war between the two dominant Liberal and Conservative parties between 1946 and 1960. The initially small-scale skirmishes turned more violent when Liberal party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was killed in 1948.

While the establishment of the National Front in 1958 formally united the Liberals and Conservatives in a power-sharing agreement until 1974, the conflict left a substantial power vacuum in remote areas of Colombia that was slowly filled by the emerging guerilla movements in the 1960s. In fact, Colombia’s major leftist guerilla movements—notably the FARC (1964), the ELN (1964), the EPL (1967), and the M-19 (1973³¹)—evolved out of armed peasant self-defense groups that have

their origins in the late 1950s. Over time, these groups were molded into organized, armed groups. The elitist nature of the political system, which foreclosed on the opportunity for other political parties to compete for elections, aggravated existing grievances and subsequently strengthened the formation of the guerilla movements.³²

As active opponents to the political-economic structure of Colombia, the guerilla movements drew support mostly from rural areas and marginalized communities, with the exception of the M-19, which was primarily urban. Due to their political and socialist agendas, many leftist groups attracted women to join their cause, both as fighters and in support roles. Although they differed in approach and strategy,³³ a common thread that made guerilla movements attractive for women was political emancipation (especially in the case of the M-19),³⁴ freedom from sexual and gender-based violence,³⁵ and self-preservation. Despite having many similarities, the different leftist armed groups never succeeded in forming a united front.³⁶ When they tried, lack of coordination,³⁷ resentment,³⁸ or assassinations weakened their positions.

At the same time, sympathy for the movements, even if only tangential, made many human rights defenders and social activists targets of paramilitary groups. The assassination of thousands of members of the Patriotic Union (Unión Patriótica; or UP), which was established as part of an otherwise failed peace process with the FARC-EP in 1984, is a particularly gruesome example of how people with a social(ist) agenda have been strategically killed over the years.³⁹

The move from reintegration to reincorporation as well as the rejection of the FARC to use the term demobilization was a strategic one:

“The concept of ‘reintegration’ is not in the agreement either. The Havana agreement removes itself from the government’s reintegration policy to such an extent that it creates a new commission. The new commission is called Consejo de Reincorporación Nacional [National Reincorporation Council]. The Havana agreement understands the concept of political, social and economic reintegration according to FARC’s interests, and that’s what we’re going for. . . . In essence, the agreement preserves the organization’s foundations: unity of the FARC family. We are a family and this very fact is contained in the agreement.”

—Male FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

Armed violence which had gradually intensified between 1970 and 1980 reached a peak in the 1990s.⁴⁰ In fact, both the ELN and the FARC did not turn into a recognizable force until the mid-1980s, roughly the same time the militia groups that had initially been established by landowners merged into the self-defense paramilitary group AUC, commonly referred to as auto-defensas, in 1997.⁴¹ The track record of human rights abuses by all parties to the conflict is abysmal, although the atrocities committed by the AUC are considered especially heinous as government figures and branches of the Colombian armed forces are said to have been involved with and connected to the AUC.⁴²

The growth in organized political violence in the 1970s and 1980s is attributable to the formalization of local drug cartels, whose contestations over control of drug trafficking routes often infringed on territories held by different armed groups, thereby subjecting rural populations to continuous spirals of violence.⁴³ Without state presence or law enforcement, women and girls were particularly affected by forced displacement, forced prostitution, and sexual slavery, pushing especially Afro-Colombian and indigenous women to be “at risk of physical and cultural extinction.”⁴⁴ Due to the intractability of the conflict and the inability to establish law and order in areas contested by all armed groups, both police forces and the military often disputed the jurisdictional reach of their respective entity, thereby creating a culture of impunity for perpetrators.⁴⁵ In many cases, state security forces were complicit in sexual and gender-based crimes.

During the disarmament and demobilization of several armed groups between 1990 and 1994, such as the M-19, the EPL, the PRT, the MAQL, and the CRS, a total of 5,000 guerilla fighters⁴⁶ were demobilized. The AUC officially dissolved under the 2005 Justice and Peace Law, which led to the demobilization of about 30,000 combatants and the establishment of a state-sponsored reintegration program from 2003 to 2006. The program eventually became the Colombian Agency for Reintegration, or ACR (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración), in 2011. Since May 29, 2017, the ACR has been renamed the Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization, or ARN (Agencia Colombiana para la Reincorporación y la Normalización).⁹

At the same time, the guerilla insurgencies of the FARC and the ELN as well as paramilitary groups continued their activities, and at times registered considerable growth. In particular, the ranks of the FARC fighters increased rapidly by the end of the 1990s, exceeding 20,000 by the year 2000.⁴⁷ Almost half of that fighting force consisted of female combatants.⁴⁸ Brittain argued that given the relatively equal footing of women in combatant and non-combatant roles, the FARC represented a form of political participation and empowerment that was unparalleled, especially at the community level in rural, remote areas.⁴⁹ Historically, though, the M-19 has sported more female leaders and top commanders than any other Colombian guerilla group.⁵⁰ Despite this significant representation of women across the armed groups, women’s contribution toward changing gender dynamics and women’s status remained relatively peripheral until the peace negotiations in Havana from 2012 to 2016.

a Given the timeframe of the study, the report will use the abbreviation for the ACR when talking specifically about the experiences of the ex-combatants interviewed for this study. Where appropriate, the study will indicate that the ACR has since been renamed to Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización. In addition, the author will use the term reintegration because it is a widely used concept and term in the DDR processes. However, when discussing the current peace process with the FARC, the term reincorporation will be used not only to pay respect to the FARC guerillas who welcomed us in their camp in the department of Cesar and spent a full day explaining their political agenda as well as sharing their stories and experiences, but also to demonstrate that the ongoing developments in Colombia are reflected in this paper as much as possible.

“ The 1970s and 1980s saw a big wave of liberation movements, and there were many women engaged in militant, leftist movements. But in the 1990s, when gender consciousness grew stronger [among female combatants], many women embraced feminism and left the militant groups . . . because the armed groups were so patriarchal in language. . . . Us women, we were thinking about a new society [and] something different. . . . but we replicated so [many mistakes]. That’s when we [the women] said, “No, if this is the society and the “new” Colombia, then everything will stay the same. ”

—Female ex-combatant (ELN), Valle de Cauca, April 2017

So far, the political ideas of the FARC have not resonated well with the Colombian electorate. In the 2018 Congressional elections, the FARC secured less than one percent of the vote. Due to harassment, killings, and the health issues of the FARC’s leader, Rodrigo Londoño, the FARC suspended its campaign for the presidential elections. These results are an indication of the challenges the FARC will face as the peace process unfolds and the group is confronted with a civil society that has been deeply polarized for decades. At the time of writing, a fragile peace is holding in Colombia and the FARC has officially disarmed as of June 2017.⁵¹

“ As my comrade was saying, we are completely willing to build peace, because peace is not built out of nothing. This conflict’s end is a very important turning point and a priority, because silencing our guns is huge, of course. . . . We will remain united and working as a political party. That’s what the agreements were all about. . . . Weapons were key to reach this point. If no one had taken up arms, we would have probably never reached the point we’re at right now, this peace process and all. . . . Weapons were the engine that brought us here [this historic moment]. . . . We fought to put an end to everything that breeds inequality in Colombia.. ”

—Female FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

The peace processes

*“ Ultimately, the quality of the peace depends on the quality of the process. And the quality of the process depends on policy. ”*⁵²

Four administrations were able to reach peace agreements with armed groups in Colombia, including guerilla movements and paramilitaries. The administrations of Presidents Virgilio Barco (1986–1990) and César Gaviria (1990–1994) formally ended the leftist insurgencies of the M-19, the EPL, the PRT, the MAQL, and the CRS. The paramilitary umbrella organization AUC demobilized under the presidency of Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) between 2003 and 2006. More recently, former President Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2016) signed a peace agreement with the FARC on August 24, 2016; three attempts to negotiate peace with the FARC preceded this historic moment in Colombia. The government began peace negotiations with the ELN in Ecuador in February 2017, but at the time of writing, these negotiations had been suspended due to violations of a ceasefire agreement.⁵³

Multiple legal instruments and frameworks⁵⁴ have governed efforts and processes to negotiate peace and demobilize armed groups in Colombia.⁵⁵ Depending on the ruling administration, however, each of the laws have been subject to amendment, termination, or renewal.⁵⁶ The laws that formed the backbone of the agreements in the 1980s and 1990s predominantly focused on demobilization processes rather than on reintegration efforts.

None of these former processes included a gender perspective, and in the negotiations that took place in the 1990s, only one woman was a signatory. This left the role of female combatants in their respective groups largely unrecognized and neglected and marginalized

Gender perspectives are understood as the differences in needs and challenges of men, women, boys, and girls which are based on the social construction of gender roles and norms. In DDR processes as well as in relation to other aspects of the implementation of peace agreements, these differences are often missing or not properly identified, resulting in women and girls not being able to access services and benefits. In other words, if the distinct roles men, women, boys, and girls play in conflict are not being assessed and analyzed, peace processes run the risk of continuing or exacerbating gender-based inequalities by both violent and non-violent means.

most of them after demobilization. The inclusion of a gender perspective, however, is vital to ensuring sustainable peace that enables both civilians and ex-combatants to enjoy their rights to fully participate and contribute politically, socially, culturally, and economically.⁵⁷ While the Colombian women's movement is diverse and cuts across ethnic, racial, cultural, and socio-economic differences, women working toward peace in Colombia share a common belief in the "need to achieve a negotiated settlement to the armed conflict and [have been] encouraging international donors to concentrate their aid on development projects rather than on the military sector."⁵⁸

Women's exclusion from formal peace negotiations eventually changed in 2014 when the negotiations that took place in Havana between the FARC and the government included a Subcommittee on Gender.⁵⁹ This committee facilitated meetings between victims of the conflict and the negotiating parties while simultaneously ensuring that the final agreement would include gender-specific language and stipulations. Even though women's participation at the negotiation table was not on par with that of their male counterparts,⁶⁰ their presence was still above global averages. By 2015, the FARC delegation included more women, reflecting the percentage of women in the armed group.⁶¹ This is considered to have set a global standard that could be adapted for other peace processes.⁶²

Aside from the official negotiations, women and women's organizations were involved in consultative workshops and forums across Colombia and in Havana,⁶³ ensuring their voices and concerns reached the main negotiating parties.⁶⁴ The participation of female ex-combatants from different countries played an equally important role, as their experiences and suggestions were streamlined in recommendations put forward to the negotiating delegations.⁶⁵

Part of this success is based on the gradual growth of women's active participation in the public policy domain in Colombia, especially when provisions on women became anchored in the 1991 Constitution.⁶⁶ Over the years, Colombia has translated international norms and values on women's rights into a comprehensive list of laws, policies, and national strategies. These documents underscore Colombia's commitment to normative frameworks that link gender equality to peace and security. In a practical sense, women's activism in peace and security ensures that on the sub-national and local levels, international strategies are implemented that will benefit the reintegration of ex-combatants in the larger scheme of building peace in Colombia.

However, for the many internally displaced persons (see more in ANNEX) and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, including forcibly recruited children, the legal architecture governing past processes demonstrated no ability to take legal action and seek legal recourse.⁶⁷ Most DDR processes aimed at creating legal incentives (such as amnesties, reduced sentences, avoidance of extradition to the U.S. for drug-related crimes, etc.) for voluntary demobilization in reality often lent themselves to institutionalizing impunity, since reporting was not enforced and investigations were stifled by the absence of capacity and personnel.⁶⁸

This lack of holding perpetrators accountable also eclipsed efforts to pay more attention to the myriad victims of the conflict as part of the peace processes, thereby neglecting obligations under international law.⁶⁹ In the absence of comprehensive data-collection mechanisms, the exact number of victims of conflict-related sexual violence is unknown, but estimates put the number at over 50,000 women per year.⁷⁰ Less, if anything, is known about the abuse against men and boys.

Given the sheer number of violent actors at the height of the conflict, this (reductionist) approach of demobilization at the expense of long-term reintegration strategies and victim-focused transitional justice was a direct consequence of efforts to mitigate violence and manage the conflict rather than solving it.⁷¹ The international community and Colombian civil society have criticized this approach as sacrificing justice to reach peace rather than achieving peace with justice.⁷²

Attempts to include a more victim-centered perspective came with the demobilization process of the AUC, which introduced stipulations for reparations and truth-seeking.⁷³ As a result, the National Reparations and Reconciliation Commission was established in 2005, which became the National Center for Historic Memory in 2011 under the Victims and Land Restitution Law (Law 1448). As of September 2018, the National Center has synchronized fragmented information and documented 262,197

fatalities from six decades of armed violence in Colombia.⁷⁴ The process of documenting human rights violations and causes of armed conflict ultimately led to the development of a legal framework including Law 1448 in 2011.⁷⁵ Part of these changes were due to a shift in the international justice paradigm as evident in the establishment of the International Criminal Court.⁷⁶

The current reincorporation process⁷⁷ with the FARC indicates that transitional justice mechanisms will be moved forward. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace stipulates the development of a Truth Commission and Transitional Justice Tribunal that is set to investigate human rights violations that were perpetrated by a multitude of actors, not just the FARC.⁷⁸

Given the nature of the conflict and the involvement of multiple armed groups over a period of five decades, the different peace negotiations never fully brought peace to Colombia.⁷⁹ While one armed group disarmed and demobilized, another group—or groups—stayed in power, often escalating violence in power struggles over territories and illicit activities such as drug trafficking.

Furthermore, the failure to “dismantle the underlying structures and financial power of these groups”⁸⁰ meant that the cycle of violence in Colombia continued to run its course. The ongoing peace process with the FARC has mechanisms in place that, if implemented, will reverse the trend of marginalizing already disadvantaged people further. At the same time, there is hope that the focus on gender equality in the peace negotiations and the agreement itself will not only catapult women of the FARC, for one, into political positions, but that their efforts will contribute to existing systems that elevate women’s voices and needs in Colombia.

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration in Colombia

“ Before, a soldier was paid more for killing a guerilla than for arresting him. . . . There is always that fear of demobilizing because of the stories you hear. ”

—Former boy soldier (group affiliation unknown), Antioquia, March 2017

In the volatile setting of post-conflict countries, ex-combatants represent a major challenge to recovery, reconstruction, and reconciliation if they are not properly integrated in the framing of peace processes, the peace negotiations, the development of an agreement, and the implementation of the peace processes. Years of socialization into violence mean that combatants can easily be triggered to revert to armed struggle, thus turning into spoilers of peace and increasing the vulnerabilities and risks associated with peace processes.

In a context like Colombia, where social, economic, cultural, and political marginalization had been institutionalized for decades, many Colombians have thus seen using violence as the only means to achieve political goals.⁸¹

Though forced recruitment of girls and boys was rampant among some armed groups, many female ex-combatants interviewed for this study explained that their motivation for joining armed groups was a form of expressing political aspirations as well as escaping discrimination and sexual and gender-based violence in their families and/or communities. Such nuanced understanding of socio-political nuances not only avoids perpetuating gender inequality during DDR processes, it also provides avenues for implementation actors to build on knowledge and skills of ex-combatants acquired during the tenure of armed group membership.⁸²

The implementation of DDR processes in Colombia has been challenging, but the experiences have equipped the government with institutional knowledge that led to the establishment of the world’s first and only state-run reintegration agency. At the same time, gender has been relatively low on the list of priorities that governed past DDR processes. Since the establishment of the ACR in 2006, however, agency staff receive regular trainings on the implications of changing gender roles and identities in conflict and post-conflict settings. The so-called “traffic light framework” ensures that the linkage between gender roles and identities and expectations as well as challenges toward violent behavior are being addressed in the different phases of the reintegration process.⁸³

As Colombia is rolling out the reincorporation process for the FARC, it is important to account for the experiences, challenges, and needs of ex-combatants who underwent DDR processes in the past three decades. Very few combatants interviewed for this research project have been able to communicate their past to their respective communities. This goes to show how complex reintegration is once the layers that demonstrate the number of combatants undergoing training, schooling, and placement in jobs are removed. However, the unique position of Colombia having decades of experience may offer new, innovative approaches toward DDR. The role that women and female ex-combatants have recently played in the peace negotiations is a strong indicator that local realities can inform global strategies and vice versa. Put differently, Colombia has not only drawn from and adopted international guidelines and frameworks for DDR processes, but has also tailored DDR programs to its local needs and context, therefore providing evidence and new approaches for future peace processes.

The Role of Gender in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration

*“ While the role of women as combatants is growing both qualitatively and quantitatively, their presence in peace and reintegration processes is not keeping pace with the trend. ”*⁸⁴

*“ To put it in a simplistic fashion, women are used during violence and dumped after violence. The female combatants become the victims of selective amnesia, wherein neither their role in conflict is recognized nor are they considered to be equal stakeholders in the peace-making process. A direct corollary of the non-recognition of women’s role in conflict is their absence in peace. ”*⁸⁵

In Colombia, women had been virtually absent in peace processes until the 2016 peace negotiations despite their substantial contribution to and participation in different armed groups. The impact on the combatants themselves as well as communities cannot be underestimated. However, this chapter will extend beyond whether women and girls are simply being accounted for. In the absence of a clear understanding of the gendered nature of conflict and gender dynamics within armed groups, DDR programs tend to neglect the role of gender identities, whereby both men and women may struggle to live up to the expectations that their culture may place on them. In particular in this context, there is the persistent association of men with being perpetrators of violence and women as victims. When their experiences do not match the cultural expectation, men and women face difficulties with acceptance of their experiences.

This simplistic approach hurts men/boys and women/girls because reintegration strategies can run the risk of perpetuating existing gender stereotypes that could aggravate tensions in the transitional phase from combatant to civilian.⁸⁶ In fact, the transformation of gender relations that takes place during conflict continues into post-conflict periods as well. Over- or underestimating the vulnerability of one group of combatants at the expense of another can have consequences that linger for generations and affect men and women alike.

*“ The differences [in how men and women experience war] are due to many of the different facets of gender relations, including: men and women are differently embodied; because they symbolize different things to their communities and their opponents, they are targeted differently and their injuries have different social impacts; they have different responsibilities to their families and communities, and thus end up differently in harm’s way. ”*⁸⁷

As a result, a gender-sensitive approach toward DDR needs to take into account the complexity surrounding masculinities and femininities in any given society. Ensuring women do not revert to traditional roles and get placed in jobs typically associated with women, such as hairdressing and tailoring, needs to also be seen in the context of men often being placed in jobs that are considered male, such as mechanic or farmer.

DDR processes therefore require consideration for the experiences of both male and female ex-combatants in order to design interventions and strategies that mitigate post-conflict interpersonal and communal conflicts,⁸⁸ but also reduce the risk of providing opportunities that are based on gender stereotypes and might not match with the economic realities as well as aspirations and expectations of ex-combatants.

Gender identities in war and peace

War and conflict are inherently gendered. The way men, women, boys, and girls relate to war is as diverse as their experiences of conflict, peace, and security. Indeed, male and female combatants “have different, albeit intersecting, needs, vulnerabilities and capacities in relation to the DDR process.”⁸⁹ A failure to address and recognize this as well as understand the way gender identities and norms are transformed in conflict settings⁹⁰ can have negative impacts in the transitional phase to civilian life for both the combatants and the receiving communities.⁹¹

The changing nature of violence and post-conflict environments shapes and alters power relations between and within the sexes,⁹² and as such, requires constant negotiation of gender identities. More to the point, “gender is not a unitary, coherent, unalterably fixed identity, but rather more fluid, contingent, and fragmented, something that is continually being produced in accordance with the multiple social settings and structures within which we live.”⁹³ As a result, men/boys and women/girls continuously produce and reproduce meaning of their gender identities.

This cycle of constant negotiation in any given society is part of a process in which men/boys and women/girls are expected to behave a certain way. Based on biological sex differences, men/boys and women/girls are ascribed characteristics that are socially constructed. In most cases, these social constructs are perceived to be in opposition to each other, where masculinity is generally valued more than feminine traits and characteristics.

Though gender has received more attention in recent years, notions of masculinities in the context of violent conflict continue to overemphasize the role of violent male identities. Though male perpetration of different forms of violence (including sexual and gender-based violence) has been established in the literature over time, “masculinity cannot be interpreted as a fixed propensity to violence” per se.⁹⁴ Institutions, historical legacies, cultural backgrounds, and peer groups play as much of a role as individual characteristics do. As such, the proclivities toward recidivism and illicit activities among male ex-combatants (without families and education), while significantly higher than among female ex-combatants,⁹⁵ have to be understood in the context of the “situational specificity of masculinities, violence and violence prevention, and the capacity to move from the individual level to the level of institutions and nations.”⁹⁶

These gender differences play an important role in the way social orders are developed and how power plays out between and within the sexes. In conflict, these—often strictly enforced—gender hierarchies are broken up, softened, challenged, or contested. Individuals under these circumstances are left with the opportunity to redefine their role and status in society.

*“ Women need to be understood as participants, protestors, as agents making the best of bad circumstances, even while they are also war’s victims. At the same time, war changes and challenges men’s roles and identities, which in turn also has profound impacts on their relationship to women, including their marital relations, household burden-sharing, and the ways each looks to the other to fulfill nurturance and protection roles within their families or within the bounds and cultures of their society. ”*⁹⁷

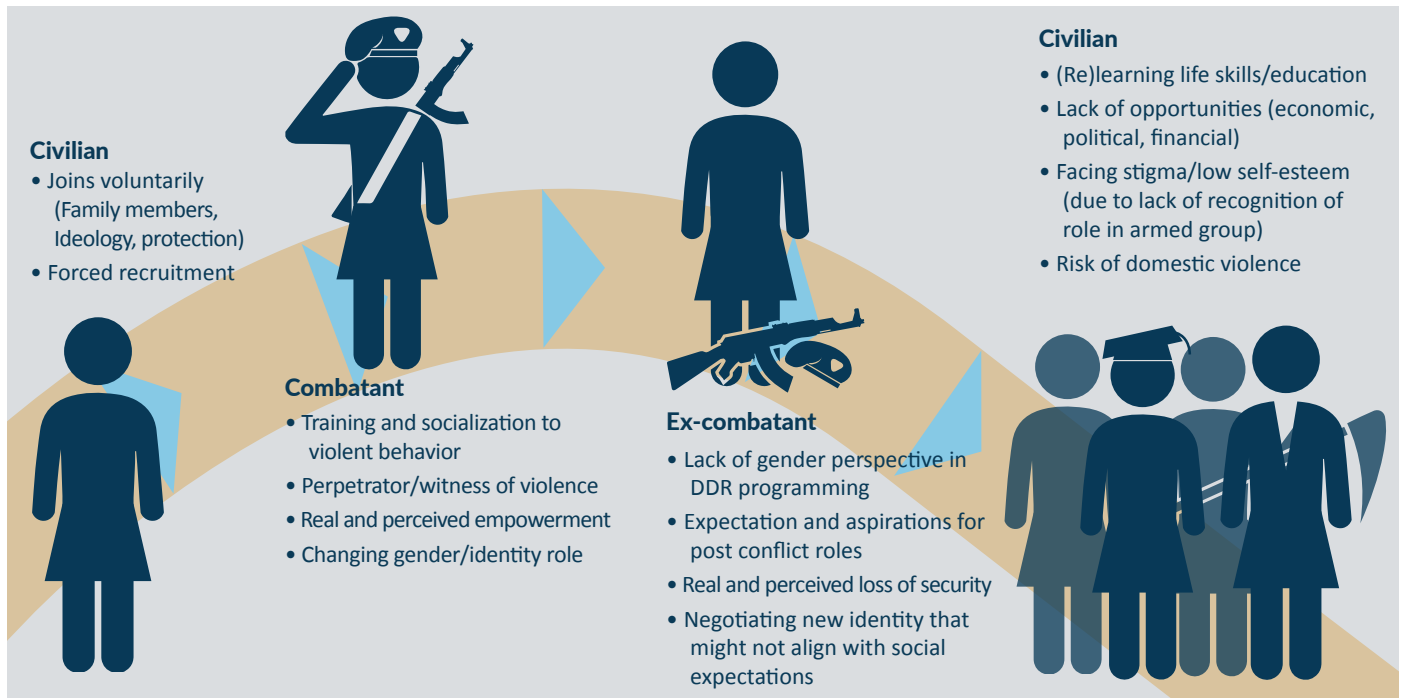
This is not to say that societies are generally open to changing gender relations. Similarly, research suggests that patriarchal structures are seldom, if ever, broken because of war or armed violence, but rather their “intensity varies.”⁹⁸ However, gendered selves and gender relations are not static because individuals respond differently to specific contexts, practices, and expectations. And recognizing these dynamics and the “structural power relations”⁹⁹ underlying these identities is essential to understanding motivations and circumstances under which men, women, boys, and girls participate in armed groups, as well as the challenges associated with demobilization and reintegration.

TABLE 1: GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF DDR

Losses due to DDR	Specific to Men	Women-specific
Symbolic	Power, Masculinity, Respect, Dignity (especially with regards to economic opportunities)	Gender Equality, Empowerment
Practical	Protection, Security, Respect, Status, Peer Support	Protection (physical and economic), Security, Respect

For example, male and female combatants experience disarmament in different ways, such as real and perceived feelings of loss of status, power, authority, equality, empowerment, and security.¹⁰⁰ As Table 1 demonstrates, some of these feelings are concrete and tangible (Practical), while others are less obvious, sometimes perceived, or harder to tackle programmatically (Symbolic). These feelings differ across genders and have a profound impact on people's ability to transition from combatant to civilian status. Beyond individual responses, though, these feelings also affect community relations, as ex-combatants will be confronted with communities that might or might not have undergone transformations of gender roles and relations.

FIGURE 1: PATHWAY- CIVILIAN TO COMBATANT TO EX-COMBATANT: WOMEN/GIRLS (ADOPTED FROM IAWG, 2012)



For women, both combatant and civilian, these changes carry significant weight; “since female combatants challenge the traditional gender roles, unlike their male counterparts, they have to suffer specifically in the post-conflict scenario. . . . They have to suffer physically, psychologically, socially, economically and politically.”¹⁰¹

For example, domestic violence against women often rises in post-conflict settings, especially in environments where reintegration programs fail to provide alternatives to violent behaviors.¹⁰² Indeed, the failure to adopt a gender perspective affects men and boys and the way they relate to women and girls post-conflict. Years of socialization into violence not only built upon idolized masculinities, meaning that characteristics and traits of what is considered masculine are being valorized, they also create militarized masculinities¹⁰³ in the Colombian context, in that the conflict creates expectations that men will engage with it in some form, often violently.¹⁰⁴ In fact, the overemphasis on alleged male proclivities toward violence inhibits further examination of the degree to which gender stereotypes may also render men and boys vulnerable.

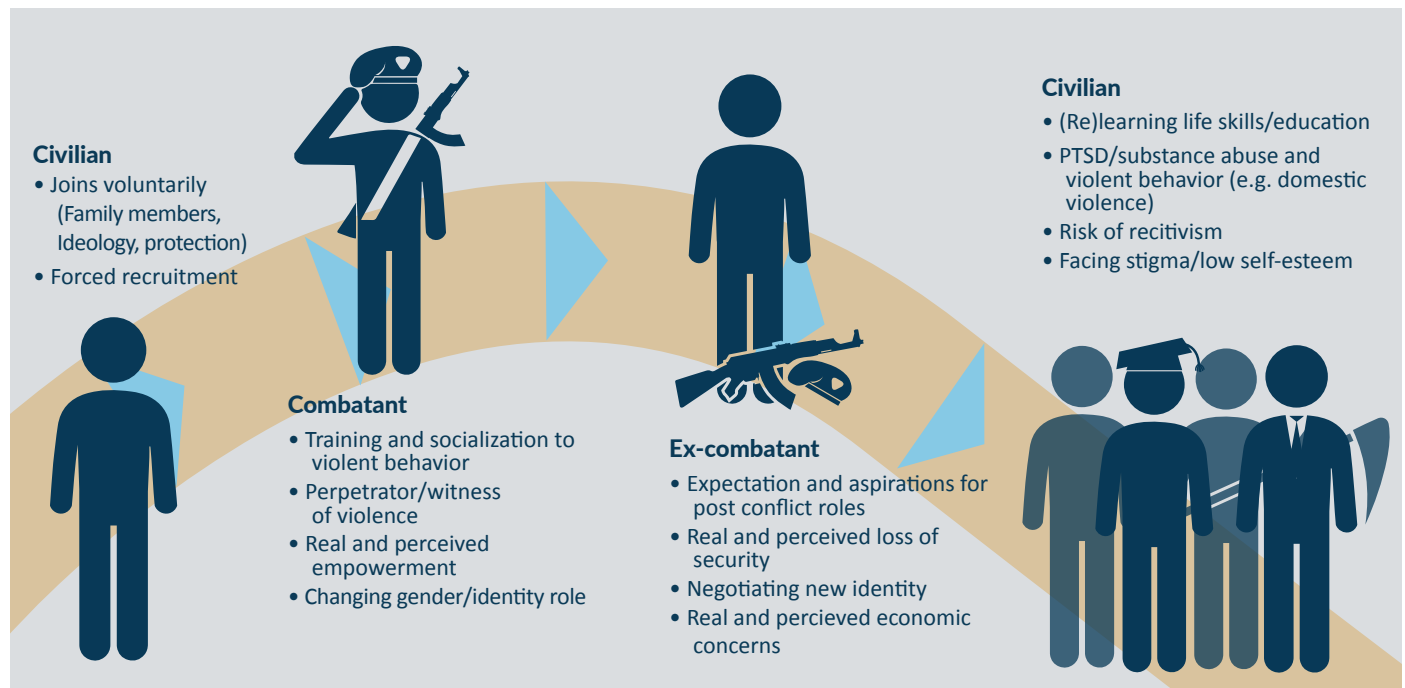
A better understanding of gender can therefore drive initiatives that aim at transforming gender identities that do not disadvantage one gender over another. To be more precise, gender is not just a social construct, but also something people act upon. As a result, while gender is constructed, it also provides avenues to change that.¹⁰⁵ See Figures 1 and 2 for examples of how gender may affect reintegration in men and women.



ZVTN "La Paz", Cesar, April 2017 photo: Alexandra Amling

The growing literature on this topic as well as evidence from the field have led to a gradual appreciation of expanding gender mainstreaming into incorporating and dealing specifically with men and boys.¹⁰⁶ And contrary to the belief that this approach takes away both attention and resources from work with women and girls, programs focused on men and boys are more and more recognized as complementing rather than impeding gender mainstreaming as well as ensuring DDR processes contribute to lasting peace.¹⁰⁷

FIGURE 2: PATHWAY–CIVILIAN TO COMBATANT TO EX-COMBATANT: MEN/BOYS
(ADOPTED FROM IAWG, 2012)



Women-specific challenges of DDR

In recent years, there has been a noticeable change at the international level toward recognizing women's roles in armed violence. But while the UN guidelines point out that needs and vulnerabilities specific to female combatants need to be identified,¹⁰⁸ the very same guidelines also stipulate that any person seeking to receive benefits has to establish their status as a combatant, which usually comes in the form of turning in arms and weapons.¹⁰⁹ In other words, a combatant is usually associated with active warfare, carrying an arm, and clear intentions to participate in an army or in irregular troops.¹¹⁰ Women and girls, especially those kidnapped for sexual exploitation and camp maintenance, often fail to be eligible under these strict requirements. In some cases, it is the armed group itself that prohibits women from entering formal DDR processes due to gender stereotypes that accredit women with "natural roles" as nurturers who should not receive benefits as their contributions are not considered exceptional or extraordinary.

Many DDR processes—contrary to their purpose of facilitating the transition from violence to peace—tend to increase the vulnerabilities of women and girls because they are denied access to education, health care (both physical and mental), vocational training, and other financial and economic benefits. Only a few processes, such as one in El Salvador, have included specific language that allowed for women to demobilize and be eligible for reintegration packages.¹¹¹ Generally, though, the patriarchal structures that dictate women's place in conflict cause their invisibility to transfer over to the post-conflict period, setting the stage for continued inequality and absence from decision-making and policy discourses.

This is especially difficult in situations where women and girls were subjected to forced recruitment, abduction, and sexual abuse. Out of fear of stigmatization, women and girls often self-demobilize in order to avoid exposing their experiences to their respective communities.¹¹² This only increases their risks of exploitation and ostracization. Aside from community rejection, research also highlights the risks associated with prostitution among girl soldiers—as well as civilian women and girls. Indeed, "different forms of gender-based violence experienced during armed conflict become institutionalized, since many of the conditions that created the violence remain unchanged."¹¹³ There are umpteen examples of sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers that range from early engagement, such as in Cambodia, to recent allegations of abuse in Mali and the Central African Republic.



chance that peace agreement will last

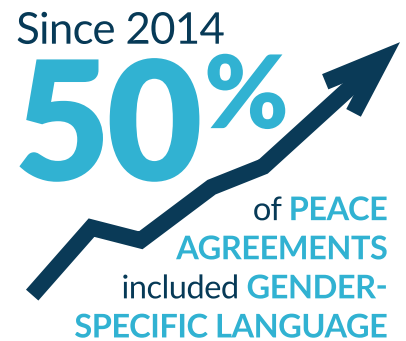
15 years when women are included in the peace process

To this day, most peace agreements have failed to account for the gendered nature of violence and post-conflict reconstruction and recovery. There are several reasons for that. First, the absence of women at the negotiation table leaves women’s needs unaddressed.¹¹⁴ This represents a lost opportunity since including women in all aspects of peacebuilding—of which DDR is a part—indicates “that the best predictor of a state’s peacefulness is how well women are treated, exceeding all other factors, including levels of democracy, measures of wealth and diversity in ethnicity or religion.”¹¹⁵

While there are notable examples of women’s active engagement in peace processes from South Africa, Northern Ireland, Guatemala, and Cambodia, these peace processes preceded the promulgation of landmark Resolution 1325, which was the first UN Security Council resolution to look at women’s roles in war beyond victimhood. A 2015 global review on the progress of the implementation of the resolution highlighted that women’s presence is still abysmally low.¹¹⁶ In fact, much has been said about the absence of women as negotiators, mediators, or signatories in peace processes,¹¹⁷ although having an inclusive peace process increases the probability of reaching a peace agreement and the sustainability of that peace.¹¹⁸ Several quantitative studies indicate the positive impact women have on peacemaking and peacebuilding when actively participating in peace negotiations.¹¹⁹

The crux of the matter here is that for the longest time, similar to Kaplan’s observations about civilians in Colombia being primarily viewed through the prism of victimhood, especially in the media, women in wars have not been seen as active agents.¹²⁰ In fact, “it is considered natural to talk to women about their victimization, which is why they would prefer peace, but it is considered unnatural to let them talk about how peace should be negotiated.”¹²¹

Another problem is what MacKenzie calls the overemphasis on security in DDR processes, which prioritizes men over women. In her research in Sierra Leone, MacKenzie found that the reintegration of women equated to the “domestication” of women, wherein reintegration became “a social rather than a political process.”¹²² MacKenzie even goes further and argues that “recasting women and girls from political activists and major contributors to the war to helpless victims and wounded . . . is a form of violent reproduction.”¹²³ In other words, by specifically targeting male ex-combatants at the expense of female ex-combatants and former girl soldiers, MacKenzie concluded that post-conflict reconstruction efforts perpetuate the binary view of male perpetrators and female victims. She



claims this contributed to disadvantaging women and girls, and in fact to continuing violence against women and girls post-conflict.¹²⁴ In particular, the devaluation of women’s support for the survival and sustainability of armed groups is but a continuation of what Stavrou called “the gender discrimination of the division of labor.”¹²⁵

This unequal treatment is problematic given the variety of ways women participate in armed groups, often at high personal cost. Not only does this situation fail to recognize women’s substantial contributions to the groups, it also reduces the prospect of sustainable peace as post-conflict stability often hinges on both the ability of ex-combatants to reintegrate into civilian life and the ability of communities to recover from the violence.¹²⁶ As such, Shekhawat and Pathak argue that it is the right of female (ex-)combatants to be included in the peace negotiations due to the roles they played in war.¹²⁷

Last, there is the problem of the security sector, which tends to be more biased against women and girls as they fall outside traditional, strictly military roles. In many cases, women and girls do not carry arms and do not participate actively in combat. By stripping women and girls of soldier status and casting them as “camp followers” or “females associated with the war,” women and girls are relegated to mere support roles that have historically restricted them from access to economic, educational, and financial benefits.¹²⁸

prior to 2000
11% of peace agreements make reference to **GENDER / WOMEN**

post - 2000
27%

Gendered expectations and aspirations for DDR

It is important to note, however, that women combatants do not constitute a monolithic group.¹²⁹ Women's roles in war and their relation to war vary considerably. For example, women's ability to be deployed as combat forces depends on the political ideologies of a given armed group, as well as that group's attitudes toward gender relations.¹³⁰ At the same time, while "the violence and trauma of war are terrible without question, some evidence suggest that the idea of a universally negative experience [for women] should be questioned."¹³¹

The situation of female ex-combatants in Ethiopia is a case in point, where women who entered the armed struggle as teenagers experienced the transition back into civilian life as "culture shock"¹³² due to traditional gender norms that had been slow to adapt to the changing nature of gender roles and identities in conflict.¹³³ For example, female ex-combatants may feel more empowered to speak up and communicate problems in a more direct way which may often be at odds with cultural expectations. Women in Uganda faced similar hurdles, often causing them to choose urban centers over returning home to their families and former communities.¹³⁴

Political emancipation is not a universal aspiration of all women combatants, but the examples above are indicative of post-conflict settings that present their own set of problems, where reconfigured gender identities might not be compatible with the realities of civil society and certain communities. Put differently, the challenge here is that to reintegrate on the terms of civil society means for most women to revert to the expected gender roles that were in place preceding the conflict. This often represents a missed opportunity to capitalize on the transformative nature of post-conflict settings that could lead to social, cultural, and political changes.¹³⁵

When talking to women of the FARC for this research project, these female combatants expressed their views on the conservative, patriarchal structure of Colombian society, and discussed how their roles as female combatants can provide avenues for women more generally to question their position in society and advance women's empowerment.¹³⁶ As such, these FARC women rejected the prospect of being treated separately in the DDR process, claiming women-specific programming violates the notions of gender equality. The particularities of these statements arguably indicate a flawed understanding of the concept of gender since gender does not imply a women-only focused approach, but it also speaks to the central argument of this chapter: the need to understand the ways in which gender identities were shaped and altered by Colombia's various armed groups.

The inability to align aspirations with expectation that are strongly rooted in gender norms can often cause ruptures that impede recovery and reconciliation. Thus, the sensitization of communities is as vital to successful reintegration as education and job placements. This is specifically important in the context of combatants whose groups have been associated with abuse of civilians,¹³⁷ as well as in environments where the tenacious indolence of patriarchal structures holds women back.

Colombia again serves as an example where the demobilization of paramilitaries indicated that the end of hostilities alone was not a good indicator of effective DDR,¹³⁸ especially because root causes and gender identities underlying these root causes were neglected.¹³⁹ On the contrary, weak state presence coupled with decades of insurgency and settlements rather than comprehensive post-conflict strategies, and the inability of civil society to expand on its non-violent initiatives, did not bring sustainable peace to Colombia.¹⁴⁰ In that process, as will be described, female ex-combatants were relegated to the interstice of DDR programs, or in some cases neglected altogether.

It remains to be seen how the peace process with the FARC, especially the reintegration efforts, will unfold in Colombia. As mentioned, reintegration had historically not featured high on the list of priorities in Colombia until the early 2000s. Yet, the political aspirations of the FARC are not without precedence, for the M-19 and the EPL were able to safeguard their representation in Colombia's Congress and the National Constitutional Assembly, thus informing the development of the 1991 Constitution.¹⁴¹

A man with short dark hair, wearing a patterned tank top and a watch, is focused on using a hand saw to cut a piece of wood. He is standing in a wooden structure, possibly a house under construction, with a window in the background. The entire image has a blue tint.

III. THE EXPERIENCES OF REINTEGRATION IN COLOMBIA

Members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) build houses at the 'Jaime Pardo Leal' Transitional Standardization Zone in Colinas, Guaviare department, Colombia on June 15, 2017. photo: RAUL ARBOLEDA/AFP/Getty Images

“ There was no reference point, as there was with the FARC, where there had already been other processes in other countries that served as a guide, but imagine what it was like to begin; it [reintegration] was just happening. You need to look at the context because, at that time, to think that we were the framers of the constitution, gender perspective was not talked about, different approaches weren’t talked about, etc. A number of things that have been taken back up over the years and today, the work of this alternative social, political, environmental, etc., movement, from this whole wave that has happened and in which many comrades have formed a part of who came from the process beginning in the ’90s, they produced that legacy that the FARC finds itself in today. So, the FARC finds a country today that now speaks of the rights of women, of the LGBTI . . . a number of things that we didn’t have. ”

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

The quote of this female ex-combatant speaks to the many struggles ex-combatants are confronted with in Colombia. She also describes the broader issues of structural inequalities, discrimination, and the way gender plays into all of these that if left unaddressed will impede efforts in Colombia toward coming to terms with its violent past. However, there are also signs of veiled optimism in her statement which suggest that much has changed since the days when she demobilized in the late 1990s; previous processes from which to learn, greater gender awareness, and better reintegration services.

While these facts speak to larger, structural changes, the individual experiences nonetheless indicate that these changes are merely cosmetic. In other words, gender stereotypes that drive gender discrimination and inequality have prevailed in institutions and in society at large. Although there are efforts to ensure female ex-combatants are not neglected, a profound understanding of gender concepts still seems to be lagging, especially where it relates to the fact that the gender lens is not limited to female ex-combatants’ experiences. Indeed, many male ex-combatants felt challenged by assumptions about their roles as men in Colombia. While women’s plight is often correlated with Colombia’s “machismo” culture, little seems to be known about the impact of cultural expectations of masculinity on men; although most male ex-combatants interviewed for this study failed to express things in these terms, some analysis can be based on interpretation of the data.

Key Findings

“ [We] are valuable because of the experience we’ve had. We have a lot to contribute to society. So that not only children, but many others, too, even if they’re adults, don’t make the same mistake of joining either the guerillas or any other gang in the cities. ”

—Former boy soldier (FARC), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

Colombia is currently the only country in the world that has a state-run reintegration agency. At the time of writing, this agency has been undergoing major changes to accommodate the FARC. The most important one was the change from the concept of “reintegration” to “reincorporation.” To some, this change is merely wordsmithing. But, as will be discussed, and in line with the arguments made above about the importance of identity in DDR processes, the adoption of “reincorporation” is a manifestation of belief systems that are underpinned by notions of gender and identity that if left unaddressed can jeopardize the peace process. Indeed, the transition from combatant to civilian status often happens in conjunction with the loss of a shared sense of identity as well as the reputation and status of being a guerilla fighter. Ultimately though, “there is seldom a common understanding of DDR or reintegration among the many stakeholders.”¹⁴² This mismatch in conceptual understanding of DDR is grounded in the fact that it took the UN some time to conceptualize reintegration, thus making it harder to operationalize.¹⁴³

The demobilization of the AUC between 2003 and 2006 is indicative of the problems inherent in DDR processes that neglect not only the reintegration component but also the gendered dimensions of reintegration. The mere “recycling” of the AUC paramilitaries back into civilian life backfired because the root causes and structures upon which the paramilitaries had been thriving had not been adequately addressed.^{144, 145}

Many female ex-combatants expressed their frustration with the absence of female representation in decision-making as well as the gender-blindness of the agreements and the DDR processes. With the caveat that some women in the interviews conceded that at the time, they themselves had not been aware that the unequal dynamics in their groups were inherently gendered because gender as a concept was unknown to them, they nonetheless recognized that they should have had a say in the negotiations.

“ We’ve talked about that issue, but what we haven’t said is that this process of the ’90s peace agreements, almost all were men. Men really occupied almost all of the venues. Politicians . . . they nominated themselves. They were male-focused peace agreements by men. In some cases, the issue of stigmatization—the other was a security issue, it was an issue in that men took over. Proportionately, the number of us women was really small, but it was very unbalanced, both internally and externally. ”

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

This element is one of many similarities that ties the experiences of ex-combatants in Colombia together. This does not, however, mean that the experiences, challenges, and needs of the ex-combatants are the same, regardless of former group affiliation. This is an important fact, since some literature suggests that the Colombian DDR framework has, for the longest time, assumed that the needs of women and men ex-combatants are the same, and that group affiliation does not matter in terms of ability to reintegrate.¹⁴⁶

“ Every experience is different because the struggle was different, the issues of subordination were different. It’s not the same to be in an armed group as a political group because the ties of subordination are different. We have spoken about that with our female comrades that have been guerilla fighters, that that, in one way or another, creates in us ways of how we have behaved looking to the future. ”

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

Of course, their experiences overlap at times, but still indicate differences that are rooted in the gendered nature of war. After all, armed conflicts are not only triggered and driven by political, economic, social, or cultural processes—all of which represent systems of power.¹⁴⁷ All of the listed aspects are deeply gendered, as the way men and women relate to each other is grounded in a set of categories that dictate power relations and interactions between and within the sexes. This fact also shows that gender is not only reduced to the individual level but also encapsulates the degree to which institutions are gendered and shape the way male and female ex-combatants relate to and experience DDR processes.

Summary of findings

For many ex-combatants, the focus groups allowed them to express their opinions about their individual or collective processes, indicating that few have had the opportunity to speak about their past in terms of experiences and challenges and how this has impacted their aspirations to become recognized citizens of Colombia again. Many see themselves as role models, although few have played active roles in their communities. Their reflections give great insight into their daily struggles as much as they describe the broader issues of structural inequalities, discrimination, and gender relations that will continue to influence the way Colombia will come to terms with its violent past.

“ If I may speak now, I’d like to say that we all share a common objective: we do not want our children and our families and other people to repeat history and live through the same things we lived through. It is important to know what happened in order to avoid repeating history. ”

—Former boy soldier (FARC), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

“ Like my comrade mentioned earlier, I, too, have a great desire to serve. God has instilled it in me, the desire to serve a society that needs us greatly because of the experiences we have been through and because we have a lot to contribute. This is what drives us to keep going; it motivates me, at least. I think that if I share my testimony with one community, for example, if I share my story with a group of young boys who are involved in drugs or any one of the many other bad things you can find in the cities, I think that my message might get across to them. Perhaps they will be able to see that one can get ahead in life and transform societies and communities. ”

—Former boy soldier (FARC), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

Despite the considerable differences in time, location, and their ages at the time of the various DDR processes, qualitative analysis of the focus groups identified several factors that ex-combatants used to describe the ease and difficulty of reintegrating (Figure 3). For example, while community was a huge positive factor for some participants’ transitions back to civilian life, for others failing to become accepted made the community—or the exclusion from belonging to that community—a factor that increased the difficulty of successfully reintegrating. The nuances of how ex-combatants described these factors are listed in more detail in Table 2, with the exceptions of “stigma” (more details below) and “generational difference,” since those two mostly overlapped with other factors.

FIGURE 3: REAL AND PERCEIVED FACTORS DETERMINING EASE OR DIFFICULTY OF REINTEGRATION



For example, for many the ability to find or retain employment hinged on their employer’s knowledge of their respective pasts. Many times, ex-combatants said they were unable to keep jobs or were overlooked for promotions due to stigma. However, in talking to some of the former child soldiers, being an ex-combatant did not always work against them, and the girls in particular expressed strong opinions about recognizing their past and not being too apologetic about it as a way to challenge assumptions and attitudes toward ex-combatants. In other words, instead of giving in to the negative narrative about being an ex-combatant and trying to stay hidden, they were actively talking about their past. Obviously, gender plays a big role here, as much as generational difference. And it goes to show how fickle these factors are as they relate to individual experiences.

Table 2 below, therefore, is an attempt to bring order to a multitude of attitudes and opinions offered by people interviewed for this project. It is neither exhaustive nor universally applicable to every ex-combatant, but rather a distillation of the personal experiences and challenges of over 40 ex-combatants in Colombia. At the same time, it is important to recognize that some of these factors are real, while others are based on symbolic meanings.

To give an example, Colombia’s major urban centers and cities represented a challenge to many ex-combatants. The way they described the noises, the smells, the sheer size, and

the vibrance of cities indicated their disconnect with Colombia’s development due to the ex-combatants’ rural upbringing and years spent in Colombia’s dense jungles. This is not to say that their reflections carry less weight, but it is one of many examples that demonstrate the difference between real and symbolic factors that seemingly supported or inhibited combatants transitioning to civilian life.

Taken together, these factors revealed an obvious tension between what the reintegration programs were able to offer and the expectations (described below as needs) these ex-combatants had for themselves and the ability to transition

TABLE 2: DEFINITIONS OF FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EASE OR DIFFICULTY OF REINTEGRATION

	EASE	DIFFICULTY
SECURITY	Freedom from fear of physical harm Ability to move back home	Fear of persecution and assassination (other armed groups) Fear of harassment (by police and armed forces) Economic and financial uncertainty
GENDER	Social inclusion Family support Easier for men/women Gender perspective in agreement Gender perspective in reintegration program Generational difference	Social exclusion Stigma No gender perspective in agreement No gender perspective in reintegration program Generational difference
COMMUNITY	Women tend to transition faster and easier than men Generational difference Outreach Being active and productive in community	Stigma Hiding past Socialization into violence at young age Incompatibility of gender norms with transformed/changed gender roles/identities
FAMILY	Coping with trauma/PTSD Support (social, economic, financial, cultural, etc.) Incentive to leave armed group	No access to family (security concerns, loss, disappearances, etc.)
TRUST	Family/friends support Good experience with security forces and government Peace processes are improving	Hiding past Bad experiences with government (forces) Stigma Hiding past from others Flawed process
EMPLOYMENT	New opportunities (due to programs) Advancement into different careers Empowerment (esp. for women and girls) Independence Networking	Low-income jobs Low retention rates (due to ex-combatant status) Stigma
IDENTITY	Empowerment Confidence Ability to adapt Becoming "role model" for youth	Low self-esteem Hiding past Trauma and PTSD
CITY	More opportunities Living in greater anonymity Life in city prior to armed group Generational difference	Adjusting from rural to urban Lack of social support/family ties Unfamiliarity causing discomfort Anonymity
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS	Family businesses Family ties	Poverty (often tied to ethnicity and race) No ability to access further education No disposable income

back to civilian life. The tension between reintegration programs and services and what the ex-combatants said they needed at the time (in addition to or in lieu of what was offered) were based on the factors listed above. Naturally, reintegration programs are limited in scope, time, and funds. And while this project recognizes the efforts by Colombia to develop a comprehensive reintegration strategy, the findings of this project nonetheless also suggest that much of the needs as identified by those who underwent reintegration in Colombia have gone unaddressed, and that the voices of ex-combatants have not been sufficiently included in adjusting reintegration programs.

Therefore, the success of reintegration programs as promulgated by the state sometimes stood in (sharp) contrast to the personal experiences of ex-combatants. And while there was a general appreciation for the programs offered by the ACR—or the government, prior to the existence of the ACR—the research uncovered a thread running through the various DDR processes: the mismatch between vocational training and economic realities, the threat of recidivism,¹⁴⁸ the lack of security, and the inability to sensitize the community to eradicate stigma against ex-combatants, especially women and girls.

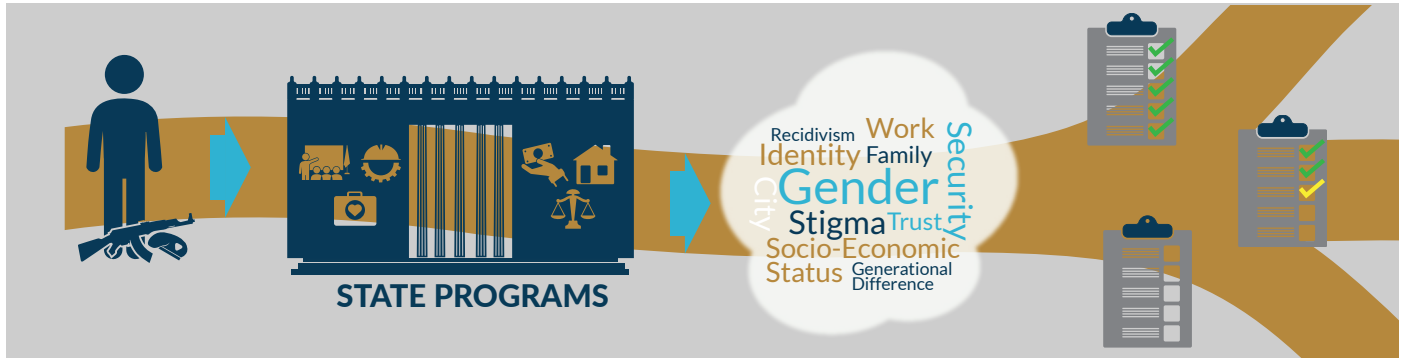
“ When you, as a reintegrated former fighter, embark on a mission to get on a council or into city hall, the turnout isn’t substantial because for those not in the political mainstream. . . obviously, it’s not within their ideology to vote for a member of the guerrillas. And the McCarthyism starts towards the other side, and that’s why there’s a drop in turnout for reintegrated former fighters. That’s my opinion. It was very difficult. ”

—Male ex-combatant (CRS), Sucre, March 2017

Interestingly, some of the needs identified in the focus groups matched directly with services provided by the different reintegration packages. The main differences, as will be discussed below, are the factors (ease/difficulty) that rendered the services and programs helpful or not (Figure 4), and the way gender amplified the ability or inability to properly reintegrate. For example, many ex-combatants mentioned access to education, which was often limited to basic education. In the absence of funding (due to program restrictions) or due to family duties (such as single-female-headed households), several ex-combatants were unable to obtain higher education.

Similarly, some participants in certain collective processes were afforded housing by the state. In the Department of Cordoba, the research team visited a community of former EPL combatants who lived on the outskirts of a bigger regional town. There was only one concrete road leading into the settlement, there was no functional sewage system, and electricity was sparse. The provision of housing was welcome, but in the absence of providing the necessary infrastructure and access to services such as health care or schools, the ex-combatants felt as if they had been dumped into this location and then buried in oblivion.

FIGURE 4: CHALLENGES OF REINTEGRATION



This feeling of neglect (for their aspirations) was also expressed by ex-combatants of the CRS and PRT who complained a lot about security, both past and present. Indeed, during one focus group in the department of Sucre, policemen inquired about the gathering of a large group of ex-combatants. The research team was assured that the presence of the police was not their fault, nor did the presence of the research team pose any risks for the ex-combatants. Nobody was taken for questioning, nor did anybody face charges or further investigation, but it demonstrated the vulnerability of ex-combatants as well as the suspicion and bias of security forces after more than three decades of an official demobilization process.

A lot of these experiences can be related to the issue of stigma. Indeed, given the frequency^b of mentions of stigma in the data, it is important to pause for a moment here and look at this phenomenon (Figure 4) in a bit more detail. Stigmatization, often described as rejection based on prejudices against ex-combatants, came up in every focus group and seemed to be most disturbing to ex-combatants when their status as a former combatant was used against their family members. One ex-combatant even referred to it as “McCarthyism.” Some ex-combatants experienced multiple forms of stigma, such as female ex-combatants who felt more marginalized due to being women who had transcended traditional gender roles by taking up arms. Often leaving families behind, being unwilling to fulfill their role in the household and as caregivers, or being outspoken and more assertive, female ex-combatants have been facing the double burden of a) being women in a society rooted in patriarchy, and b) being ex-combatants who had carried guns.

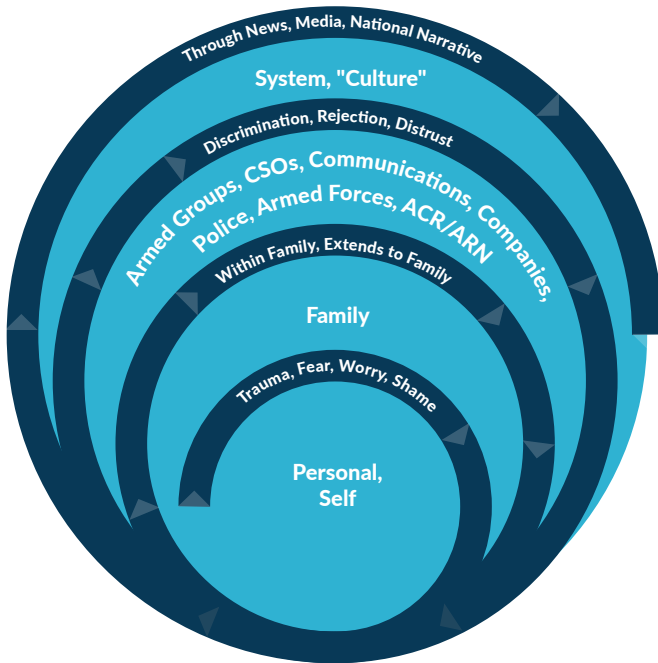
Yet, other ex-combatants did not feel rejected at all, or they did not perceive it as a problem prohibiting their ability to rebuild a new life as a civilian. At times, ex-combatants discussed their own observations of stigma used against friends who had demobilized with them.

FIGURE 5: REINTEGRATION OUTCOME SCENARIOS



^b The research team coded stigma even when the word itself was not directly mentioned. In comparing their separate coding, the research team identified phrases and descriptions that matched notions of stigma.

FIGURE 6 : IMPACT OF STIGMA ON REINTEGRATION



This fact alone warrants our attention, but it also requires further analysis because stigma is a lot more complex than just community rejection influenced by a culture of resentment and hatred against guerrillas and paramilitaries. In fact, we should depart from the premise that stigma has only a singular meaning. On the contrary, the problem of dealing with stigma can function as a prism through which to better understand the nuances of why, for instance, the October referendum did not yield a unanimous win for the peace agreement but rather demonstrated the diverging views on ex-combatants, some of which were more favorable toward ex-combatants and others which were suspicious at best. This variety of opinions about ex-combatants should therefore be seen as a barometer of views and sentiments rather than the outcome of two immutable camps at opposite poles.

As such, the nested model indicates that while there are opposing views, it is not an absolute and static situation. The nested model allows us to understand the problem of stigma from different perspectives (layers) by sorting issues into controllable segments. Put differently, by peeling off one layer and diving into the progressively larger circles surrounding the first layer(s), we eventually see the permutations of stigma that are social, political, economic, cultural, and gendered.

This is particularly true for women. Many female ex-combatants mentioned that despite the widespread gender inequality in civil society, women have had it slightly easier transitioning back in terms of job security, physical security, and community acceptance. Despite their different roles, interviewees told us, women were less linked to armed warfare and atrocities, which made it a little bit easier for women to transition.

The problem with reintegration programs that have been primarily measured against statistics that demonstrate the numbers of people having completed the programs rather than honing in on gender relations and their impact on reintegration has been a recurrent issue. In combination with other factors that influence and determine the personal outcome of reintegration, the transition from combatant to civilian is far more complex and long-term than a timed program can capture (Figure 6).

This experience of having one or more factors on one side of the spectrum, however, did not mean that every ex-combatant facing economic insecurity ultimately turned violent again or become involved in criminal activities. There are no causal relationships here. On the contrary, the associations between factors and outcomes are exclusively based on the data collected, and often varied across age, gender, and group affiliation. What it does reveal, however, is that reintegration is not an isolated phase of time in a country with decades of violence and illicit activities. It is part and parcel of a process of recovery, reconstruction, rehabilitation, and reconciliation.

For many decades, this holistic understanding has been lagging in both Colombia and global approaches toward DDR. The following chapter will unpack these experiences further by examining the gendered nature of DDR experiences.

The Men

+ Community

"It was easy for me in the community. It was not easy with the armed groups here. And it still continues to be easy because the community accepts the social issues that we deal with here."

—Male ex-combatant (CRS), Sucre, March 2017

+ Family

"I know that for many, it's their family, because they are tired of those routines [inside the armed group] and want to locate and love with their families. . . . If they have a son, a father, a brother, they get tired of a lifetime in the war, so they want to change, have more freedom, because that is very nice, being to go wherever you want."

—Former boy soldier (ELN), Antioquia, March 2017

- Employment

"If you go to an interview, you're asked why you finished high school at this age or why you haven't worked. They ask you lots of stuff. At last you end up telling them that you belonged to an armed group. . . . [It's] difficult to find work even after training."

—Former boy soldier (group affiliation unknown), Antioquia, March 2017

- Security

"It was difficult, because if they call you a paramilitary member, the guerillas accuse you, then the army accuses you of being a guerilla member . . . it's rather difficult to deal with."

—Male ex-combatant (CRS), Sucre, March 2017

- Gender

"I'd say that for many women, from what I could observe and what I learned (which could be a lot or a little, depending on how you look at it), entering into civilian life was much easier. Women are more likeable; you know what I mean? I admire women in that sense, because women are more determined, and more willing to take risks."

—Male ex-combatant (EPL), Antioquia, April 2017

- Trust

"We were promised housing and a good education, decent work, which has not been provided, so we are dissatisfied with this process. We are grateful to you for taking us into consideration and for your concern for the process."

—Male ex-combatant (AUC), Córdoba, March 2017

- City

"Many colleagues have been in the country their entire life and spent many years in the FARC or in an armed group, and they had never been in the city. There are examples of colleagues who could not go through a traffic light. They don't know how to use a computer, a cell phone, an elevator. Colleagues who were given their debit cards and who sent it away to get it laminated. . . . It's a culture shock."

—Former boy soldier (FARC), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

- Socio-economic status

"At this level of poverty, of misery, it is difficult to achieve peace."

—Male ex-combatant (AUC), Córdoba, March 2017

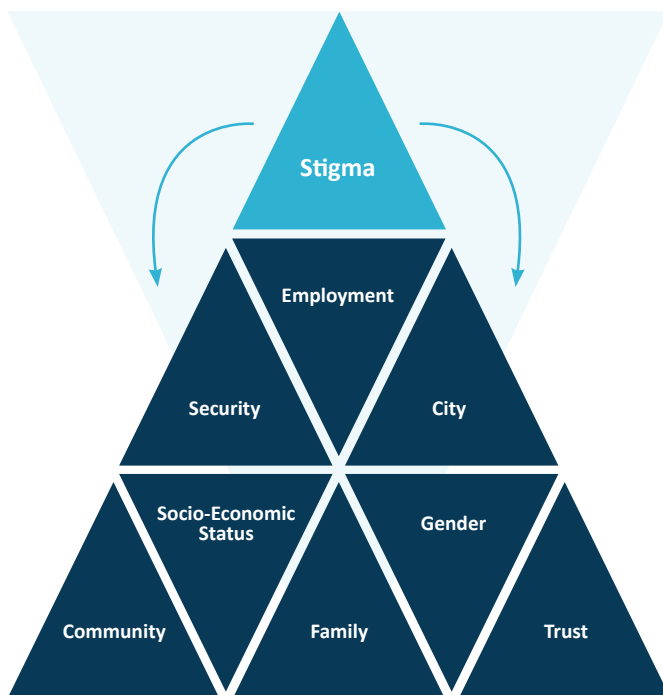
These eight quotes encapsulate the essence of the experiences of male ex-combatants who were interviewed for this project. As they are listed here, they are not in any order of priority. Rather, the abundance of red minus signs speaks a clear language, enumerating the spate of negative factors driving the experience of reintegration and absence of factors that could have facilitated a smoother transition.

“ And those of us who got the chance, we’re here trying to survive with dignity. That’s why sometimes there’s so much recidivism [See Note 158]. Many colleagues fall back into it. They go back. They commit suicide. They get lost to drugs. Many fall back into other things. The agency and the government have done many things with these programs. It has been improving, but it is not enough. ”

—Former boy soldier (FARC), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

Yet, if there was a hierarchical structure to the experiences of men, it would be in the form of a pyramid on top of which sits “stigma” that permeates every other aspect (Figure 7). As mentioned, stigma played a crucial role for ex-combatants because it manifested itself in different ways. The impact on the ability of male ex-combatants to find or retain employment, feel safe (physically, economically, financially, etc.), and develop relationships with the community and their families was often determined by the severity of stigmatization.

FIGURE 7: HIERARCHY OF FACTORS DETERMINING REINTEGRATION EASE OR DIFFICULTY: MALE EX-COMBATANTS



None of these factors can be seen in complete isolation because, for example, issues of trust were based on security concerns, stigma, gender, and community relations. Finding and keeping employment was often closely associated with resettling to the city, which also bore concerns for security, community acceptance, and family relations. Arguably, one would think that the city provides more anonymity and more opportunities for ex-combatants to find work. But exercising constant reticence and concealing their past has been mentally challenging for many ex-combatants, including women. Additionally, the city also harbors a majority of those who voted against the peace agreement in the October 2016 referendum, making ex-combatants feel less welcome and accepted. Last, given the ex-combatants’ rural origins, many expressed a feeling of being devoured by the “concrete jungle” of the city.

The list of combined factors and how they determine and influence each other is long. The pyramid merely represents to what extent factors appeared at a higher frequency than others, and that was primarily based on how focus group participants would deepen conversations about one or more factors. As a result, the bottom of the pyramid features factors that were important but still carried a lesser, not as strong meaning than those on the top and in the middle.

The choice of the pyramid is also based on the strong symbolic meaning of the factors identified in the data analysis, where

stigma is only the tip of the iceberg. The personal, micro-level experiences of ex-combatants as they relate to stigma are indicative of the larger macro-level problems and challenges in Colombia. As a result, the main analysis below will tell the story of where factors are clearly defined by the ex-combatants, followed by paragraphs where they intersect. The analysis will thus be more of a narration of experiences rather than a strict, fact-driven examination.

As mentioned earlier, stigma weighs more heavily on some than on others. On average, women in the focus groups seemed less affected by it, although the mere absence of stigma in their reflections on their experiences does not mean they never encountered problems with stigma. A simple explanation could be that other factors mattered more. On the other hand, one male ex-combatant mentioned that female ex-combatants are considered less threatening and are generally seen as being “nicer.”

Indeed, as the pyramid for male ex-combatants demonstrates, there are numerous other issues that determine the ability of ex-combatants to both get reintegrated (services and programs) but also to feel reintegrated (the outcome of services and programs). The two (using services and the outcome of the services) are not mutually exclusive, but it seems that they were not treated equally by those designing and executing DDR programs. Put differently, the experience of the process of reintegration is seen as mattering less than ensuring ex-combatants go through the process.

The experiences of the male ex-combatants varied only insofar as their geographical location and the difference in programs were concerned. Contrary to the experience for women, there was no direct generational variance in the challenges of reintegration. In other words, the experiences of former boy soldiers paralleled the challenges described by male ex-combatants who had demobilized 10 to 20 years ago, whereas the former girl soldiers seemed less aligned with the older generation of female ex-combatants in their concerns.

Stigma

The thread that sewed the experiences of male ex-combatants together was stigma. As demonstrated above (Figure 7), stigma has been described as a multi-layered problem for most ex-combatants. According to one former boy soldier, the impact is set within a system—“on the street, in the news, on TV, in many places, there is that discrimination, that rejection”—that allows for stigma to grow and permeate other relational levels. The feeling of exclusion, while indirect in many ways, was palpable for many ex-combatants. Inherent in this feeling of social segregation was a sense of having lesser rights, especially when it came to expressing opinions. First, in cases where the ex-combatants felt the need to conceal their past, speaking favorably about rebels had the potential to blow the cover they had built for years. Second, in cases where ex-combatants had been able to reveal their past, they felt compelled to hold back, as one ex-combatant from the EPL in Antioquia (April 2017) described:

“We are in a country that is democratically free and where people can express and say what they feel, but there are certain difficulties we all know about, that things are not so. Perhaps there is something that you want to express, your ideas on a given issue, but you know you cannot say things openly anytime or anywhere, because we don’t know each and every person and who they really are.”

The ability to openly admit a past affiliation with an armed group is challenging in and of itself. One of the former boy soldiers described the dilemma of having to decide how much one can reveal. Even if there is genuine interest, he said it is problematic “because there are things that you don’t want to mention, because you talk about abuse, rape, kidnapping . . . many very bad things that you don’t want to remember” (Antioquia, March 2017).

This becomes even more psychologically challenging in situations where ex-combatants have been confronted with both views that paint them as murderers, narco-traffickers, and sicarios (hitmen) and certain environments in which they are encouraged to speak about their past. Balancing these seemingly opposing situations has been difficult, and they can have a profound impact on their relations with peers and society at large.

Former child soldiers are particularly vulnerable under these circumstances. In the absence of family presence—due to loss or geographical distance or cut ties—former child soldiers often have to navigate the reintegration process alone. Despite having access to services and guidance provided by multiple institutions, the societal stigma in everyday encounters can leave serious scar tissue. The research on that topic is unequivocal:

*“In the case of individuals who were brought (willingly or otherwise) into the force as children, a life of combat and the social practices of the armed group may be all that the individual knows or remembers. Breaking away from this network of relationships, even with the promise of peace, may be too uncertain for many to bear, leading many to revert and cling to familiar (albeit violent) patterns of behavior. Since many programs attempt to demobilize children as quickly as possible, this psychological shift is inevitably incomplete. Indeed, it is difficult to say how much time it takes for this shift to fully occur, or in fact if it ever does.”*¹⁴⁹

Security

To make matters worse, ex-combatants have no control over the extent to which their backgrounds will be treated as confidential. Quite a few ex-combatants—either based on proxy or personal experience—mentioned the danger of retaliation. Targeted assassinations of ex-combatants have been quite common, although numbers are hard to find, especially since many combatants self-demobilize and seek refuge in the anonymity of urban centers. Indeed, it was difficult to identify ex-combatants in the cities in the preparational phase of the field work. Even with local and institutional assistance, finding ex-combatants who were willing to meet and talk posed a serious challenge. In certain geographical locations, the congregation of ex-combatants from multiple different armed groups that operated at the same time, often clashing violently in their struggle for territorial control over illicit trade products and routes, evidently makes staying hidden in the shadows of urban society vital for survival.

Beyond physical security, many ex-combatants also talked about the socio-economic struggles of finding work that would allow them to support their families. The double burden of being an ex-combatant as well as being unable to provide for their families constitutes a problem for men in a society that is founded on strict rules for gender roles and norms. While none of the male ex-combatants talked explicitly about this as an intrinsically gendered aspect of reintegration challenges, the way they talked about economic insecurity seemed to indicate their understanding of men's roles in Colombia. Signs of emotions such as bitterness, frustration, and anger prevailed when male ex-combatants talked about their inability to earn enough for food, health care, and education for their children.

In comparison to their older counterparts, the former boy soldiers seemed less concerned about economic insecurity, but few had families themselves. In addition, all former boy soldiers were either still in the process of receiving reintegration support or had recently finished it, and on average seemed to find being in the city, while challenging, an important stepping stone to rebuilding their lives.



Comuna 13, Medellín, April 2017 photo: Alexandra Amling

City

However, the submersion into city life was not always a smooth process. One former boy soldier (ELN) admitted, for example, that he had trouble using the bus when he first got to a city. The list of issues with the transition to urban centers is long, but it also speaks to the stark contrast between rural and urban Colombia. More than that, the issues are emblematic of the significant levels of inequality in Colombia as evident in levels of poverty and lack of access to basic infrastructure in the countryside. As a matter of fact, the ex-combatants' descriptions of being unfamiliar with things most urbanists take for granted these days (e.g., cell phones or debit cards) are but one example of widespread income disparity.

Another former boy soldier (FARC) elaborated further on the issue, moving beyond the mere socio-economic aspects of the "culture shock" of urban life:

“ The culture shock . . . We don't know much about the city, and honestly, not to victimize myself, but in the country you're more innocent. If there isn't any food, there are bananas, chickens, and you satisfy your hunger, but there is no evil. In the city there is evil. You find that if you don't work, you don't eat, you can't pay rent and nobody cares. It's not like that out in the country. If you have the countryside, if you didn't go to work one day, you can go the next day, but no one pays attention to what you have to try to steal it. I have my appreciation because here you emerge as a person. It's not difficult, but society itself, the insecurity, it's like it wants to take away what you have. You feel unsafe in this city because there's no lack of criminals that want to steal from you. ”

—Valle del Cauca, April 2017

The social critique coming through in this and the following statement is as much a testament to years of indoctrination by leftist guerilla movements as it is a representation of the origins of the people who were recruited into armed groups.

“What my colleagues are saying . . . it is just that it is a very different dynamic. We know about weapons and how to disassemble a rifle, how to march, the dynamics of war. This is what has influenced us, what is stuck in our minds, in our daily lives. And the dynamics of a city are completely different. That’s where there is a clash. You come to this concrete jungle and endure hunger. Society itself does its best to tell you that it doesn’t care if you’re starving out on the streets. Defend yourself however you can. When you’re out walking in the communities, there’s always a neighbor who will give you a glass of water, breakfast, that will sit you down at a table and tell you, ‘friend, neighbor, come have breakfast with me.’ In the city, individualism has eroded away so much that people don’t even greet you, when a greeting is something so essential in the life of a human being. And in the countryside, it’s an everyday occurrence. It’s friendly. Arriving here is . . . we move forward by the grace of God, those of us who believe in God, and we have that backbone as the human beings that we are, the Colombians that we are.”

—Former boy soldier (FARC), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

Moreover, these distinct experiences of two former boy soldiers underscore the problem with reintegration programs that have been tailored to a national, urban-based economic development strategy that has historically neglected the rural areas of Colombia. Of course, in the absence of viable jobs and economic alternatives in the countryside, the city offers more opportunities. But decades of economic disregard have meant that the state needs to step up its initiatives to develop its peripheral regions.

Naturally, not every ex-combatant is keen on participating in reintegration efforts that focus on rural-based projects such as agriculture or fishing (at the coast), given the low profits one derives from farming or fishing. Rather, the statements indicate the lack of concerted efforts to design and implement localized, community-based projects that benefit both historically marginalized communities and ex-combatants.

Gangs and other groups involved in illicit activities have long been feeding on these insecurities in the cities. Feelings of loss and abandonment, coupled with unaddressed psychological trauma, make former child soldiers a particularly vulnerable group at risk for recidivism. According to one former boy soldier, more than half drop out of the process. He attributed it to boredom, inability to focus, and the fact that the drug business generates more and faster money. Adding yet another layer, that of regaining authority and status, it is not difficult to see why gangs provide such a favorable alternative to young men, although recent quantitative research did not find a significant relationship between ex-combatants who demobilized as minors and potential for involvement in criminal activities associated with recidivism.¹⁵⁰ In a context such as Colombia, understanding the notions of strong masculinities and what is expected of men and boys is paramount to successful reintegration. After all, armed groups often represent power, strength, and authority. Coupled with financial gains, reintegration programs need to account for the male-specific vulnerabilities in reintegration programs that if unaddressed, could drive ex-combatants into recidivism.¹⁵¹

In the end, the city both pulls and pushes ex-combatants in different directions, and without guidance or support, it may be challenging to navigate such a complex environment. Shedding an identity in exchange for a new one leaves many ex-combatants stranded, especially where notions of status and authority are linked to masculinities. Indeed, moving from relative power (usually symbolized by wielding a gun) to the ranks of those in Colombia’s economic margins with the potential to fall under the poverty line is not a prospect most would look forward to. And while the city allows people to look for different jobs, without the proper education needed for well-paid jobs, ex-combatants face another set of obstacles.



Cali, April 2017 photo: Alexandra Amling

Education

In most cases, many ex-combatants had never finished high school due to early recruitment. Those with a certain level of education were eligible to take basic courses provided by the National Training Service, commonly known for its Spanish acronym SENA (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje). These courses are technical in nature and often focus on agricultural and mechanical jobs. In other words, blue-collar jobs that do not earn a lot of money. And while analysis indicates that women often run the risk of being placed in gender-stereotypical jobs such as hair dressing or tailoring, men are equally placed in trainings and jobs that reinforce gender stereotypes and might not necessarily reflect their capabilities and aspirations.

For example, one former boy soldier mentioned his desire to study psychology, given his experience with trauma and learning how to cope with his past in the armed group as well as struggling in the city. By studying psychology and becoming a certified therapist, the young man is aspiring to give back to the community and help ex-combatants as much as those who suffered under the rule of armed groups. Unfortunately for him, the ACR was not able to pay for university-level education. Similar sentiments came out in the focus group with the ACR ex-combatants. Quite a few male ex-combatants had to choose between providing for their families or higher education, if indeed higher education was a prospect paid for by the ACR.

In reality, few ex-combatants receive college education that is completely funded. The AUC focus group was particularly vocal in their criticism regarding the lack of proper educational attainment that they said is more than needed to move forward. The most upsetting fact was that financial support for college education terminates after a certain number of semesters. Due to family duties and/or lack of financial resources, most stopped their college education at the point where the ACR discontinued its support.

Given the sheer size of the AUC, tens of thousands of suddenly demobilized combatants represent an economic challenge to any government. It is, however, no excuse for any government to fail to establish guidelines and mechanisms to absorb these former AUC fighters. The lack of provisions for AUC fighters came through in the focus groups but has also been mentioned by current Minister of Labor Rafael Pardo, who was a senator at the time: “I know of no specific government, or private program, or a plan by the private sector, that addresses the question of what to do with these people. That is a major problem.”¹⁵²

Employment

The issue of engaging the private sector in hiring former combatants is an endemic problem, and is not just specific to the AUC combatants. The 1990s saw some land distribution among combatants of the CRS. But due to insecurity, many ex-combatants said they had to leave these areas. Not only did it impact families who were often forced to be separated, it also destroyed the ability of ex-combatants to work the land they were given. For others, the “proyecto productivo” was not exactly an income-generating activity, especially when that outcome did not match with expectations.

“ You would get an equivalency diploma, get to high school, but from there you wouldn’t take the next step, not because you didn’t have aspirations, but because you had responsibilities to support yourself, work, and the productive project wasn’t the most profitable in order to be able to go to college. . . . That didn’t allow me to be the head of household, support my family and go study. . . . Economic conditions were not very favorable. ”

—Male ex-combatant (CRS), Sucre, March 2017

Interestingly, one focus group suggested that the difficulty of finding a job had less to do with them being ex-combatants than with the fact that the situation in their communities did not provide any jobs or opportunities, forcing many to leave and seek work elsewhere. Those lucky enough to find and retain employment said it was mostly about networks and connections, and not necessarily about qualifications, training, or education. It is sometimes more who you know, and less about what you know, as an ex-combatant suggested. To this day, though, finding work is even more difficult when both partners in a relationship are demobilized.

As Colombia developed and the DDR processes evolved, so did the bureaucratic layers that accompanied these processes. According to the ex-combatants who reintegrated with support from the ACR, the more formalized structure of the ACR, which requires ex-combatants to get certified by the Operational Committee for the Abandonment of Weapons (more commonly known for its Spanish acronym, CODA)¹⁵³ has made it almost impossible for ex-combatants to conceal their past.

The development of a database initially built to support ex-combatants in their search for employment has had the opposite effect. Background checks by companies often lead back to this database and can cause businesses and companies to decide against hiring a former combatant out of prejudice. Similarly, the issuance of an ID card (CODA certificate), ostensibly created to facilitate access to the reintegration program, can impede progress; it's unclear, for example, why certain ID cards expired, but it appears to cause tremendous issues for ex-combatants:

“ My ID card is invalid because of the process. I can't look for work because I look like I've been marked. If I take my ID card to the bank for a loan, they won't give it to me because it isn't valid. So, they've got me trapped. I completed the psychosocial process and I served my sentence—the entire three-year process, but that still hasn't been fixed. I don't have the same rights. ”

—Male ex-combatant (AUC), Córdoba, March 2017

“ In my case, because I took seven semesters, I have vocational and technological training, but to work as a systems technician in a company . . . I can't do that because of my legal issue. My ID card was invalidated. It's under review for disciplinary action at the state's attorney's office. And if you're going to work, they ask you for the certificate from the state's attorney, and since there's a disciplinary action against you, it's impossible. ”

—Male ex-combatant (AUC), Córdoba, March 2017

Indeed, in cases pending with the prosecutor's office, former combatants were unable to access any services. While judicial processes are important, especially given the widespread impunity that followed the DDR process of the AUC, this inability to find work and provide for their families puts entire families at risk.

“ Since I left, I've been paying rent, and I had to set up there. Jobless and homeless. How am I supposed to pay rent? And with children. ”

—Male ex-combatant (AUC), Córdoba, March 2017

In the examples above, male ex-combatants are confronted with the harsh reality of being unable or struggling to support their families. The quote also highlights the degree to which society subjects men to gender norms that pressure them to take full responsibility for their families. Interestingly, neither men nor women in the focus groups ever questioned that particular fact.

Family

In other cases, the status of ex-combatants negatively affected their families. This issue was found across multiple focus groups, regardless of generation, armed group affiliation, or gender. In the larger scheme of things, this factor weighed extremely heavily on ex-combatants.

“ With respect to your family, they are also affected. It's not only us but the entire family. In my case, my sister, she is professional, she was able to go to school and she was working in a bank as an adviser. And when they realized she had a brother who had belonged to a group, they said she had a brother who was a guerilla fighter who posed a threat to the bank. So, they fired her. ”

—Former boy soldier (FARC), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

Another ex-combatant (CRS) talked about cautioning a comrade's daughters to keep quiet about their father's past in order to keep their jobs. One former boy soldier mentioned the plight of his father who lost a job and has been struggling to find employment since.

At the same time, family can serve as a key motivation to leave. Reflecting on the impact on their families, the former child soldiers talked about their mothers playing an important role, both in their leaving but also for their staying in the reintegration process. They owe it to their mothers, some opined, to become better people and citizens of Colombia again. The symbolism of the mother here cannot be underestimated. What constituted a blessing for the boy soldiers has been a matter of stigma for the female ex-combatants because they often left their children and families for the life with an armed group.



Comuna 13, Medellín, April 2017 photo: Alexandra Amling

Community

This view on women abandoning their gender roles as mothers and Colombian women mattered especially among older generations of female ex-combatants. There is, according to the focus groups, a change in attitudes but it is difficult to establish whether this gradual change is due to enforced community outreach by the ACR and civil society organizations, wariness about war, or the fact that Colombia has undergone multiple reintegration processes. What matters, however, is the fact that there is—seemingly—a tangible shift in attitudes toward ex-combatants occurring.

“ I want to add that we arrived at a time when society wasn’t as ready. It’s still something that’s lacking now. But in those years, it was even more difficult to be accepted by society. That’s why many colleagues were rejected, discriminated against. There was a pretty big stigma. Now it is different because we have integrated ourselves into society, we have reintegrated, and you could say that it’s easier now. People are more understanding. ”

—Former boy soldier (FARC), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

In part, the ex-combatants themselves dedicated a lot of time to working with communities, both out of a sense of duty and also to prepare the path for future generations of ex-combatants.

“ One of our tasks, for those of us that are further along, has been to try to participate in outreach sessions in society to raise awareness among people about who we are, to get exposure, so that the stigma comes to an end. We have laid the path for many people who are now arriving and for those who arrive in the future. You could say it wasn’t easy at first. We have always tried, as much as possible, to not let people know. ”

—Former boy soldier (FARC), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

Indeed, trying to live with communities and being patient in their approach appears to have worked for some of the former child soldiers. In communities that have borne the brunt of war, such as indigenous communities, attempts at rapprochement have been particularly delicate, as one former boy soldier experienced firsthand. His statement speaks to many issues; the experience left a profound impact on his struggle to reconcile his identity as a fighter and his indigenous roots.

“ When I built my first stool in a woodshop, I cried out of happiness. Why? Because for a very long time I had assembled and disassembled firearms and built bombs and things like that. This time around I had made a stool, something that would be of use to someone, that would do good. When I saw that growing yuca (cassava root) and plantain and that fishing brought the communities joy, I started to learn from them and realized that there are other ways to serve the communities. Now, when we go away, they ask about us, wondering where we are. I do belong in this community and will continue to belong here. I’ve had many meetings. One day in one of those meetings the chief [known as Cacique in Spanish], who is the highest authority in the community, said: ‘I interact with everyone. The fact that there is a guerrilla member sitting with us right now is proof of that,’ and everyone turned around and looked at me. One of them once said that I did not look like a guerrilla fighter, that I looked like humble man. And the chief said that I was a humble guerrilla fighter. ”

—Former boy soldier (FARC), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

Parts of these engagements also lead to rebuilding one’s own life. At the nexus of social and economic reintegration, community approaches like those described above lay the foundation for greater reconciliation. In the end, the community may begin to see that they also have to adapt to a new reality. Put differently, reintegration processes are not simply an ex-combatant’s business. The steep learning curve affects everyone in Colombia. It also speaks to an interesting point the young ex-combatant

made in the focus group; the ACR offers material incentives that alone cannot compensate for the immense loss of belonging and community that an armed group provided. On the contrary, this young man described the need to find like-minded people, often beginning by gathering ex-combatants in transition homes and in the trainings. It brought them, he said, one step closer to rebuilding social ties outside an armed group, and to transforming from combatant to civilian.

To counter some of these problems and to allow former combatants to live in a more collective setting, the government established settlements at the outskirts of some urban centers in the 1990s. In one city in the department of Córdoba, former AUC members lived in communities just across the river from a housing project that was built specifically for members of the EPL. This EPL settlement was never finished and continues to lack basic infrastructure such as electricity, sewers, and access to clean water. In 2017, the streets were unpaved and the houses were bare concrete. Time stood still there.

Despite the somewhat eerie atmosphere, there was a tangible sense of community. In the area where the AUC paramilitaries had settled down, being out at night amid sparsely lit streets had felt strangely safe. The reason is that the community looks out for each other. Relations with the police were said to be good, and any stranger riding through the neighborhood would be identified quickly. Amid ongoing insecurity and economic struggles, these tightly-knit communities provide some comfort and safety.



ZVTN "La Paz", Cesar, April 2017 photo: Haizea Arratitel

Ex-combatants from the EPL made similar remarks. They talked about their reliance on both ex-combatants and the community at large. The violent past has left a strong mark in this region, but precisely because almost every community had been affected in one way or another, people help each other out. A not-unimportant fact here is that the EPL ex-combatants resettled as a collective, and both the non-combatant and ex-combatant communities had been targeted by the FARC or ELN after DDR.

Trust

For those ex-combatants who were active in more politically-focused groups, the difficulty of transitioning back was compounded by their inability to continue their activism. While some armed groups, such as the EPL and the M-19, could negotiate some guarantees for political participation, it was not always easy to find entry points to run for local government structures. At times, it was the targeting by the FARC who considered other ex-combatants traitors that forced people into hiding.

“It [peace agreement and DDR] was a consensus. Once it was seen that the armed struggle was losing momentum, that the fight was political, we just demobilized and the politics . . . ended up there. But . . . the FARC killed many of us.”

—Male ex-combatant (EPL), Córdoba, March 2017

When asked, FARC combatants admitted to using violent tactics in persecuting ex-combatants. In their justification, the FARC stated that these former rebels were traitors. Unlike the FARC, these ex-combatants had decided to go back to their houses and forget about their struggle. And precisely because the FARC envisions future political activism, its members refused to identify as ex-combatants.

But even without the threat of the FARC or other armed groups, ex-combatants have struggled to rally support behind their agendas. If they succeeded but their past was revealed, some ex-combatants were faced with enormous prejudice that ended their political aspirations. Another problem has been local police or army units forbidding any sort of gathering of former ex-combatants.

The incident in the department of Sucre and the sudden appearance of police during the focus group, though not causing problems, underscored the suspicion among law enforcement and the difficulty for many ex-combatants to organize politically.

“I must also say that in many places where the Current of Socialist Renovation [CRS] has left, that it’s been difficult for us to have a political stake, whether it be through assembly or city council. . . . As a group, we have not had a clear route to follow in politics. We need to say that so that it doesn’t happen with the FARC and the ELN [now].”

—Male ex-combatant (CRS), Sucre, March 2017

This very situation is reminiscent of other concerns ex-combatants mentioned. For example, in the event of a theft or another commotion in a community, the police often try to establish whether the person of concern is a former combatant. In case of an arrest, the police would equally investigate first if the suspect/criminal was an ex-combatant. Granted that while the concerns of local law enforcement are not unwarranted given the large scale of BACRIM presence and other illegal groups, this double burden of being an ex-combatant and being looked upon with suspicion amplifies existing mental health problems that often lead to substance abuse or suicide.

Gender

When asked about the degree to which, if any, they felt treated differently than female ex-combatants during the reintegration process, the male ex-combatants explained that they had not experienced differential treatment, although in their stories, some ex-combatants talked about struggles of female comrades that indicated gendered problems of reintegration. For example, a former boy soldier talked about a former girl soldier who demobilized with two children. She had neither the opportunity (due to her role as a mother) nor the education to find work. According to him, the only way out for her was to get involved in illegal activities.

It is unclear if the girl was participating in vocational training or had access to the same institution all former child soldiers (interviewed for this study) were sent to by the ICBF. Regardless, the anecdote does reveal one shortcoming that has been identified globally as a challenge for female ex-combatants with children; the inability of programs and projects to account for the different availability and schedules of single parents.

Interestingly, no man—except the FARC men in “La Paz”—recognized the lack of a gender perspective in the past peace agreements, nor did they acknowledge that these agreements were entirely negotiated by men. According to their experiences of the reintegration processes, women had not been marginalized or did not face disadvantages. However, one former EPL combatant made an interesting observation that in his experience the absence of misconduct did not translate into equality, per se.

“I can treat a woman right and think that things are equal for everyone, that everyone enjoys the same rights and conditions, I can believe [in] that [ideal], but the truth is that there are many hardships in the community and many shortcomings in that sense, because there are many vandal groups. You know that where there are drugs, gangs, and weapons, you know they [those gangs] involve minors [girls and boys alike] in so many of their dealings, be it drugs, gang activity, prostitution and all of that . . . so it’s very hard to say that it’s like that . . . I’d say about 50 percent.”

—Male ex-combatant (EPL), Antioquia, April 2017

With regards to community acceptance, the male ex-combatants also did not remember any mistreatment of women. Neither did the men feel they were treated worse than women. The mixed focus groups often agreed in unison that the process was fair for everyone.

Although many ex-combatants had been severely marginalized on racial and ethnic grounds, unlike women and girls, men (mostly) are not subjected to strict gender norms that render them vulnerable to ostracization or domestic and intimate partner violence once demobilized. Even so, the societal pressures put on men and boys to conform to expected roles and responsibilities should not be deemphasized either. For example, the fear of failing to support their families has put enormous pressure on demobilized men because men are supposed to be the breadwinners. On average, though, women and girls are marginalized much more profoundly than men, especially when they have been associated with rebel groups.

Compared to older generations, former boy soldiers seem to have had a slightly higher chance of moving up the socio-economic ladder. Young in age and without families to provide for, former boy soldiers may at least try different professions and take different classes and trainings. Most seasoned ex-combatants did not have such a “luxury.” In a way, after the demobilization is before the demobilization. In economic and financial terms, many ex-combatants have not bettered their situation. That is—sadly—quite ironical, since so many ex-combatants joined armed groups due to perceived or real inequalities; they came from poor and marginalized communities. One male FARC guerilla expressed this quite poignantly:

“ We deliberately did not participate in the demobilization process because many demobilized M-19 members ended up selling mangoes on some corner. And how sad it is for a rebel fighter who has fought for the people to end up ignored by the state, having to suffer through the very conditions against which they had taken up arms in the first place. That makes no logical common sense; they were relegated. Our comrades who belonged to Corriente de Renovación Socialista [Current of Socialist Renovation] ended up in their houses, completely lost from a political standpoint, and the same happened to Ejército Popular de Liberación [The People’s Liberation Army], they came to an end. . . . How wonderful would it be if FARC were the meeting point [politically speaking] where the Colombian people converged, where many comrades who were forgotten by the state in their [peace/amnesty] processes and others who were saved came together. ”

—Male FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

Conclusion

In sum, male ex-combatants face multiple challenges when reintegrating. Stigma underlies most of the factors associated with difficulty of transitioning to civilian life. This is particularly evident in the struggle to find or retain work, as well as rebuilding social ties with communities and organizing politically. The lack of educational attainment—either having no access or lacking financial means to continue education—amplifies these insecurities and vulnerabilities. It keeps ex-combatants slightly above the poverty line with little prospect of breaking that cycle of socio-economic inequality that often was what caused them to join an armed group in the first place.

Interestingly, all male ex-combatants did not question their status as it relates to gendered expectations, though the struggle to transition back to civilian life was compounded by the fact that men were stuck in a continuum of gender stereotypes that require them to be the strongman. This notion of strong masculinities came through in most interviews. It drives men’s desire to make the reintegration process work for the sake of their families. But it also makes them targets for gangs and other rebel groups who exploit feelings about power and authority through the symbolic meaning of holding a gun and making profits from illicit activities.

Last, lack of protection from the assassinations of former combatants by criminal gangs and other armed groups, and harassment by government forces, have eroded much of the trust in government forces. Not that there was much trust to begin with, but the failure of the government to provide safeguards for ex-combatants during the challenging journey of transformation to civilian life has far more long-term consequences, especially as it relates to the current peace process with the FARC. While the government has evidently drawn from all its peace processes and keeps incorporating these lessons in its efforts to improve the reintegration programs, the experiences above indicate that the social reintegration component needs more attention, especially since it influences the ability of ex-combatants to reintegrate economically. How these issues compare to those of female ex-combatants will be discussed below.

The Women

+ Identity

"After 29 years, I feel I am a citizen with full rights, without denying that my condition as an ex-combatant woman still represents a brand that hinders my access to some jobs and some public scenarios. The road has not been easy, above all, because I decided not to deny or hide my condition as an ex-combatant."

—Female ex-combatant (M-19), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

+ Identity

"Adapting isn't that difficult. . . . You get offended because you . . . have the beliefs and the politics that you were taught in the past, but it's like accepting that each person has their own way of thinking and way of doing things."

—Former girl soldier (group affiliation unknown), Antioquia, March 2017

+ Family

"It's said here in Colombia that the family is the fundamental pillar of society, so it's about seeing what they've gone through [with the reintegration processes of family members]."

—Female ex-combatant (AUC), Cesar, April 2017

- Gender

"Something that's clear and that is really a critique of the agreements is that we as women were not taken into consideration."

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

- Education

"It is easier for men to find employment. A man leaves the residential institution here and if he doesn't have experience, he can work in construction and he'll be employed. Instead, for us women, if we don't know something, then we are screwed. We can't get a job unless it is sweeping, mopping, or washing dishes and I don't think we're willing [to do that]."

—Former girl soldier (group affiliation unknown), Antioquia, March 2017

- Trust

"They [ACR representatives] only wanted to show the pretty side of the program. . . . They didn't want the negative side of the program to be known . . . It's not all bad; we must highlight the good, but also make it known that the reality is that there are problems."

—Female ex-combatant (AUC), Cesar, April 2017

- Trust

"My community, not all, but the women from the association, other similar groups, at least know I was part of a political-revolutionary process, but even still, I don't know if I'm part of that community. They let us in, but it's not like they've fully accepted us yet."

—Female ex-combatant (PRT), Sucre, March 2017

- City

"It's . . . the issue of where you're from, the vast majority of guys and girls who are here in the mountains are campesinos, so they've lacked a lot of things. They come to the city and cannot do a city job because they are not prepared for that."

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

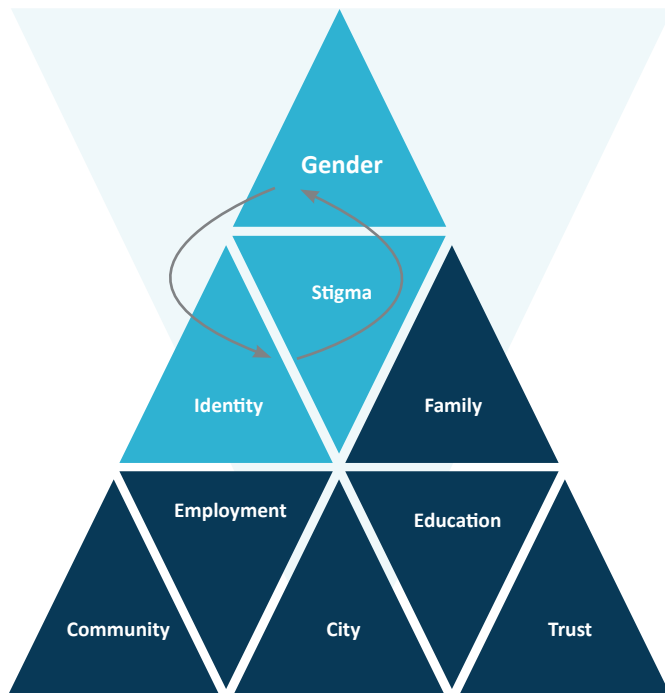
Compared to the eight quotes listed for the men, which touched upon multiple factors that determined their ability to reintegrate with ease or difficulty and where stigma played a bigger role, the data for women revealed more focused reflections related to the different levels of identity, including gender. While stigma constituted an obvious obstacle for many women, especially those who reintegrated in the 1990s, the female ex-combatants contextualized their experiences more profoundly than the male ex-combatants. In other words, the female ex-combatants shared their experiences and challenges as both ex-combatants and Colombian women.

“ We are trying to build trust. We’re working on that dynamic right now, that a demobilized woman of the armed forces not be seen as an armed woman, instead trying to build that trust, that she’s a woman who comes from a process, she shouldn’t be put into a box. Because she’s a woman, she’s already in a different situation. ”

—Female ex-combatant (AUC), Cesar, April 2017

As with the quotes for the male ex-combatants, there is no hierarchy to them as they stand here, other than demonstrating—yet again—that the negative experiences outnumbered the positive experiences. The number of negative experiences also indicates that women face just as many challenges as men. The difference here is that the women understood the intrinsically gendered nature of their challenges, pointing out the way women’s needs had not been adequately addressed in peace processes.

FIGURE 8: HIERARCHY OF FACTORS DETERMINING REINTEGRATION EASE OR DIFFICULTY: FEMALE EX-COMBATANTS



As such, the pyramid for women (Figure 8) features gender at the top, because most—if not all—experiences and challenges were influenced or impacted by the stereotypes women have faced. Put differently, stigma was compounded by notions of gender that caused female ex-combatants to be judged twice as hard as men.

Similar to the factors for men, none of the factors listed in the women-specific pyramid work in isolation. All factors intersect, such as gender and stigma combined, influencing the way female ex-combatants had to reconsider their reproductive roles and their relationship to their families. However, in contrast to the men, women were constantly negotiating their identities vis-a-vis their environments. As a result, factors such as identity, gender, and family were less separated from stigma than the pyramid depicts. In fact, there is almost a circular movement that binds gender, stigma, and identity together in a much more pronounced way.

As with the men, the bottom of the pyramid features factors that were mentioned at a lower frequency than those on the top and in the middle. Interestingly, and unlike the men, the female ex-combatants appeared less hung up on the issues that impeded their ability to transition back to civilian life without problems. This is not to say that women are stronger, or that the men were simply wallowing in self-pity. On the contrary, the data merely suggests that the female ex-combatants had found better coping mechanisms than the men and seemed eager to look for opportunities.

Something that stood out from the focus groups with female ex-combatants was their strong critique of the reintegration programs not only neglecting a gender lens, but also underestimating the reasons why women or girls joined in the first place. As mentioned, for the longest time, those in charge of designing reintegration programs worked off of the premise that men and women had the same needs. This simplistic approach underestimates that fact that men and boys do not always join for the same reasons as women. And where they do, there is still more nuance to it. In other words, men and boys often join to empower themselves for economic, political, and social means. In fact, men and boys join for reasons that reinforce gender norms rather than challenge them. Manhood in this context is associated with status, power, and authority which then become embodied in holding a gun. Women and girls, on the other hand, often join groups to transgress culturally sanctioned roles that situate them below the status of men and perpetuate social marginalization. Arguably, one could say that the propaganda of guerilla movements had worked enough to convince government officials that female and male ex-combatants were equal, and therefore should not be treated differently.

The problem here is more structural, though. In their own words, many women and girls joined voluntarily to escape domestic violence, discrimination, or marginalization. Some armed groups provided protection and offered a certain level of empowerment. Discounting this aspect of motivation for joining an armed group translates directly into perpetuating gender inequality, as the trainings and services did not match the aspirations of those female ex-combatants who experienced different levels of emancipation in their groups. For example, the M-19 and the FARC provided some women with the opportunity to lead platoons and smaller teams. Such skills, managing and leading people, may be a real asset and catapult women into positions of leadership in civilian life. This neglect reinforces the observations made for the male ex-combatants: the experience of the process of reintegration seems to matter less than ensuring ex-combatants go through the process.

“The reason why I am here is because long ago, when I was nine years old . . . there were many massacres. . . . It was the paramilitaries . . . they went there and wreaked havoc, killing many adults. They killed them, cut them up, dismembered them with a chainsaw; they raped little boys and girls, hung them from trees as if they were nothing. I saw it with my very eyes, and that is what I had to experience when I lived there, because my grandfather was killed by the paramilitaries. . . . I wanted to fight to make my world a better place, to change the violence that we had been forced to live through. And I also realized that in the city there was much violence also against women, against children and everyone.”

—Female FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

What makes the analysis and the write-up of an orderly narration of the female ex-combatant focus groups so difficult here is that many factors (e.g., city, gender, family, stigma, etc.) are impossible to disentangle. Where possible, quotes are listed under one factor with the understanding that each quote may speak to other factors just as much.

One final point of difference between male and female ex-combatants was that the concerns of the younger female ex-combatants were not always closely associated with those of the women from earlier peace processes, although the concerns fell under the same categories. For example, the younger ex-combatants discussed gender issues less from a conceptual point of view than the older generations. Even so, their descriptions of processes and experiences expressed the gendered nature of reintegration in a more direct way than the men were able to articulate. Furthermore, the female ex-combatants, on average, appeared to be more concrete and detailed in their criticism than the male ex-combatants.

Stigma

One such example was the former girl soldiers talking about the failure of certain institutions to prepare them for the world outside the walls of their reintegration programs. During the trainings and classes, the former girl soldiers said they always engaged with other ex-combatants. Obviously, the level of comfort to open up about their past in a rebel group was much higher than in civil society.

“There are many things that are different . . . [in] society, I can’t talk as much about how it is outside, because I wasn’t able to leave [the school], just for work. From here to work and back here. . . . Working in a company is different because [of] the people you interact with . . . at that time everything was going on with the peace process and many argued about that and you couldn’t say anything, because it’s something that you have to swallow. . . . So, it was difficult, but it is always complicated.”

—Former girl soldier (group affiliation unknown), Antioquia, March 2017

But exactly how to relate to others was not part of the curriculum. Of all the useful tools and skills they learned, the girl soldiers often felt left to their own devices when navigating life outside an armed group and the protective walls of their reintegration programs.

“You leave here [training facility for former child soldiers] and that’s when the big problem starts. The fear, the fear of being recognized by society as you are, because here we were never taught to say who we are or where we come from without fear.”

—Former girl soldier (group affiliation unknown), Antioquia, March 2017

The feeling of unease and fear caused one former girl soldier to get trapped in a web of lies that she was eventually unable to maintain. Once she decided for herself to open up, she felt better about herself but also realized that she felt more integrated into society.

“ Yes, I do I feel like I’m part of society now, because I’m going to school, because I have more of a social life. At first it was really tough, but I started to mull things over again and I spoke with a friend who is a doctor. He told me not to be afraid to say who I am; because I felt like I was lying whenever I was asked why I was here, or why I lived alone, because I wasn’t with my family . . . so it was one lie after another, after another. . . . so I felt bad, because I didn’t remember to keep up with all of the lies I had told. I ended up saying something else. He gave me advice to say where I was from and why I was here. And since I started to implement that, I’ve felt much better. Because that is being true to yourself and honest with others. People are very curious to find out why I was there and to hear about how my experience was, if it was hard. . . . It is best to be honest with people so that they don’t start speculating about lots of stuff. And they accept you as you are. That’s why I feel so good. ”

—Former girl soldier (group affiliation unknown), Antioquia, March 2017

Another female ex-combatant (EPL, Sucre) told a similar story where she was initially hesitant to share her background. But because of her fear that someone else might end up talking about her and even distort the facts, she ultimately decided to tell her colleagues about her past. To her surprise, her story was well received, and they began to discuss how to solve present-day problems as they relate to the economy, politics, and the communities themselves.

When asked whether the stigma against them was also related to them being women, the former girl soldiers all agreed that they had never faced stigma due to their gender. While their group was too small in number to generalize their experience, it was nonetheless an interesting finding given that women who demobilized in the 1990s have had very different experiences. For them, stigma was amplified by gender stereotypes that painted an especially dark picture of female ex-combatants.

“ Women ex-combatants are double judged and stigmatized for transgressing traditional gender roles by joining an armed group and for confronting the system as insurgents. ”

—Female ex-combatant (M-19), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

“ So us female rebels don’t have lives, but we have one inside the military. Our lives revolve around the men and women who have taken up arms. Starting from scratch—that is what we women have said, those of us that have taken up arms in the guerrilla forces. We arrived after a peace agreement to rebuild our lives from nothing because we didn’t have friends anymore. ”

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

Indeed, women taking up arms was frowned upon in a society where women have been relegated to the household and where violence against women is rampant.¹⁵⁴ Openly questioning and challenging the system in that case almost weighed more than the fact that women had become guerilla fighters. This is one of many examples where one factor (stigma) intersected directly with gender. Of course, the experiences of all ex-combatants, regardless of sex, are inherently gendered, but the ability to articulate that was stronger with the women.

Given this heavy burden for women and based on their direct experiences, many female ex-combatants from the 1990s process said they came together to organize, trying to influence future peace processes. One such example came from a female ex-combatant from the EPL (Sucre, March 2017) who talked about calling upon relevant stakeholders to consider the different needs women have, both physically and mentally. A few women in the focus groups expressed their sincere hope that the FARC, and specifically their women, would draw from years of political organizing on women’s rights.

At the local level, female ex-combatants have been trying to forge new relationships with communities that would allow other female ex-combatants to reintegrate without major obstacles.

“ We are trying to build trust. We’re working on that dynamic right now, that a demobilized woman of the armed forces not be seen as an armed woman, instead trying to build that trust, that she’s a woman who comes from a process, [so] she shouldn’t be put into a box. Because she’s a woman, she’s already in a different situation. So, we’re talking about that in certain communities. I’ve even done it within my own community [which is an indigenous community]. So, it’s to try to make the ground fertile for when these women [from the FARC] arrive, to try to facilitate the process for them so that it’s not like what it was for us. ”

—Female ex-combatant (AUC), Cesar, April 2017

At the same time, some of the women are also educating their communities, beginning with their own families. Teaching non-violent ways, one female ex-combatant said, was a direct outcome of her own experience, and has shaped her identity as she becomes the person she wants to be.



ZVTN "La Paz", Cesar, April 2017 photo: Alexandra Amling

Identity

What is so interesting about this fact is that this ex-combatant used her role as a mother to educate her own children as a means of transforming Colombian society while also promoting reconciliation. Another female ex-combatant referred to the family in the Colombian context as an important pillar. By projecting family values onto society at large, these women were referencing a significant identity marker that helped them to overcome their own challenges as women who had transgressed stereotypical gender roles. The reproductive role of a mother thus gave them not only tools to support efforts to educate communities, but also helped them overcome the burden of stigma.

“ As a mother, I decided that I was never going to educate my children in violence, that I would never mistreat them, that I would never lay a hand on them, and I have followed that up until now. . . . I think that wherever you go, with your home as your example, it’s like that is the nation’s experience, to transmit it to the community. ”

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

Stigma against ex-combatants often lingers for long periods of time; these female ex-combatants accepted that reality and tried to transform the gender stereotypes as caregivers into a proactive role. Though they were able to cross an important threshold on their journey back to civilian life and shed their ex-combatant identity for one that is less and less associated with armed groups, it is difficult to change attitudes in society.

For the former girl soldiers, constructing a new identity was directly related to education, but not simply learning how to read and write. They understood education as the process by which they transformed themselves. Aside from coursework and training, the former girl soldiers appreciated the way education contributes to personal growth which also coincides, in their opinion, with shaping identities.

“ There are people who learn empirically and earn even more than us. Then they just think that they need people who pay taxes, who produce for the country and that’s it! They don’t think that it’s truly necessary to grow as a person and as a human being and that is what education does. Education doesn’t just mean learning how to read and write, but learning how to grow as human beings, learning values and principles. ”

—Former girl soldier (group affiliation unknown), Antioquia, March 2017.

Obviously, willpower and patience are required to appreciate the larger implications of education and the tools different institutions are able to provide. Interestingly, these ex-combatants criticized both male and female ex-combatants for their inability to understand education in these broader terms, and to stay in the program. One former girl soldier kept talking about how “most of the girls who leave here . . . go out to go get married or look for someone to support them.” Some former girl soldiers end up in prostitution. Similarly, male ex-combatant who drop out are either “in jail or are dead; some pick up their weapons again.” Others join the military. Taken together, these dropouts represent a large at-risk group for recidivism, a finding that corresponds with official statistics.

But it also points to a larger problem with reintegration programs that underestimate gender norms in society that increase the pressure for both male and female ex-combatants. As mentioned, machismo and strong masculinities set the stage for boys at a very young age. Being unable to live up to expectations of manhood makes reintegration challenging for men and boys. Women and girls, on the other hand, often break more radically with their gender identities when joining an armed group. Yet, while some women and girls are able to capitalize on this newfound freedom within the confines of their armed groups, some only transcend their gender identities to a degree. Once disconnected from the group, some of the girls and women find themselves in a society whose values and norms have not changed but which they also do not challenge.

The blame, however, does not rest with any one single person. On the contrary, one former girl soldier blamed it on a larger system that created a culture that is not favorable toward ex-combatants. She used domestic violence as an example, where children are often socialized into accepting the father beating the mother. Such violent identities, she said, are tricky to transform, especially that of the passive observer role. Indeed, without knowledge and awareness as well as guidance, it is challenging to deconstruct the combatant identity and construct a new identity that is not shaped by stigma and rejection and preconceived gender norms that deemphasize women’s role in society and politics.

Family

This is particularly true for female ex-combatants with children when they returned home. At times, children rejected their mothers because they felt abandoned and were thus less likely to reconcile with their mothers. In other situations, families were displaced while the women were with their respective groups, making it difficult for them to reunite. Ex-combatants often had to go into hiding, adding yet another layer of complexity to reunification attempts.

“To get my family back—those ties that get lost in war and also those that get lost to the land, because some of them had to be in different places other than where they were from.”

—Female ex-combatant (PRT), Sucre, March 2017

In a society where a high value is placed on motherhood, female ex-combatants struggled with that aspect of their life choices. In fact, while the male ex-combatants worried more about issues of providing for their families economically and financially—and in doing so did not question their gender identity—the female ex-combatants reflected more deeply on their diverse roles as mothers, caregivers, breadwinners, and activists. Each represents a challenge in and of itself. Each is associated with a different identity. But aligning them in a setting where DDR processes did not take these roles and identities into account made it obviously very difficult for women.

“It [transition] is always difficult because it’s starting a new life; it starts practically from scratch, yearning, a lot of grief, leaving different groups. I always went between the city and the countryside, more in the city, but also in the country, and so you go about taking on different roles. But after the process, being in a particular city, adapting to different situations, thinking of this stigmatizing society . . . yes, it’s intense and it’s very difficult, above all because there are no friendly policies, policies that don’t help the process, the lack of comprehensive support and a gender-based approach at the time, too. . . . For example, going back to the productive and reproductive role of a mother, seeing your children afterwards. . . . Our children were born in 1990 and ‘91, so taking on the role of being a mother, the role of earning money, transportation in order to participate in political life, to study . . . that’s what makes it difficult.”

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

The ways stigma extended into their families came up with the female ex-combatants as well. One former AUC ex-combatant from Córdoba mentioned her son being kicked out of the military because of her. That situation was even further complicated by the fact that the family of her husband had connections with guerilla movements. The impact that can have on children does not require a lot of imagination.

But family was also associated with positive experiences, such as support for former girl soldiers at the time they resettled to urban centers for their reintegration process. While contact was often limited, former child soldiers, male and female alike, highlighted the important role of families while demobilizing. In environments that are completely foreign to them, such as the city, having family ties can make a huge difference for ex-combatants, especially in terms of their mental health.

City

Yet, the city was never described by women as the daunting place many male ex-combatants had experienced it to be. On the contrary, the former girl soldiers saw immense opportunity for themselves, while the older generation did not reflect upon it as much, which is partly attributable to the fact that many of the female ex-combatants had worked clandestinely in urban centers during their time in the armed groups, or as in the case of the M-19 women, had been recruited in the city. They seemed, on average, more familiar with urban life.

Even if having problems with city life was not a direct personal experience, the female ex-combatants were aware of the challenges posed for those combatants who had lived most of their lives in the jungle or the countryside prior to taking up arms.

“It’s the issue that I was just telling you about, the issue of where you’re from. The vast majority of guys and girls who are here in the mountains are campesinos, so they’ve lacked a lot of things. They come to the city and cannot do a city job because they are not prepared for that, they have to go do a rural job, but the rural job has its seasons, its time periods. When you go to plant, to harvest, it’s not like today you’re harvesting here and tomorrow [you] are producing. During this time of the harvest, [there are] also [vulnerabilities such as] a plague, a drought, a harsh winter, and there are no policies for any of those projects.”

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

Of course, the situation has changed tremendously since the establishment of the ACR and the implementation of a more holistic approach toward reintegration. Due to these adjustments in the programs, the former girl soldiers have been able to access much better services and trainings than the generations that preceded them. In addition, while the ACR by its own account has no definite gender policy because the ACR caters to individual needs, female ex-combatants are at least recognized and included in reintegration strategies. As Colombia’s industry and economy are diversifying and expanding due to relative security and stability, there are even more prospects for the FARC combatants.

Employment

However, the mere existence of jobs in the cities does not mean ex-combatants will have access to them. Female ex-combatants were affected by the ACR database in the same way the males were.

“Look how the government was supposedly going to respect our right to privacy in our internal affairs [rebel past]. They had told us that when we left, that we were going to be just like anyone else, that we were going to be subject to a process obviously, but that that was going to be handled by the ACR. But that was a big lie, that process of privacy, because it didn’t happen. I can tell you . . . some of the blame is the program or the government. Some companies had access when that was private. . . . How many people have returned to taking up arms because of this rejection?”

—Female ex-combatant (AUC), Cesar, April 2017

Similarly, reliance on contacts and networks was evident among female as well as male ex-combatants. For example, one female former AUC member recounted the problems with ex-combatants accessing high-profile jobs (such as mechanics, engineers, or operators) in the mining sector. Only after a professor intervened and supported some ex-combatants to take the necessary coursework for these types of jobs were ex-combatants able to become employed in the sector. Just like the men, some female ex-combatants had traveled around the country to find work.

“Small cities don’t offer [jobs], there are no jobs. There is no network that allows you, on your own merits, access. Everything is politically connected, because that prevents many female combatants, with their skills, experiences, from having the chance to have these jobs. Here, the system isn’t interested in you, or in anything.”

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

The lack of employment in rural areas was another significant parallel the women shared with the male ex-combatants. In fact, “reintegration is not enabled by jobs that do not exist. In some cases, demobilization and reintegration will actually create unemployment, particularly among women.”¹⁵⁵ This was particularly true for the early peace processes in Colombia.

“When we talk about the focus, we’re talking about the focus on productive projects. The project was given to men, and from there they added us women in, and what’s more, for the female comrades that had partners, it was imposed on them. [There was no] focus on the particular needs of women, to see if that is really the productive project I wanted.”

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

From a more ideological perspective, one former M-19 combatant simply did not want the services from the very government she had been fighting for years.

“When I decided to retire, the peace agreements had not been signed with the organization to which I belonged, so there was no reintegration program. When the agreements were signed in 1990, I did not want to be linked to the government’s Reintegration Program, because I thought that I had not fought for almost 20 years against the state to accept their ‘support;’ I seemed to give up. Although today I believe that, above all, support is necessary for grassroots people, especially if it is aimed at gaining autonomy and overcoming existing inequalities in terms of gender, social and ethnic origin. I trusted more in my possibilities and in social and family support networks.”

—Female ex-combatant, (M-19), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

The obvious neglect of women was further compounded by the disastrous economic outcomes of the mismatch between aspirations and what was offered.



Buga, Colombia, August 17, 2016 photo: Alexandra Amling

“I wanted to be a teacher, a consultant. I didn’t want to be in a workshop. That caused me to be a failure in economic terms.”

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

Many female ex-combatants went ahead and sought employment on their own, trying to conceal their past as much as possible. In a way, one former female AUC combatant (Cesar) said, if she was well-behaved, nobody would question her status, as her positive contributions to civil society speak their own language.

Though many female ex-combatants reject the notion of dependence on men, another female former AUC member (Córdoba) suggested that a woman “can at least find a husband and her husband will help her, but a man has to work to put food on the table for his children. It’s a different case for women than it is for men.” The latter part of this statement is certainly true; the challenges of economic reintegration are rooted in different experiences, skills, and expectations, and are inherently gendered.

Trust

Set against overall levels of poverty and in the absence of state support for non-combatant communities, there was little hope or prospect for ex-combatants to reintegrate successfully.

“Many houses here, . . . there’s a lot of poverty, not as much with the demobilized population, but with the community. That hill is crowded with people. Many have a small house. . . . If they are not able to solve those people’s problems, they’re not going to solve yours, since they sometimes believe we are bad guys.”

—Female ex-combatant, AUC, Córdoba, March 2017

Not only was stigma holding ex-combatants back, but more importantly, they returned into communities that had been marginalized and neglected for decades. The arrival of large numbers of ex-combatants often did not alleviate resource constraints. And if the government was not holding up its end of the bargain, recidivism was thriving. Indeed, there were only a few demobilized in the community of the woman cited above. Arguably, the failure to dismantle the economic and political structures of the AUC allowed for the BACRIM to form. In fact, quantitative research on recidivism in Colombia suggests that in the absence of viable alternatives (both economic and cultural), many AUC ex-combatants turned to illicit activities that were more profitable.¹⁵⁶

As such, some female ex-combatants complained that the government or institutions were unwilling to discuss the shortcomings of reintegration efforts in order to improve the system.

“ They only wanted to show the pretty side of the program . . . they didn’t want the negative side of the program to be known. . . . It’s not all bad; we must highlight the good, but also make it known that the reality is that there are problems. ”

—Female ex-combatant (AUC), Cesar, April 2017

The importance of these statements cannot be understated, since they exemplify the awareness of ex-combatants of the pitfalls of reintegration programs. Sadly, their feedback is hardly ever sought, and in the absence of comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, it is unlikely this situation (not just in Colombia) is going to change anytime soon.

“ How useful would it be for one of these processes to bring in three girls as a reference who were all married, who lived as kept women and who cannot speak of anything besides their husbands, the kitchen, and their children? I don’t think that for a reintegration process for our country, which receives so much foreign investment, that a good reference would be bringing in, for example, young people who are junkies that spend their time on the corner. . . . They don’t bring them in, because that isn’t what the country wants to show. ”

—Former girl soldier (group affiliation unknow), Antioquia, March 2017

Summary

Neither female nor male ex-combatants seem to have an easier or more difficult time. The male ex-combatants claimed that the women have it easier, while the female ex-combatants said the exact opposite. It is not simply black and white, and that applies to every factor discussed here and in previous sections. There are more parallels between male and female ex-combatants, such as dissatisfaction and frustration with the reintegration programs.

Taken together, women’s experiences with the reintegration processes show interesting parallels with the male ex-combatants’, but in terms of priority, male and female ex-combatants differed quite a bit. The female ex-combatants, especially the older generation, expressed frustration with the gender-blind approach toward DDR.

In the absence of women at the negotiation tables, women’s needs and aspirations were left out completely, leaving them socially, economically, and culturally stranded in an environment that—on top of these gendered components—was not open to ex-combatants. Access to higher education was impossible under these circumstances, leading women to seek employment in sectors that underpay or did not offer upward mobility. Similar to the male ex-combatants, the one-dimensional view on “proyectos productivos” kept female ex-combatants barely above the poverty line.

What stood out, however, was the way in which the female ex-combatants were dealing with these myriad problems. Instead of letting the outside world dictate all the terms, many female ex-combatants found ways to adjust without reverting completely to their expected roles. At the crossroads of reintegration and gender-blind peace agreements until 2016, many female ex-combatants often had little options but to return to their reproductive roles as mothers and housewives. They also had to take jobs associated with women.

At the same time, they tried to lay a foundation of political ideology and notions of women’s empowerment and gender equality in a new generation of Colombians. They may, perhaps, be the exception rather than the rule, because holding on to their experiences while simultaneously translating them into action to further empower all Colombian women is very challenging. However, this speaks to female ex-combatants’ ability to transform gender identities because they were in fact aware of their gender identity.

The resilience of these female ex-combatants was fascinating. Though it is impossible to predict if the FARC women will be able to benefit from some of the groundwork these female ex-combatants have been able to lay, female ex-combatants have seemingly been quite creative in addressing and overcoming some. But they were not alone in their endeavors. Colombia’s civil society has grown in both numbers and influence over the last decade and their impact and influence on shaping aspects of peacebuilding was most visible during the negotiations in Havana.

In sum, female ex-combatants face multiple challenges when reintegrating, just like men. But the obstacles of male and female ex-combatants become magnified when viewed through a gender lens. Table 4 below is a summary of the main points that demonstrate where experiences were related and yet distinct based on gender.

TABLE 3: COMPARING EXPERIENCES OF MALE AND FEMALE EX-COMBATANTS

FACTOR	SIMILARITIES	FEMALE-SPECIFIC	MALE-SPECIFIC
STIGMA AND IDENTITY	Overcoming trauma and rejection	Double stigma as women who transgressed expected gender roles	Being accepted in society as a non-violent individual
COMMUNITY	Avoiding exposure and keeping quiet about their past	Stigma of being labeled violent women, although former girl child soldiers felt less problems	Most feel they will never be fully reintegrated because of underlying stigma against ex-combatants
FAMILY	Difficulty of livelihood support for family	Going back to reproductive roles and rebuilding relationship with children often very difficult; problem of extending stigma to family that impedes children’s opportunities	Providing for family given the challenges of finding and retaining employment; problems are amplified if the partner is also an ex-combatant
SECURITY		Mostly economic and political; female ex-combatants face obstacles to political participation	Mostly physical but also economic; this includes harassment by security forces
TRUST	Lack of trust in institutions and society	Feeling of broken promises and rejection; especially lack of gender perspective disadvantaged older generation of female ex-combatants	Feeling of neglect and broken promises
EMPLOYMENT	Difficulty retaining or finding work, esp. well-paid work that requires certain skillsets	Women with aspirations have to work harder to find well-paid and meaningful work, although they seemed on average to have lesser issues	Difficulty retaining work due to stigma, especially when supervisor finds out about their past
CITY	Opportunities and threats	Some operated in the city clandestinely while in armed group, and did not feel threatened by the city; the city provided opportunities especially for the girl child soldiers	Most felt the city intimidating in terms of both noise and size; many would opt to stay in their hometowns and villages to be close to families
EDUCATION	Lack of higher education	Lack of funding or family duties impeded going to school	Lack of funding by reintegration programs; need to provide for family impeded seeking higher education

A photograph of a person from the waist down, wearing light-colored, frayed denim jeans and dark-colored sandals with multiple holes. The person is holding a black assault rifle with both hands. The rifle is positioned horizontally across the lower half of the frame. The background is a blurred outdoor setting. The entire image has a purple tint. The text 'IV. CONCLUSION' is overlaid in the center in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

IV. CONCLUSION

View of a member of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) at the Transitional Standardization Zone Jaime Pardo Leal in Colinas, Guaviare department, Colombia on June 14, 2017. photo: RAUL ARBOLEDA/AFP/Getty Images

“ Work directly from the needs of ex-combatants. The programs must be developed in a participatory manner; you cannot continue thinking that they do not have the capacity to make proposals. The approach and solutions should not remain individual but collective. The exercise of citizenship, participation, are key to building life projects, not self-blaming, or blaming society. That is why we should work with the communities. The approach is different for those who have a rural origin and have acted in rural areas, and for those who are of urban origin and have worked in the cities. The differential and gender approach must be present. I believe that welfare models do not strengthen people’s citizenship, and that therefore initial aid must be accompanied by individual capacity-building projects, so that gender roles are not reproduced but also so that people are prepared for the failure of their productive or life projects and can establish support networks to face the difficulties that will always be present in everyday life. ”

—Female ex-combatant (M-19), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

There was considerable overlap in the descriptions of what the focus groups considered to be needed and what should be recognized more profoundly. Among the different needs the ex-combatants mentioned, they were asked to pick the one that mattered the most. The list below is based on these “priorities.” With the caveat that state-funded DDR programs can only do so much and are limited in mandate and time, we owe it to the ex-combatants to mention all the suggestions they listed as things that should be considered for better reintegration services.

Male and female ex-combatants differed slightly. The need for more psycho-social support came up frequently among both men and women. A lot of the male ex-combatants, however, considered physical security a priority while most women highlighted the need for more education; better career counseling, which often included better-trained personnel; and family. Women, it seemed, were more aware of the opportunities the reintegration process provided while men felt that the reintegration process was mainly a source of loss of authority, status, and power.

Table 4 below is split into “gender-aware” recommendations and “gender-specific” recommendations. While the general guideline of the UN divides DDR activities into “gender-aware” and “female-specific,” the authors refrained from this distinction because “gender-specific” allows the inclusion of issues that pertain specifically to male or female ex-combatants and does not elevate the needs of one group at the expense of another. The “gender-aware” recommendations, on the other hand, list ideas that apply to both male and female ex-combatants without suggesting ex-combatants have experienced gender-specific discrimination. Rather, the recommendations require awareness of the differential needs of male and female ex-combatants.

None of the results were out of the ordinary, as all focus groups mentioned at least one or two items that spread across all focus groups. The order of the table reflects the frequency with which suggestions were mentioned. This means that the inclusion of a gender perspective is featured near the bottom of the list because that issue was more prominent among female ex-combatants, and therefore less frequently mentioned than issues such as security or employment. However, the position of gender does not suggest that gender carries less weight or is secondary to more tangible factors such as education and housing. After all, gender touches upon all the needs and priorities listed in the table. The specific needs mentioned by the ex-combatants indicate their gendered experiences that need to be addressed properly.

Finally, all items and their descriptions are based on what ex-combatants talked about. The research team termed the categories based on global jargon of DDR services and programs without undermining the opinions expressed by the ex-combatants. Since this report is meant to make the voices of ex-combatants heard, and to ensure these suggestions are not made up, specific quotes are listed to underscore the importance of some of these items for those who were or will be directly impacted by DDR processes.

By addressing these suggestions, other factors might simultaneously be incorporated, such as trust or socio-economic status. Just the way the factors that supported or inhibited proper reintegration were often difficult to separate from each other, and indeed often meant that one factor conditioned the outcome of one or more other factors, the same can be said about the things that ex-combatants felt they needed at the time of their respective processes.

For example, enforced provisions of physical security are a first step for ex-combatants to not only feel safe but also respected, which in turn can support efforts to rebuild trust in the government and governance structures. By extension, this also means accountability for state security forces, as keeping ceasefires is not a one-way street. It is mutually beneficial for the armed groups but also for the military. Along these lines, sustainable employment provides economic security, thereby improving ex-combatants' lives and reducing the risk of recidivism.

Many items in the table have been addressed in the eight-dimensional approach of the ACR. Indeed, those familiar with the process of reintegration through the former ACR might contest that these findings are not necessarily groundbreaking for the very fact that the former ACR has continuously adapted to the shifting nature of Colombia's five decades of armed conflict, most recently indicated by its change of name to ARN.

Regardless, these suggestions indicate that overall, reintegration in Colombia continues to be a challenging endeavor. Indeed, the common thread of the combined experiences of male and female ex-combatants—the mismatch between vocational training and economic realities, the threat of recidivism, the lack of security, and the inability to sensitize the community to eradicate stigma against ex-combatants, especially women and girls—indicates that for all its improvements and adjustments, even the former ACR has been unable to address all ex-combatant concerns.

Of course, some of the expectations might be beyond the scope of the ACR/ARN, especially where attitudes toward ex-combatants are concerned. If we look at the length of time of the conflict, it will take years, if not more than one generation, to heal the wounds. A first step would be to listen to the experiences of the ex-combatants, and to understand the gendered nature of their experiences.

TABLE 4: LIST OF SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVED REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS

GENDER-AWARE			
RANK	NEED	DESCRIPTION	IN THEIR OWN WORDS
2	Family	Access to families (esp. for former child soldiers when being relocated to cities); extension of benefits to family members	"Your family can give you encouragement. My brother lives around here. My family, for example, lives in [X], very far, and I can only communicate with them by phone. And whenever they think of it, they send me a money transfer, whatever they can. I talk to my father, with my mother, but it's not like I can go there. Here I have to figure things out any way I can because I can't go there. If I go there, you know what awaits me. I could be killed. It's complicated. You know you have to deal with things here, whatever it takes." —Former boy soldier (group affiliation unknown), Antioquia, March 2017
3	Housing	Providing houses for ex-combatants; supporting ex-combatants with affordable housing	"One of the most significant difficulties, which was something we needed, is that a lot of people leave there [the group] with just what they have on their backs. Once they leave, they have nowhere to go. Many don't want to go back to the camps because things are difficult for them there. So, it's the housing. I think it's a right." —Male ex-combatant (EPL), Antioquia, April 2017
6	Employment	Holding companies accountable; this sentiment was strongest among male ex-combatants	"At the time, the president [Uribe] told the national companies to support the demobilized. They were going to give them tax breaks. But what happened? These companies wanted tax breaks, but they didn't want to hire demobilized fighters because they were large companies. The demobilized were like criminals to them, so they didn't support them. At that time, we needed people supporting us, especially from companies. That was also missing." —Male ex-combatant (AUC), Córdoba, March 2017

GENDER-SPECIFIC			
RANK	NEED	DESCRIPTION	IN THEIR OWN WORDS
1	Security	Protection for ex-combatants, especially male ex-combatants; better law enforcement; faster deployment of military	“What would be a good thing in this demobilization process would be to have real guarantees, and real guarantees aren’t simply assigning you a police officer, it’s allowing you to access all resources. It’s something that we also see now with the FARC’s disbandment. In the places where the FARC has left, armed paramilitary groups are emerging once again, a phenomenon that is spreading throughout the country.” —Male ex-combatant (CRS), March 2017
4	Psycho-social support	Learning how to cope with loneliness, anxiety (both trauma and struggles to provide for family), family separation, cut family ties, children who were left behind; marriage counseling; sentiment was strong among both male and female ex-combatants, although the emphasis for what support is needed differed	“Health in Colombia is bad, and even more so in these towns, but we’re already used to that. The economic situation is what is killing us. If we hadn’t left completely convinced that we were going to work for peace, that was our first commitment, perhaps we would have done bad things, because there isn’t much economically.” —Male ex-combatant (CRS), Sucre, March 2017 “For example, going back to the productive and reproductive role of a mother, seeing your children afterwards . . . our children were born in 1990 and ‘91, so taking on the role of being a mother, the role of earning money, transportation in order to participate in political life, to study . . . that’s what makes it difficult.” —Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017
5	Community outreach	Addressing stigma; reconciliation; especially addressing the double stigma against female ex-combatants	“People are still scared to talk. They’re still scared to say that they’re part of a program, to the extent that you accept it as a responsibility that you have, and that’s a commitment to myself and it’s the trustworthiness. . . . I tell my colleagues, my friends who know that I am part of it. Sometimes I’ve had to say in the university that I’m a demobilized ACR combatant, but despite being a part of that, it’s seeing how I can support that population. Changing that stigma that’s within the population has not been easy, but there I am, in this constant struggle of trying to change that, and that’s why I was telling you that we’ve done work in the zone for normalization, and I hope that what we’ve done can be seen soon. On the issue of gender, 12 of us were in an activity there.” —Female ex-combatant (PRT), Sucre, March 2017
7	Gender perspective	Addressing gender inequality and mainstream gender in all programmatic activities, including community outreach	“It does not apply because I was not in the program. But I think women ex-combatants need: 1. Training in women’s rights, with emphasis on the right to a life free of all kinds of violence and the right to political participation. 2. Flexible schedules for study and professional or technical training. 3. Nurseries that attend to their children so they can study and train in trade or professions. 4. Accompaniment to win or generate autonomy in making decisions about their life projects and economic autonomy. 5. Promote and develop training processes for men who question militarized masculinities and generate transformative reflections towards ‘liberating masculinities’ and respect for women’s rights and non-hegemonic sexual identities.” —Female ex-combatant (M-19), Valle del Cauca, April 2017
8	Political participation	Allowing ex-combatants to organize; sensitizing law enforcement; sentiment was very strong among female ex-combatants	“Security. Safeguards so that we could freely partake in political activities. . . . The main objective is politics, and we try to change economic situations, transforming the political situation, because there are government policies that go to sectors, we transform people’s economic situation.” —Male ex-combatant (CRS), Sucre, April 2017 “Because she’s a woman, she’s already in a different situation. So, we’re talking about that in certain communities. I’ve even done it within my own community [which is an indigenous community]. So, it’s to try to make the ground fertile for when these women [from the FARC] arrive, to try to facilitate the process for them so that it’s not like what it was for us.” —Female ex-combatant (AUC), Cesar, April 2017
9	Career counseling	Professional development plans, labor market analysis, assessing expectations; was particularly strong among female ex-combatants	“I had the money to buy things, but I was so insecure from never having lived alone before or having taken care of myself. So that’s what it is. Here they don’t give you the self-confidence you need to leave.” —Former girl soldier (group affiliation unknown), Antioquia, March 2017

The strong sentiments regarding the FARC women's ability to play an essential role in driving a more progressive and inclusive agenda forward demonstrate the shifting approach toward DDR that understands ex-combatants as assets rather than burdens. In fact, one government official from the Peace Advisory Office in Cesar suggested that due to the time spent with the FARC and the strong ideological conviction of those who stayed, there are chances for FARC women to push for equality for all. According to her, FARC women have been leaders and fighters as both guerillas and advocates for equal rights within the group, which makes them ideal candidates to drive change.

“ All women in Colombia must at this very moment look beyond and envision things. The moment is right for women to take up the political struggle. We want to see women there, and we're all headed over there together. Women rebel fighters who go there will most likely be referred to as ex-combatants or something of the like . . . I don't know what they will call us when we're there. Of course, we dream about being governors, senators, representatives, presidents, all of it. ”

—Female FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

While these efforts to empower women are laudable, it is equally necessary to put measures in place that address male gender identities. The results of the interviews have shown that few men question their own role in society, but the burden of adhering to societal and cultural expectations of what a man should be has obvious implications for male ex-combatants.

Looking backward to move forward is essential for implementing peace and driving reconciliation in Colombia. While the situation is not insurmountable, a few key issues stand out that offer insights on how to drive the implementation of the peace process with the FARC, but also on how to advance progress for DDR processes generally. The following points are based on the findings themselves as well as conversations with those involved in DDR in Colombia:

Design gender-aware programs

- Validate and enforce gender capacity and knowledge of the different phases of DDR processes among implementation teams
- Evaluate prevalent gender norms in civil society to mitigate tension between ex-combatants and resettlement communities
- Evaluate gender-specific vulnerabilities as they pertain to masculinity and femininity to manage the expectations of ex-combatants vis-à-vis civil society and the labor market
- Create space and fora for active political participation, especially for female ex-combatants in order to ensure women are not forced to revert into reproductive roles only
- Provide workshops and trainings to prepare long-term ex-combatants for living in a modernized society
- Support male ex-combatants through workshops on positive masculinities

Design gender-specific programs

- Assess and document the contributions of women and girls to armed groups to ensure programs do not reinforce gender stereotypes or jeopardize the physical and economic integrity of women and girls in post-conflict settings
- Engage female ex-combatants at all levels of camp management and community outreach
- Implement programs that address and mitigate causes of intimate partner violence and domestic abuse in demobilization camps, including training on violence against children for male and female ex-combatants

Address structural inequalities and grievances upon which armed groups have historically thrived

- Invest in educational programs, especially higher education (where applicable)
- Ensure physical security for ex-combatants and their communities
- Ensure employment opportunities, vocational training, skills, and expectations match economic realities
- Provide infrastructure projects that link remote areas of demobilization with urban centers to ensure equal access to markets
- Expand and enforce community outreach to eradicate stigma against ex-combatants

Current Trends in the Implementation of the Havana Peace Accords

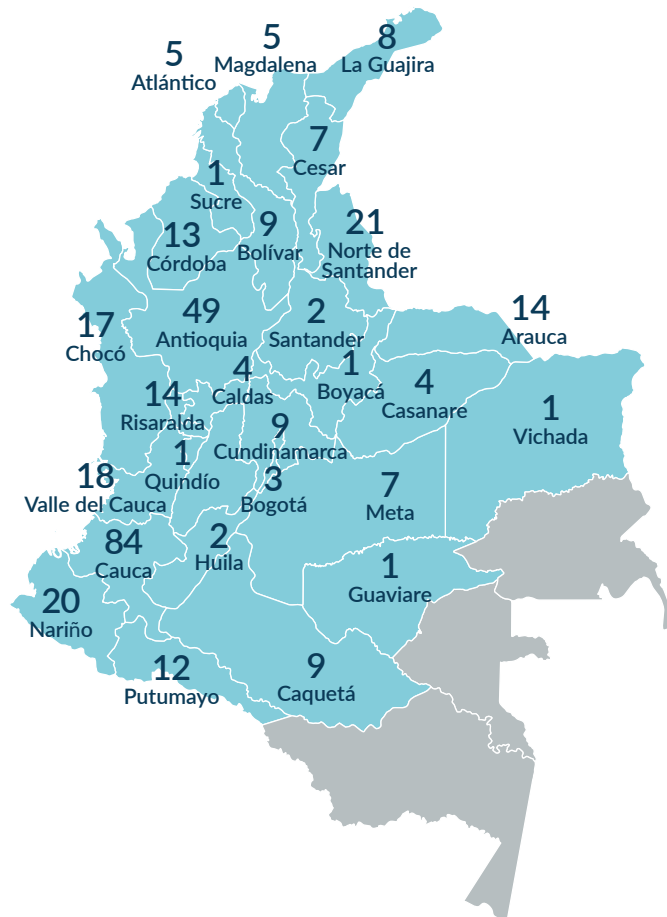
Reflecting on the items ex-combatants said were missing and should be enforced, three stood out as having the potential to negatively influence the reincorporation of the FARC: security, political participation, and community outreach.

Indeed, the issue of security is quite worrisome given the targeted assassinations and killings of former FARC guerillas, human rights defenders, and social activists that have occurred since the signing of the peace agreement (Figure 9). As of July 2018, over 300 social leaders have been killed in Colombia,¹⁵⁷ with a high frequency of homicides in the departments of Antioquia and Cauca.¹⁵⁸ Although smaller in scale (for now), these killings bear troublesome similarities to the situation of the UP in the 1980s.

The difference here, however, is that the UP had a popular following. The FARC has been less fortunate in their ability to launch a strong political platform. Recent results from the congressional and presidential elections paint a pretty distressing picture. So far, the only inroad the FARC has made for political participation are the stipulations under the peace agreement that guarantee ten seats in Congress through 2026, which five former guerillas took in the Senate and five others in the House of Representatives on Colombia's Independence Day, July 20, 2018.¹⁵⁹

The EPL and the M-19 were able to carve out a space for themselves to influence Colombia's politics for some time, and while former guerillas are still active, the heyday of leftist activism has given way to right-wing populism, as exemplified by the recent presidential win of Iván Duque Márquez, who is said to have close ties with former President Álvaro Uribe. How the FARC will be able to counterbalance the push toward harsher sentences for former guerillas and potential changes to the peace agreement remains to be seen.

FIGURE 9: HOMICIDES OF SOCIAL LEADERS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (DEFENSORÍA DEL PUEBLO; ENGL. OMBUDSMAN'S OFFICE OF COLOMBIA, JULY 2018)



In light of these recent developments, the following quote rings almost hollow among the tunes of populism and ongoing violence. At the time, and especially after traversing several departments of Colombia, the aspirational tenor behind the quote seemed to be within grasp.

“ We are completely confident that the Colombian people have in one way or another felt us and are not against what we do in Colombia, we are sure of that. You see, we are not the only ones who have suffered the consequences. Many of us are poor in Colombia; the rich are very few. Most of us are poor and the poor have suffered greatly just because they're poor, like a constant war. ”

—Female FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

As much as this statement speaks to the structural inequalities in Colombia that persist to this day in rural and coastal communities, it neglects the fact that Colombia has also developed enormously over the past two decades. As the cities have grown, so have the problems that are specifically urban, making exclusive statements about the plight of campesinos less applicable to a diversifying civil society. In addition, a new generation is growing up in Colombia, one which knows little about the conflict because it has declined since its most violent phases in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Urban-based and better educated, this young generation might not follow the FARC as they beat their drums of rhetorical warfare on Colombia's capitalism.

However, to avoid repeating history and to prevent another large segment of Colombia's population from joining the ranks of registered ex-combatants, carving out a meager life at the outskirts of Colombia's urban centers, sensitizing civil society will continue to be important. At the end of the day, it is necessary to recognize the sacrifices combatants have to make when leaving the sanctuary of their groups. This is especially true for women who face the burden of being ex-combatants and women who transgressed their gender roles.

“A person's perception of another person is very different when they only know what third parties say about that person, like the media or other people, and not because they've spoken to that other person or heard what they have to say. That person may think one thing, but if, like you, that person comes to where we are and we can address them and tell them about our struggle and how it began, and they get to know us personally, as we are, surely that person will take back a different view of what we are.”

—Female FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

Battling stereotypes, stigma, and the bureaucratic maze of reincorporation will pose many different obstacles to the FARC members as they slowly transition to civilian life. Recognizing that they walk a path many others have crossed before them is one way to navigate these uncertain times. In Havana, the FARC was eager to listen to the experiences of ex-combatants from other countries, to the expectations of civil society and victims, and to the demands of women. It informed the peace agreement that eventually became over 300 pages long.

Time will tell what will become of the FARC. Colombia is still not entirely peaceful and continues to face multiple challenges: the peace talks with the ELN are volatile at best, remnants of the paramilitaries are still roaming the countryside, coca production is at an all-time high, and Venezuela's economic decline has been pushing its citizens into the border areas of Colombia's northeast. Setting priorities and putting aside necessary funds for thousands of FARC guerillas under these circumstances is difficult for any administration. There is a window of opportunity right now for the opposition to the peace agreement to tamper with the achievements of more than five years of active peacebuilding in Colombia.

Colombia is at a crossroads. One wrong turn could have devastating consequences. The FARC, for its part, wants to move forward, even if the outcome of the presidential election is not ideal for them. In their own words, they owe it to the Colombian people to bring peace to Colombia. At the same time, this is a first taste from the well of political power games. It is a test for whether the FARC will prevail as a political party, and to demonstrate that there is indeed unity among its members.

With that in mind, we would like to close on a promising note because so much of what the research team learned over a span of four weeks in 2017 indicated an immense appetite for peace and change. There are opportunities in Colombia, and much of that hope is placed on the women of the FARC. Right now, two are representing the FARC in Congress. The women of Colombia fought hard to get the recognition they deserve. The peace negotiations and the peace agreement demonstrated alternating phases of inclusion. For what it is worth, it has catapulted Colombia onto the international stage as a role model, rather than a bad example for drug trafficking and violence.

“We want for women to be able to gain recognition, to be allowed to get ahead, hold public posts, and not just to be stay-at-home wives or have to go into the forest in the armed struggle. You hear rumors according to which we women want to stay out in the forest in the armed struggle. No, none of us wants to stay in the forest; we want change. I've had many job types here. I have been a nurse for 20 years, and I have been a secretary and a bursar. I have been given many opportunities here in the struggle. One doesn't get these opportunities outside. If I were outside, I'd have a bunch of children and my life would be worth nothing. Those are the things that force you to go down this road.”

—Female FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

Drawing from international experiences as well as years of dealing with DDR, Colombia has made incredible progress toward facilitating the transition of ex-combatants to civilians. The individuals interviewed for this study might disagree occasionally with that statement, but despite their negative undertones, they also acknowledged that five decades of armed violence cannot be eradicated by one peace process.

Most eventually realized that while they are not a homogenous, monolithic group of ex-combatants, their struggles tie them more closely together than they might have previously thought. If ex-combatants can overcome their differences after years of fighting the government as much as each other, there is hope that their experiences and challenges can help move Colombia toward reconciliation.

APPENDIX

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

For this study, a total of 28 men and 24 women were interviewed in March and April of 2017. Among them were 10 members of the FARC who did not identify as ex-combatants, as—in their own words—the struggle did not merely end with the laying down of arms. Because of this, there is no demographic information available because they declined to fill out the consent form which stipulated that the study was about ex-combatants, which, as they stated, was evidently not the case. These five men and five women are captured under “N/A” in Tables 5 and 6 respectively. The interviews took place in different locations in the departments of Antioquia, Valle del Cauca, Sucre, Córdoba, and Cesar.

Two other female ex-combatants were unable to sit down with the research team but provided their responses in written form. Demographic information is missing from both of them, which is captured as “N/A” in Table 7 along with the five FARC women.

One note on the gender dynamics within the groups, both in settings of mixed-gender and women-only groups: anyone familiar with the Colombian context understands the detrimental impact of “machismo” culture on men, women, boys, and girls, although women and girls are disproportionately more impacted by the hypersexualized behavior that tolerates acts of sexual and other forms of gender-based violence.

Despite the expected subordination of women and girls in Colombian society, the women in the mixed-gender focus groups spoke as openly as the men. Also, in one group, the women were all partners of male ex-combatants in the group. In this particular setting, the women were relatively quiet, even if encouraged by both the group and the facilitator to participate. It is difficult to gauge to what extent this behavior was due to disinterest, shyness, or underlying gender dynamics between the couple or in the community at large. Due to the short amount of time spent with these focus groups and in the absence of more detailed information about their respective communities as well as personal histories, any assumption made about the women’s behavior would be misleading.

Women-only groups were on average more outspoken, although the generational difference here was quite interesting in terms of the topics they discussed more frankly; women of previous peace processes reflected on the absence of a gender perspective,

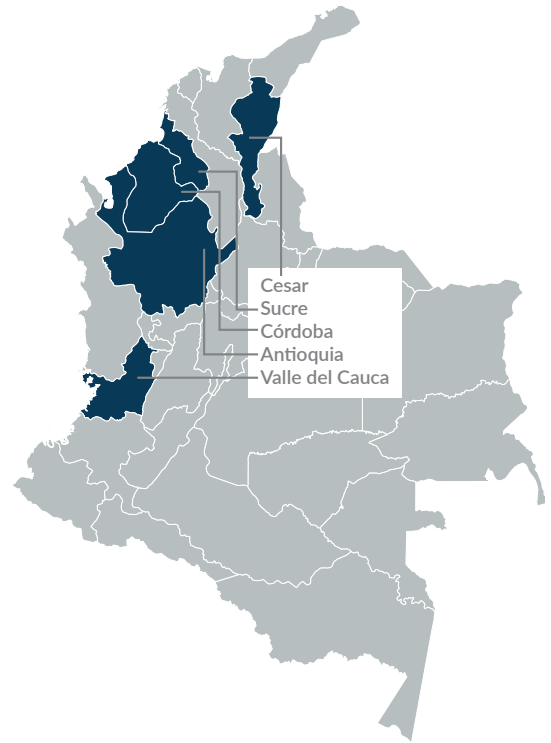


TABLE 5: DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY: MEN AND BOYS

GROUP AFFILIATION	ETHNICITY/RACE	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	AGE GROUP	EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT
AUC 4	MESTIZO 14	EMPLOYED 7	20-30 7	HIGH SCHOOL 8
FARC 10	INDIGENOUS 3	SELF-EMPLOYED 11	30-40 3	LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL 8
ELN 2	AFRO-COLOMBIAN 1	UNEMPLOYED 3	40-50 2	SOME COLLEGE 5
PRT 1	WHITE 2	OTHER 2	50-60 3	OTHER 2
EPL 4	OTHER 3	N/A 5	60-70 5	N/A 5
CRS 6	N/A 5		70-80 1	
N/A 1			80-90 1	
			N/A 6	

Note: Five of the FARC members under “Group affiliation” were combatants at the ZVTN in La Paz in Cesar Departamento.

TABLE 6: DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY: WOMEN AND GIRLS

GROUP AFFILIATION	ETHNICITY/RACE	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	AGE GROUP	EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT
N/A 2	MESTIZO 6	EMPLOYED 5	19-30 3	HIGH SCHOOL 9
FARC 6	INDIGENOUS 3	SELF-EMPLOYED 5	30-40 1	LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL 3
ELN 1	PREFER NOT TO ANSWER 1	UNEMPLOYED 6	40-50 8	SOME COLLEGE 2
PRT 1	OTHER 1	OTHER 0	50-60 3	OTHER 1
EPL 6	N/A 8	N/A 8	60-70 1	N/A 8
CRS 3			N/A 8	
AUC 3				
M-19 2				

Note: Five of the FARC members under “Group affiliation” were combatants at the ZVTN in La Paz in Cesar Departamento.

which drove some of them to become more engaged, while the former girl child soldiers were more critical of female ex-combatants dropping out of programs, not due to the absence of a gender perspective but because of alleged weak character. In sharp contrast to the men, these young women put more emphasis on character strength in rebuilding their lives rather than criticizing the institutions for failing to teach them how to reveal their past.

Combined, these discussions with women provided an interesting macro-level view on Colombian society and the (apparently) unchanged ways gender norms dictate and influence gender identities. Along with these deep reflections, the two focus groups with male former child soldiers likewise produced a lot of valuable insights into interpersonal and systemwide relationships, although these young men reflected more thoroughly on their personal transformations in the hope of transforming society.

It is worth noting that “machismo” literally translates to “masculinity” in Spanish. In most cases, machismo is associated with negative, violent forms of masculinity, especially male sexual prowess that justifies sexual violence against women and girls. But the field of gender studies as well as Latin American scholars have begun to study and dissect the underlying concepts of machismo; by tracing the term back to its etymological origin, some scholars argue that machismo is not merely the misogynist and violent behavior it has come to be known for.

Last, despite evidence of widespread sexual and gender-based violence within the armed groups and against civilian populations, the participants did not reflect on this topic very much. Granted, the questions for the focus groups did not provide many prompts to address the issue directly, but there was no indication that any of the participants had been personally affected by or had witnessed such violence. In the field of violence against women, interviewees are often asked about personal experiences of sexual and physical violence but are offered a proxy variable (such as hearsay) to protect themselves or in cases when talking about it can cause traumatic flashbacks. This was not the case in these groups.

The data presented here is a snapshot in time, and certainly does not reflect all factors—whether real or perceived—that determine the ease or difficulty with which Colombian combatants go through a DDR process. It is also important to

remember that the data was collected at a time when the government and the FARC had just signed a historic peace agreement. This influenced in many ways how ex-combatants from previous DDR processes reflected upon their own experiences.

DDR CHALLENGES IN COLOMBIA

“ The response to the peace accords was more violence, both the rebel groups themselves and the paramilitary groups and the very state because of the same thing again, because the issue is, until there is negotiation with all armed stakeholders, there is a strong possibility that violence will break out, in particular against those who make peace agreements. ”

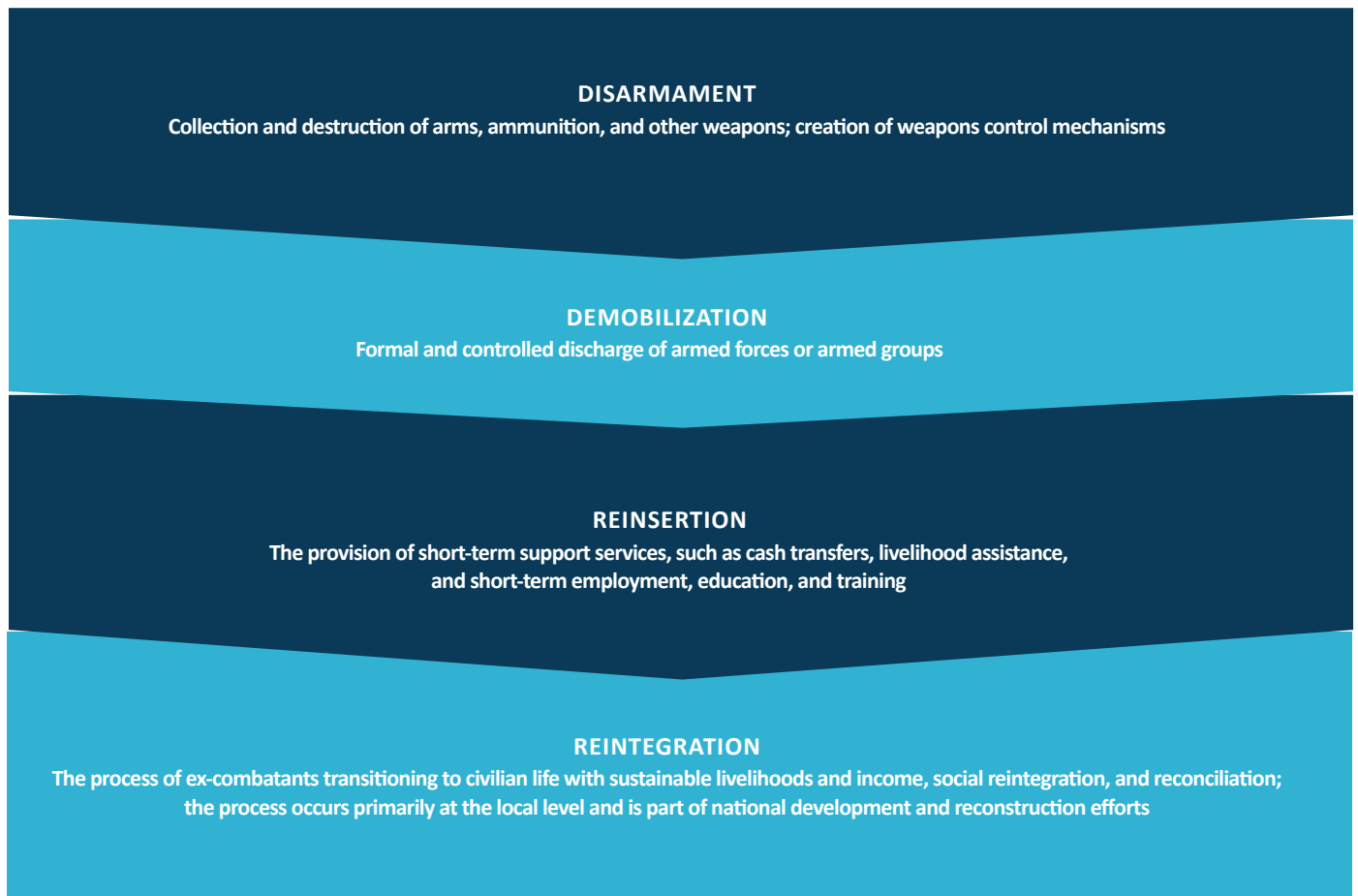
—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

Despite their sequential appearance, the different components of DDR are interconnected and often take place simultaneously.¹⁶⁰ These processes are not purely political or technical tools but also carry a significant symbolic meaning,¹⁶¹ especially where gender roles and identities intersect with conflict dynamics that transform or alter gender relationships.

While the transition from conflict to peace is hardly ever linear, the on-and-off battles between the government and the armed groups, as well as among the armed groups themselves, have made recovery and stability in certain areas of Colombia highly elusive, for both civilians and former combatants.

Part of the longstanding insecurity has been the inability to replace the authority of armed groups with state representation. This does not mean that all communities had positive, symbiotic relationships with armed groups. The interactions between armed groups and communities have been extremely complex and changed considerably over time. In the absence of state presence, armed groups often took over the role of mediator in dispute resolution, offered protection, and provided basic services. A Colombian academic¹⁶² identified three basic levels of relationship:

FIGURE 10: STAGES OF DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION, AND REINTEGRATION (U.N. IDDRS, 2014)



1. Mutual trust–Violence against and abuse of civilians is limited or non-existent:

- Positive relationship between one armed group and the community where both benefit from each other
- The armed group is embedded in the community, mostly through familial relationships: “A campesino is a guerrillero, and a guerrillero is a campesino.”

2. Mutual acceptance–Violence against and abuse of civilians happens occasionally:

- Challenging relationship where one armed group exerts authority and maintains “public order”
- Armed group dominates and controls community with some inclusion of community members in decision-making processes

3. Mutual distrust–Violence against and abuse of civilians is rampant, especially sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls:¹⁶³

- Difficult relationship where fights over territorial control render civilians extremely vulnerable to changing presence of armed groups
- One or more armed groups vie for control of a community

A 2017 report by the International Crisis Group identified a similar trend, especially in areas where coca production and trafficking has traditionally been widespread.¹⁶⁴ In these peripheral regions, the presence of armed groups often meant either protection from state encroachment if communities were accused of supporting guerilla activities¹⁶⁵ or abuse at the hands of competing armed groups. In either case, conflict-affected communities have a complicated relationship with the government. Given the locations of these contested areas, already marginalized communities, such as Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, were disproportionately affected by the conflicts.

The glacial pace of the deployment of security forces in formerly FARC-controlled areas¹⁶⁶ so far has done little to change the perception that the government has failed its communities. Ex-combatants interviewed for this study expressed similar concerns, because lack of security affected them as combatants just as much as civilians once they demobilized.

It is difficult to ascertain what state presence will look like in many regions of Colombia, especially those areas that have been specifically targeted for activities to eradicate coca production to fight the illicit drug trade. Without viable economic alternatives, access to markets, and improved infrastructure, rebuilding trust for democratic governance structures will not be an easy task. Indeed, “The search for durable employment opportunities for ex-combatants remains a chief challenge plaguing their holistic reintegration into normal civilian life.”¹⁶⁷ This is particularly true for Colombia’s neglected rural areas, where the economic reality did not always match economic reintegration efforts. It underscores that despite its longstanding experience with armed groups, Colombia is still building its knowledge base as it relates to reintegration efforts.

The problem with eradication efforts is the perpetual lack of understanding by the government of area-specific challenges to planting other crops, and the problem of transportation to markets due to bad infrastructure and market prices. Ex-combatants have expressed similar concerns when reintegration packages included crops and land that provided no stable income. (Nicholas Casey, “After Decades of War, Colombian Farmers Face a New Test: Peace,” New York Times, July 18, 2017)

For all its issues with DDR, though, it is important to highlight the unique position the Colombian government is in to deal with armed groups. The existence of a relatively stable state and economy has allowed ex-combatants to access far more services than has been the case in war-torn countries like Sierra Leone, Liberia, or the Democratic Republic of Congo. Indeed, a 2008 World Bank report contextualized Colombia’s approach in the international environment of providing DDR support. What stands out in this comparison is the advantage of having a functioning private sector that has facilitated strategies for job creation or economic placement of ex-combatants. Furthermore, because the government has covered the costs, DDR processes seem to have on average been twice as long.¹⁶⁸

Due to the scale and magnitude of the armed insurgencies in Colombia, as well as changes in the approach toward armed groups in the late 1990s and early 2000s which incentivized individual demobilization, the Colombian government eventually developed a more centralized framework to support combatants on their journey through multiple institutions and back to civilian life (see Figure 11). In particular, the government recognized the need for long-term strategies that not only benefited the ex-combatants but also supported reconciliation efforts and services that extended engagement into civil society. This new approach was based on multiple factors: the experiences of more than 20 years of DDR, the recognition that the security framework of DDR and the “blanket amnesty” strategies of the 1980s and 1990s had not been efficient enough in bringing peace to the country, and lessons learned from other countries.¹⁶⁹

“ In the wake of withdrawal [demobilization], there was complete persecution [by the state, by the police, by government security groups, etc.] There were no guarantees on the part of the government for the demobilized combatants. The very same government officials even accused you of continuing to be a guerilla member, and community leaders, connected somehow, were told that we were planting subversive ideas within the civic movements. ”

—Male ex-combatant (CRS), Sucre, March 2017

Currently, Colombia’s reintegration agency (formerly known as ACR) supports individual and collective reintegration processes.¹⁷⁰ The integral process includes eight dimensions that are tailored to the needs and skills of each individual. These dimensions encompass security, citizenship, education, health, habitat, family, productivity (life), and the personal level.¹⁷¹ None of them work in isolation, but rather reinforce each other.

The emphasis on long-term strategies encompassed economic as well as social reintegration. These efforts were institutionalized through Colombia’s National Policy on Social and Economic Reintegration. This also meant that assistance shifted from lasting 18 months under the Program for Reincorporation to Civil Life (commonly referred to as PRVC for its Spanish acronym) to the six and half years of support by the former ACR.^c

FIGURE 11: HISTORY OF INSTITUTIONALIZED DDR IN COLOMBIA (ARN: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW)



^c The name difference here between reincorporation (PRVC) and reintegration (ACR) is important because at the time of the PRVC, the focus of the government was to give short-term support to combatants by providing subsidies (including monthly stipends) and some training that would allow combatants to return home.

The community-based approach is evidently one of the most important components of social as well as economic reintegration and will be discussed as part of the data analysis. From a global perspective, the perpetual lack of community-based approaches is also highlighted in the literature. In the case of Uganda, reintegration efforts for both male and female ex-combatants were embedded in existing projects, thereby avoiding friction caused by giving support to former combatants but not communities who might have otherwise felt marginalized or deprived of income-generating opportunities.¹⁷² Aside from ensuring equal access to resources, community-based initiatives can also lead to improved gender relations. For one, greater buy-in by the partners of former combatants, especially husbands, mitigates vulnerabilities associated with domestic violence. Furthermore, community-based approaches can equally thwart attempts by gangs, dissidents, and armed groups to fill the void left by a demobilizing armed group.

DDR PROGRAMS AND SERVICES IN COLOMBIA

Under the structure of previous collective disarmament and demobilization, Colombia's ex-combatants assembled in designated camps and sites, and their names were compared against a list provided by the commanders of the respective units of the armed group.

As part of DDR, ex-combatants were offered short-term assistance to reintegrate, such as "life-kits" (e.g., hygiene articles, clothes, some food and cash), education, and vocational training. In economic terms, most reintegration efforts centered on so-called *proyecto productivos* (productive projects) that often came in the form of support for small-scale agricultural activities. However, the absence of an industry and government neglecting to develop the peripheral regions of the country did not provide a fertile ground for economically feasible reintegration programs. According to the focus groups, most *proyectos productivos* consisted of small parcels of land being given to ex-combatants for farming.

“ We are there ready to help in that sense, because what we want is for there to be change for the people, that the people's needs are met. By this I mean for example the campesinos that sometimes have to travel 4 or 5 hours in order to bring their produce, and if they don't own a donkey or mule that can carry the load for them, they have to carry it on their own backs. To see all of this motivates us to continue in the struggle and keep fighting. ”

—Male FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

In addition, given the insecurity of Colombia and the lack of infrastructure, most ex-combatants complained about the failure to turn their land into profitable farming lands. Some had to abandon their land altogether because of assassinations and harassment by other armed groups. Moreover, without money to invest into livestock (such as cattle), living off small-scale harvests drove many ex-combatants and their families below the poverty line. At times, ex-combatants were forced to move to urban centers in search of employment.

Since the DDR processes happened at different periods of time and under different administrations, the government did not have a comprehensive reintegration strategy until the early 2000s, a problem that was compounded in part by the fact that armed groups often lacked long-term strategies for reintegration themselves. In fact, the heavy emphasis of the M-19 leadership on ensuring a smooth transition from guerilla group to political party led to piecemeal implementation of economic and social reintegration interventions which had severe implications for many ex-combatants in the long term.¹⁷³

In addition, the gender-blind approach to these past peace processes had severe consequences for women. The agreements thwarted many women's attempts to continue with their political and socio-cultural agendas to transform women's roles in Colombia overall. Without a national reintegration strategy to include society at large, women suffered a double burden as women who had previously transgressed gender roles before being forced to revert to strict gender roles. And while the AUC process had a gender perspective that aimed to restore the rights of female ex-combatants, the entire process lacked enforcement.¹⁷⁴

“What really must be emphasized was its [peace process] nature, because at that point, the topic of reconciliation was never discussed, nor the post-conflict [situation]; nothing was spoken about.”

—Female ex-combatant (EPL), Sucre, March 2017

Even with the ongoing adjustments to the ACR program, there has been no special, gender-specific program as part of the ACR reintegration programs and services. Given the personalized approach of the ACR in the past, it was very much up to the individual ex-combatant to define their needs and expectations, as well as weaknesses that the ACR then aimed to strengthen. A relatively recent development (in April 2017) has been a more pronounced focus on positive masculinities, which—according to one representative of the ACR in the Department of Cesar—was built in conjunction with enhancing the ACR’s gender strategy.

The negotiated terms of the Havana agreement have gender-specific language, which means that more activities will be streamlined in the ARN. Indeed, the change from ACR to ARN is but one of many steps that indicate that reintegration processes are mechanisms stipulated by the negotiated terms with a given armed group. According to the aforementioned representative of the Peace Advisory Office, the ARN will most likely have a more nuanced, differential approach toward women. This is much-needed, as research indicates that fewer women go through the official reintegration process because it “often pigeonholes women into more domestic careers”¹⁷⁵ that do not resonate with female ex-combatants’ skills and/or aspirations.

The inconsistency of service provision and the failure to implement long-term strategies for reintegration as well as the lack of a gendered understanding of the different needs of male and female ex-combatants has been a factor in dissatisfaction and frustration for different generations of ex-combatants through the early 2000s.

Since the dissolution of the AUC in 2006 and the establishment of the ACR in 2011 (ARN since 2017), combatants from the remaining armed groups have been able to demobilize individually. Some of the former child soldiers interviewed for this study were going through the ACR process at the time. However, if they left their groups while under the age of 18, the military was obliged to hand them over to the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare, more commonly cited in the literature by its Spanish acronym, ICBF (Instituto Colombiana de Bienestar Familiar). Once registered, processed, and cleared in the ICBF’s transition homes, the former child soldiers had some level of authority to decide which urban center they wanted to go to for reintegration programs. Part of this structure was meant to ensure that former child soldiers did not end up in an area that was still being controlled by the very group they had left. Once the former child soldiers turned 18, the ACR took over.

“The goal when we first got here was to come out clean in terms of our legal standing, but also earn a professional degree. There is an element of adjustment and adaptation in those processes. You have to meet periodically and be consistent; you have to know how to manage different things. For me, the satisfaction of coming out clean was greater than anything, despite the difficulties. The idea of attaining both legal and financial freedom is a big motivation.”

—Former boy soldier (FARC), Valle del Cauca, April 2017

Due to their involvement in the insurgency, all combatants were required to fulfill a set amount of community service. One ex-combatant (CRS) expressed his anger with that mandatory process not because he had to do it but because of what he had to do: picking up trash. Instead of supporting social work in the communities, another ex-combatant said, they were made to do minor tasks that were not relevant to their previous socio-political work and also did not serve the community directly.

The inter-agency collaborative approach that the ACR offered has worked for some but not for others. The former child soldiers seemed, on average, to have had a much better experience than ex-combatants from previous processes. The generational difference here appears to include a better experience with the army at the time of surrender, the coordinated approach of the ICBF or ACR, and a general appreciation for receiving tools to learn for themselves rather than being handed everything and then sent off.

Put differently, the benefit of the current process is the multi-pronged approach that allows ex-combatants to develop skills that they then need to refine themselves by working with their individual case managers. Specifically, it gives female ex-combatants the opportunity to define—within the parameters of the program and depending on the gender capacity of the case manager—their new role in society. Although most ex-combatants conceded that the ACR has its shortcomings, the former child soldiers also highlighted the need to confront oneself as being a first step toward transforming from combatant back to civilian.

A VISIT TO THE ZVTN, LA PAZ

“The Havana agreement is the roadmap, and anyone can see in it what will become of us as individuals and what will become of FARC as a group. Nowhere in the agreement does it say—and I mean verbatim—I think nowhere does the agreement include the word ‘demobilization,’ because the very concept strikes mobilization, it means a lack of mobilization, and we are going to politically rise up and mobilize the people; that is why the concept ‘demobilization’ is not included in the agreement.”

—Male FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017



ZVTN "La Paz", Cesar, April 2017 photo: Alexandra Amling

In April 2017, the FARC had just been gathering in their respective transition zones. A visit to the ZVTN in La Paz in the department of Cesar showed signs of neglect and delay. Much had been written about the government delays transporting materials to these remote areas in Colombia's peripheral regions. The atmosphere in the camps was warm and welcoming. As civilians, those on the research team were only allowed to access the "visitor site" of the camp on the top of a mountain. At the bottom of the mountain, shielded by dense rain forest, was the actual camp that was still guarded by armed FARC guerillas. Army posts controlled the outer circles of the camp.

The camp was like an anthill; constant construction noise, visitors everywhere—the UN observers, family visits, SENA representatives preparing for a workshop, Colombian journalists and filmmakers—and the rhythm of the daily chores of FARC guerillas, such as cooking, cleaning dishes,

and ensuring each visitor was accounted for. Sitting in the shade of a mango tree, the research team was able to spend a full day with FARC guerillas; five male and five female guerilla fighters. We walked the perimeter of the camp, drank sweet coffee, were served lunch, and were able to observe, albeit for a short time only, what DDR meant in the context of this historic peace process.

The first phase of DDR, the collection of arms and ammunition, had only recently begun. But it became clear relatively quickly that DDR in its conceptual sense did not apply to the FARC. First, the commander rejected signing the consent form because it mentioned the examination of ex-combatants. Due to their status at the time, the FARC did not identify as ex-combatants. In fact, they consider themselves combatants of words and not arms anymore. Startled by the process's reasoning, the next comment of the commander shot the concept of DDR into final pieces; the FARC does not believe in reintegration. The point was reiterated throughout the day.

“But the Havana process denies DDR . . . [a] study indicates that DDR has failed throughout history, because former combatants are left high and dry and completely abandoned by the state. If FARC goes down that path, we won't make it as an organization. That is why FARC doesn't believe in that.”

—Male FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

Of course, DDR processes are always determined by the negotiating parties, but the rejection of globally accepted terminology demonstrates how much Colombia has been accommodating the armed groups, and has supported efforts to make peace processes if not entirely inclusive, then at least as specific and localized as possible.

Much has happened since this visit in April 2017, and developments in Colombia's formerly FARC-controlled areas indicate that much of what ex-combatants described in the focus groups still holds true. In particular, their concerns over what was missing or needed speaks to many insecurities the FARC will most likely face in the coming years. At the same time, the role of the FARC women and the activism of female ex-combatants as well as civil society organizations gives hope that this peace process will challenge existing structural inequalities.

“ Women here in the organization think of the world in a different way as compared to the women who are out there. Many women in Colombia don’t think [aspire] beyond the possibility of raising their children. Women need to think far beyond that. I completely agree with the idea of raising one’s own children and educating them. However, when we look at what assurances there are in place that those children will have a good education and get ahead in life, who’s guaranteeing that? If we don’t rise up and fight for those rights ourselves, then what? We play many different roles. All of the women in FARC-EP want to be professionals to continue doing what we do and change this country. We are capable of doing so. What other profession could be more valuable than to act and think like a rebel? ”

—Female FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

The ideological vigor was palpable everywhere in the camp. Men and women alike shared the enthusiasm to drive change for everyone and for putting women at the spearhead of this movement.

“ FARC is a feminist organization because women’s rights have been violated everywhere in the world. How can any man beat a woman and then kill her? There’s no room for that in our hearts . . . How can a grown man rape a little girl? It’s abhorrent! . . . We at FARC are feminists. We fight so that women are given the same conditions as men [because] will men forever be the ones calling the shots? What about women? Is their sole purpose to sweep the house, care for the children, and do the laundry? No. I will say it again: there’s room for everyone in FARC, all those who are unhappy about Colombia. ”

—Male FARC guerilla, Cesar, April 2017

Many might disagree with parts of this statement and contest the feminist layout of the FARC. After all, reports were mounting¹⁷⁶ after the passing of the peace agreement that contraception and abortions¹⁷⁷ were forced on female guerillas during the conflict. However, on the website specifically dedicated to the women of the FARC, Mujer Fariana, information can be found about the rules and regulations regarding pregnancies.¹⁷⁸

To what extent female FARC guerillas were aware of these rules and how long these rules had been in place is beyond the scope of this research, simply because it was not part of the research focus. We would like to note that this very fact is not meant to discount the experiences of those female guerillas who reported on their ordeal. Rather, given the strong feminist rhetoric of the FARC, the research team felt it necessary to dig a little deeper, especially since it was easy to gloss over such delicate issues in the bustling atmosphere of La Paz.

Nonetheless, without being specifically asked about their views on gender at the beginning of the conversation, the male guerillas naturally steered the conversation toward that topic. The strong views on feminism and women’s empowerment can partially be explained by the fact that the FARC was quick to respond to the establishment of the Sub-Committee on Gender in 2012 by creating the Mujer Fariana website in 2013. It seems a natural fit to link gender equality to their social equality agenda as aspects of discrimination, either political, social, economic, or ethnic, have their equivalent in women’s struggle to end discrimination in Colombia.

However, by empowering women without acknowledging that men are not questioning their own gender identities, as was evident in the experiences of the male ex-combatants interviewed for this study, the FARC is running the risk of underestimating the immense pressure that rests upon its fighters. Evidence from work on violence against women globally indicates that empowering women without including men in the discussions will eventually distort the outcome and become a detriment to women’s empowerment and emancipation. At the same time, it is important to understand the male-specific vulnerabilities in order to curb and counter recidivism.

It is too soon to speculate to what degree the FARC will be able to transform this theoretical construct into actionable strategies and policy suggestions that will resonate with Colombians. It will, in part, depend on the progress of the reincorporation process, which at the current rate of implementation looks rather grim; less than half of the activities have been implemented, and of that number only 17 percent have been fully implemented.¹⁷⁹ These delays are further exacerbated by the fact that President Santos left office in August of 2018, and the new president is not a friend to many stipulations of the peace agreement.

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

This paper focuses on the reintegration of ex-combatants, but the experiences of non-combatants deserve to be presented here as well. In fact, non-combatants have often found themselves on different sides of the conflict and thus had to position themselves across a spectrum in relation to multiple violent actors. In some cases, non-combatants were able to maneuver the presence of armed groups; in other cases, non-combatants were forced to join the ranks of the millions of displaced persons at the peripheries of Colombia's major cities, exacerbating their vulnerabilities further due to lack of access to services, employment, education, and protection. Gender-blindness toward these non-combatants and the absence of their voices in peace agreements have resulted in further marginalization.

As such, given the scale of reintegration efforts both past and present, it is important to understand the context, circumstances, and locations in which ex-combatants transition back to civilian life. After all, successful reintegration does not only depend on the support and services provided by the government, but also—and maybe even more importantly—on the ability of communities to welcome them.

According to conversations with displaced persons in Colombia in 2017, many actors have benefited from having violence rather than peace; the war economy of drug and arms trafficking as well as disputes over land and natural resources led to mass displacement as communities were often caught in the crossfire between the paramilitaries, the guerilla movements, and the Colombian army. Data from the UN's agency for refugees and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre puts the number of IDPs in Colombia at over seven million.¹⁸⁰ While new displacement has significantly gone down since the FARC and the government reached a peace agreement in 2016, globally Colombia still ranks second behind Syria.¹⁸¹

The IDPs come predominantly from disputed territories in the five Pacific coastal departments of Antioquia, Cauca, Choco, Valle del Cauca, and Nariño.¹⁸² According to a 2014 Brookings study, Afro-Colombians and indigenous communities have been particularly vulnerable to displacement, while women and children constitute about 80 percent of all Colombian IDPs.¹⁸³ The situation is especially difficult for female-headed households, whose numbers have grown over the past decade.¹⁸⁴ Some women said that they have at least found comfort in the solidarity and support among the displaced communities.

Despite the reduction in armed violence, and in fact in the number of armed actors, accountability towards the IDPs is still lagging. Only two peace agreements included specific language on reparations for victims. In the peace agreement with the FARC, the fifth element specifically mentions the return of the displaced persons as a peacebuilding measure.¹⁸⁵ However, many of the IDPs have lived for decades at the outskirts of Colombia's major cities with little to no prospect of ever going back to their homes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many cases centering on IDPs returning home have been pending for years. News reports indicate that the power vacuums left by the FARC's retreat to 26 rural transition zones (formerly ZVTN, now Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación, or ETCR) are slowly being filled by illegal groups and city-based gangs who prey on and exploit the vulnerabilities of displaced persons and youths in the cities' peripheries.



Displaced Families Redeem "Virtual Vouchers" February 3, 2014 photo: WFP/William Reina/Flicker

TABLES

TABLE 1: GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF DDR	20
TABLE 2: DEFINITIONS OF FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EASE OR DIFFICULTY OF REINTEGRATION	29
TABLE 3: COMPARING EXPERIENCES OF MALE AND FEMALE EX-COMBATANTS	52
TABLE 4: LIST OF SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVED REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS	55
TABLE 5: DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY: MEN AND BOYS	60
TABLE 6: DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY: WOMEN AND GIRLS	61

FIGURES

FIGURE 1: PATHWAY-CIVILIAN TO COMBATANT TO EX-COMBATANT: WOMEN/GIRLS (ADOPTED FROM IAWG, 2012).....	21
FIGURE 2: PATHWAY-CIVILIAN TO COMBATANT TO EX-COMBATANT: MEN/BOYS (ADOPTED FROM IAWG, 2012).....	22
FIGURE 3: REAL AND PERCEIVED FACTORS DETERMINING EASE OR DIFFICULTY OF REINTEGRATION	28
FIGURE 4: CHALLENGES OF REINTEGRATION	30
FIGURE 5: REINTEGRATION OUTCOME SCENARIOS	30
FIGURE 6: IMPACT OF STIGMA ON REINTEGRATION	31
FIGURE 7: HIERARCHY OF FACTORS DETERMINING REINTEGRATION EASE OR DIFFICULTY: MALE EX-COMBATANTS	33
FIGURE 8: HIERARCHY OF FACTORS DETERMINING REINTEGRATION EASE OR DIFFICULTY: FEMALE EX-COMBATANTS	44
FIGURE 9: HOMICIDES OF SOCIAL LEADERS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (DEFENSORÍA DEL PUEBLO; ENGL. OMBUDSMAN'S OFFICE OF COLOMBIA, JULY 2018)	58
FIGURE 10: STAGES OF DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION, AND REINTEGRATION (U.N. IDDRS, 2014).....	62
FIGURE 11: HISTORY OF INSTITUTIONALIZED DDR IN COLOMBIA (ARN: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW)	64

ABBREVIATIONS

ACR	Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración (Colombian Agency for Reintegration)
ARN	Agencia Colombiana para la Reincorporación y la Normalización (Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization)
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia)
BACRIM	Spanish for bandas criminales: criminal gangs
CODA	Comité Operativo para la Dejación de las Armas (Operational Committee for the Abandonment of Weapons)
CRS	Corriente de Renovación Socialista (Current for Socialist Renovation)
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
ECTR	Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación (Territorial Training and Reincorporation Spaces)
EPL	Ejército Nacional de Liberación (National Liberation Army)
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
MAQL	Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame (Quintin Lame Armed Movement)
M-19	Movimiento 19 de Abril (19th of April Movement)
PRT	Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores de Colombia (Workers' Revolutionary Party of Colombia)
PRVC	Programa para la Reincorporación de la Vida Civil (Program for Reincorporation to the Civil Life)
SENA	Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (National Training Center)
ZVTN	Zonas Veredales Transitorias para la Normalización (Transition Zones for Normalization)

ENDNOTES

- 1 An exact number of DDR processes is difficult to obtain because data on DDR is collected and coded differently. For example, the Uppsala Peace Agreement Dataset codes DDR processes for countries with civil wars only if the peace agreement has specific language on disarmament, and that applies to civil wars where even only one party to the conflict disarms. In the case of Colombia, the dataset only references the disarmament of the AUC in 2003 but fails to mention the other groups that were disarmed and dissolved in the early and mid-1990s. Moreover, some countries are coded several times due to having multiple rounds of negotiations and settlements, making it difficult to distinguish between intent and implementation. In other words, the mere mentioning of DDR in a peace agreement does not mean DDR took place, let alone was successful. Equally problematic is the estimate of DDR processes in 2010 research by the Swedish Folke Bernadotte Academy. In it, the authors refer to 51 civil wars that have seen the implementation of DDR programs since 1979, with a recorded increase after 1994, and 38 DDR programs implemented from 1994 to 2006. A closer look at the list of countries reveals similar problems found with the Uppsala dataset: some countries are listed more than once, although in a different order than in the Uppsala dataset. And because the data coding ends with the year 2006, more recent developments are missing. Colombia, again, is also coded for the 2002 process, although the list fails to mention the AUC. A more recent publication on the first global summit on DDR in Colombia puts the number of countries with DDR programs as low as 25, although no reference to a data source is given. For more information, see Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl and Nicholas Sambanis, “Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Programs: An Assessment” (Stockholm and Sandö: Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2010); and Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración (ACR), *First Global Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Summit: Global DDR Challenges and Techniques, South-South Cooperation, and Rural and Territorial Reintegration* (Bogotá: ACR, 2014), 62.
- 2 Lili Banholzer, “When Do Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programmes Succeed?” *Discussion Paper* (Bonn: Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2014), .
- 3 Banholzer, “When Do Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programmes Succeed?” 15.
- 4 Douglas Porch and María José Rasmussen, “Demobilization of Paramilitaries in Colombia: Transformation or Transition?,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 6 (2008): 520–540.
- 5 Marie O’Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz, *Reimagining Peacemaking: Women’s Roles in Peace Processes* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2015); and Thania Paffenholz, Nick Ross, Steven Dixon, Anna-Lena Schluchter, and Jacqui True, *Making Women Count—Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women’s Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations*, Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies and UN Women, 2016.
- 6 Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR (IAWG), *How-to Guide: Gender-responsive Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration* (New York City: United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Centre, 2012).
- 7 Dag Nylander and Hilde Salvesen, *Towards an Inclusive Peace: Women and the Gender Approach in the Colombian Peace Process* (Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution, 2017).
- 8 Catalina Rojas, “Women and Peacebuilding in Colombia: Resistance to War, Creativity for Peace,” in *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*, ed. Virginia M. Bouvier (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 216.
- 9 Dyan Mazurana and Linda Eckerbom-Cole, “Women, Girls, and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR),” in *Women and Wars*, ed. Carol Cohn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 204.
- 10 Dyan Mazurana, “Women, Girls, and Non-State Armed Opposition Groups,” in *Women and Wars*, ed. Carol Cohn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 155.
- 11 IAWG, *Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*.
- 12 Oliver Kaplan and Enzo Nussio, “Explaining Recidivism of Ex-combatants in Colombia,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, (2018): 64-93, DOI: 10.1177/0022002716644326.
- 13 Kimberly Theidon, “Reconstructing Masculinities: The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (February 2009): 1–34.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Fundación Ideas para la Paz, “Retorno a la Legalidad o Reincidencia de Excombatientes en Colombia: Dimensión del Fenómeno y Factores de Riesgo,” *Serie Informes No. 22* (2014).
- 16 Kaplan and Nussio, “Explaining Recidivism of Ex-combatants in Colombia,” 83.

- 17 Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (IAWG), *Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* (New York: IAWG, 2014). An earlier version of the IDDRS from 2006 laid out in more detail how gender mainstreaming in DDR processes needs to account for the experiences of men and boys, especially highlighting the different ways in which violent masculinities need to be addressed as part of gender-sensitive planning and execution of DDR processes. The 2014 edition, however, also recognizes the need to identify and pay attention to male victims of sexual and gender-based violence.
- 18 Adriana Rincón Villegas and Andrés Freire-Kane, "Lost in Transition: The Legal Pathway for Demobilization in Colombia," *Revista Análisis Internacional No. 5* (2012), 190.
- 19 U.S. Congressional Human Rights Caucus, *The Human Rights Situation in Colombia: Afro-Colombians and Indigenous People*, Testimony by Erin Mooney, Members' Briefing, June 8, 2005.
- 20 UNHCR estimates the total IDPs in Colombia to be over 7 million people. See UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Forced Displacement Growing in Colombia Despite Peace Agreement*, 2017.
- 21 Donny Meertens, *Forced Displacement and Gender Justice in Colombia: Between Disproportional Effects of Violence and Historical Justice* (New York: International Center for Transitional Justice, 2012).
- 22 Virginia M. Bouvier, "Gender and The Role of Women in Colombia's Peace Process," in *UN Women Background Paper*, UN Women, March 14, 2016, 8.
- 23 UNHCR, *Forced Displacement*, 2017.
- 24 The rural population of Colombia comprises approximately 30 percent of the total population. And while they have suffered in greater numbers than urban populations, is it worth noting that local peace initiatives and communities were active at the height of the conflict from the late 1980s to the 1990s. Some authors put the number at about 30,000. See Ricardo Esquivia Ballestas and Barbara Gerlach, "The Local Community as a Creative Space for Transformation: The View from Montes de María," in *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*, ed. Virginia M. Bouvier (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 295. Local zones of peace were established in several areas in the country. According to research conducted by Christopher Mitchell, these zones of peace were both inward-looking as well as outward-looking, for peace had to be established with the combatants but also kept and maintained within the community. See Christopher Mitchell and Sara Ramírez, "Local Peace Communities in Colombia: An Initial Comparison of Three Cases," in *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*, ed. Virginia M. Bouvier (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 250. The establishment of the Red Nacional de Iniciativas por la Paz contra la Guerra (National Network of Initiatives for Peace and Against the War: REDEPAZ) in the 1990s is a clear indicator of the desire for peace in Colombia, and civil society engagement. However, according to Mitchell and Rojas, these local peace efforts also faced challenges. The administration of President Uribe "marked a change in both central-government policies and attitudes toward local peace initiatives, so that the opportunities for successfully maintaining them lessened while the problems they confronted multiplied." Part of the problem was the launch of military campaigns against the FARC under Plan Colombia as well as coca eradication efforts that drove people away from their homes. The involvement of the government—at either local, regional or national level—in these processes was thus often in direct opposition to what these communities tried to achieve. See Christopher Mitchell and Catalina Rojas, "Against the Stream: Colombian Zones of Peace Under Democratic Security," in *Local Peacebuilding and National Peace: Interaction Between Grassroots and Elite Processes*, eds. Christopher Mitchell and Landon E. Hancock (London and New York: Continuum Books, 2012).
- 25 In his book, Oliver Kaplan examines why some civilians were able to protect themselves during Colombia's conflict, and why some communities failed at accomplishing the same. In particular, Kaplan looks at the mechanisms and pre-existing structures, and argues that social cohesion is a vehicle for resisting oppression and developing ways to protect oneself from violence. For more, see Oliver Kaplan, *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 26 According to John Paul Lederach, some Colombian peasants were "masters of web-making for social change." Their ability to imagine armed actors as part of a relationship rather than as an opposition gave these peasants the necessary tools to mediate their position. See John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). While Lederach's example speaks to a particular case study, and while it is true that not all communities and associations were able to protect themselves all the time, Lederach and other researchers point out that non-violent resistance has as much a stake in the conflict as the state and non-state actors. However, "if the war in Colombia has received little attention, Colombia's drive for peace has received even less." See Bouvier, *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*, 6.
- 27 Bouvier (ed.), *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*, 5.
- 28 Rafael Pardo, "Key Issues in the Negotiations Process," in *The Peace Process in Colombia with the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia-AUC*, ed. Cynthia J. Arnsion (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars-Latin American Program, 2005), 22.

- 29 It is worth noting that while membership of the BACRIM comprises former paramilitaries, the criminal activities of the BACRIM have diversified beyond drug trafficking, and their organizational structures are more fluid and less hierarchical. For more information, see Jeremy McDermoot, "The BACRIM and Their Position in Colombia's Underworld," *InSight Crime*, May 2, 2014.
- 30 Bouvier, *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*.
- 31 The M-19 officially announced its existence in 1974, but their activism can be traced back to activities surrounding the 1970 elections; the candidate of the National Popular Alliance (ANAPO) movement—Gustavo Rojas Pinilla—was defeated in what many groups in opposition to the National Front called an election steeped in fraud. For more detailed information on ANAPO, see Jorge Pablo Osterling, *Democracy in Colombia: Clientelist Politics and Guerrilla Warfare* (New Brunswick and Oxford: Transaction Publishers, 1989); and U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, "Colombia, The ANAPO: What is it?" Intelligence Memorandum No. 0505/70, approved for release 2006/05/25.
- 32 James J. Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia: The Origin and Direction of the FARC-EP* (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), 58.
- 33 In fact, armed groups such as the FARC went to great lengths to understand gender norms and ideologies in their spheres of influence in order to bend them to their benefit. See Mazurana, "Women, Girls, and Non-State Armed Opposition Groups," 155.
- 34 Mauricio García Durán, Vera Grabe Loewenherz, and Otty Patiño Hormaza, *The M-19's Journey from Armed Struggle to Democratic Politics: Striving to Keep the Revolution Connected to People*, Berghof Transition Series No.1 (Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2008).
- 35 Mazurana, "Women, Girls, and Non-State Armed Opposition Groups," 155.
- 36 Carlo Nasi, "Colombia's Peace Processes, 1982-2002: Conditions, Strategies, and Outcomes," in *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*, ed. Virginia M. Bouvier (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 44.
- 37 The CGSB was founded in 1987, but the organization was short-lived due to contested views on engagement with the government for peace negotiations. As a result, most of its members entered unilateral negotiations with the government in the 1990s, including the M-19, the EPL, and the PRT. The FARC resumed warfare after failed negotiations in the same period. For more information, see David Rampf, "The Untold Story of the Workers' Revolutionary Party in Colombia: The PRT's Transformation from a Clandestine Party into a Legal Political Actor," in *Inclusive Settlements Papers 4*, Berghof Foundation, 2015.
- 38 León Zamosc, "Peasant Struggles of the 1970s in Colombia," in *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*, eds. Susan Eckstein and Manuel Antonio Carretón Merino (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 111.
- 39 Diana Jean Schemo, "Colombia's Death-Strewn Democracy," *The New York Times*, July 24, 1997.
- 40 Oliver Kaplan, *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 64; 162.
- 41 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Follow-Up on the Demobilization Process of the AUC in Colombia: Digest of Published Documents (2004-2007)*, OEA/Ser.L/V/II CIDH/ INF. 2/07 (Washington, D.C.: Organization of American States, 2007).
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 ABColombia, *Colombia: Women, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and the Peace Process* (London: ABColombia, 2013), 7.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Durán, Loewenherz, and Hormaza, *The M-19's Journey from Armed Struggle to Democratic Politics*.
- 47 According to research conducted by James J. Brittain, actual numbers regarding the strength of the FARC-EP are inconsistent and inaccurate. Based on his research and weighed against other sources from Colombia, "between the late 1990s and early 2000s . . . the number of combatants roughly equated to 45,000." See James J. Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia*, 19.
- 48 Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia*, 194.
- 49 Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia*, 195.
- 50 Durán, Loewenherz, and Hormaza, *The M-19's Journey from Armed Struggle to Democratic Politics*, 13.
- 51 UN News Centre, "Colombia: With Arms Laid Down, Focus Now on Reintegration, UN Envoy Tells Security Council," June 30 2017.
- 52 Pardo, "Key Issues in the Negotiations Process," 22.
- 53 "Colombia Suspends Peace Talks with ELN Rebels After Bomb Attacks," *Reuters*, January 29, 2018.

- 54 Historically, the laws that dictated the demobilization of armed groups centered on amnesties and pardons. Chief among these laws was Law 77 of 1989 which facilitated the negotiations with the M-19. The peace agreements with the EPL, the PRT, and the MAQL in 1991 were guided by Decree 213, which “extinguished the penalty and the criminal action for political and related crimes.” A similar framework (Law 104) was adopted for the peace negotiations with the CRS in 1994. During the (failed) negotiations with the FARC in the late 1990s, the government enacted Law 418 in 1997 for two years, which was later modified and extended by Law 548 in 1999. Law 418 gave the government the ability to begin a dialogue with guerilla groups, but not paramilitary groups. This finally changed in 2002 with the promulgation of Law 782, which was passed a few days after the AUC signaled willingness to demobilize. Law 782 allowed the government to engage with all armed groups, irrespective of their political status as traditionally negotiated prior to reaching agreements. In 2006, the stipulations of Law 782 were extended by Law 1106, granting pardons to those who were not involved in grave human rights violations. The decree (Decree 128) that regulated Law 782 provided economic, social, financial, and educational benefits as incentives for combatants to demobilize. The international community and civil society have criticized the implementation of this legal structure as a loophole for paramilitaries to gain immunity because ex-combatants who were convicted of “lesser crimes” could not be prosecuted again if evidence of major crimes emerged. At the same time, investigation was not properly enforced, and ex-combatants who might have been implicated in serious human rights violations were not identified. “The fact that neither Law 782 nor Decree 128 considered carrying out investigations on the groups’ members before certifying their demobilization status implied a first step to impunity.” For more detailed information on the emergence and dissolution of the M-19, see Durán, Loewenherz, and Hormaza, *The M-19’s Journey from Armed Struggle to Democratic Politics*. For information on legal instruments of the peace processes in the 1990s and the AUC, see Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “Context: Origin and Characteristics of the Internal Armed Conflict in Colombia, Para 60,” in *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Follow-Up on the Demobilization Process of the AUC in Colombia*; Renee Jeffery, *Amnesties, Accountability, and Human Rights* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 179; Rosario Figari Layús, “The Role of Transitional Justice in the Midst of Ongoing Armed Conflict,” *Potsdamer Studien zu Staat, Recht und Politik*/5, 2010, 50. For more details on Law 782 and Decree 128, see *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Follow-Up on the Demobilization Process of the AUC in Colombia*.
- 55 For a detailed description of different components of each decree and the way they governed DDR processes, see The World Bank, *Colombia—Peace Programmatic I: Demobilization and Reinsertion of Ex-Combatants in Colombia*, Research Report No. 39222-CO (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2008), 84–86.
- 56 Pardo, “Key Issues in the Negotiations Process,” 17.
- 57 O’Reilly, Ó Súilleabháin, and Paffenholz, *Reimagining Peacemaking*; Paffenholz, Ross, Dixon, Schluchter, and True, *Making Women Count—Not Just Counting Women*.
- 58 Rojas, “Women and Peacebuilding in Colombia,” 216.
- 59 It is important to recognize that the sub-committee had no decision-making power. However, the significance of its existence should not be downplayed because of this fact. On the contrary, the international recognition of the sub-committee on gender as well as civil society delegations (including women, victims, and other marginalized groups) had major implications, for these mechanisms were unparalleled. These delegations kept the negotiating parties at the table and led to significant moves by the FARC to issue apologies and finalize the release of all child soldiers. For more information, see Bouvier, “Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia’s Peace Process.”
- 60 UN Women, “Facts and Figures: Peace and Security.”
- 61 Bouvier, “Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia’s Peace Process.”
- 62 UN News Centre, “Gender Equality, Women’s Empowerment Central to Colombian Peace Process—UN Officials,” July 26, 2016.
- 63 Centro Nacional de Memoria Historica, *Desafíos para la Reintegración: Enfoques de Género, Edad y Etnia*. (Bogotá, Colombia: Centro Nacional de Memoria Historica, 2013), 107.
- 64 For a more detailed account of women’s activism and participation in peace initiatives before and during the Havana negotiations, see Bouvier, “Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia’s Peace Process.”
- 65 Nylander and Salvesen, *Towards an Inclusive Peace*.
- 66 Rojas, “Women and Peacebuilding in Colombia,” 216.
- 67 ABColombia, *Colombia: Women, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and the Peace Process*, 8.
- 68 Joanne Mariner (ed.), “Smoke and Mirrors: Colombia’s Demobilization of Paramilitary Groups,” *Human Rights Watch* 17, No. 3 (2005): 1–3.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 ABColombia, *Colombia: Women, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and the Peace Process*, 7.

- 71 Arturo J. Carillo, "Truth, Justice, and Reparations in Colombia. The Path to Peace and Reconciliation?" in *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*, ed. Virginia M. Bouvier (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009).
- 72 Aside from the shortcomings of the legal instruments underpinning the peace process, there were also problems with the implementation of the laws. For example, all combatants of the AUC gathered in specifically demarcated concentration zones. Time spent in these areas often counted as time served. The preparations to collect evidence for legal investigation and prosecution were often ad hoc, and prosecutors received little to no training, and while there were no legal stipulations that granted blanket amnesties, the lack of enforcement allowed for what critics called a veiled amnesty. See Renee Jeffery, *Amnesties, Accountability, and Human Rights* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 183. As a result, less than 10 percent of the demobilized AUC fighters applied for benefits under the legal provisions, which impeded efforts to collect important information on crimes and human rights violations committed by AUC units. In addition, individuals did not have to show conclusive evidence of their membership, thereby allowing people who were not associated with the AUC access to social and economic benefits. This, in turn, also meant that the total of demobilized individuals was almost twice as high as the recorded number of members of the AUC prior to their demobilization. For more information, see Layús, "The Role of Transitional Justice in the Midst of Ongoing Armed Conflict," 55; and Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Follow-Up on the Demobilization Process of the AUC in Colombia*.
- 73 Carillo, "Truth, Justice, and Reparations in Colombia," 143.
- 74 Ginna Morelo, "The Database Documenting 60 Years of Conflict in Colombia," *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, September 3, 2018.
- 75 Roberto Vidal-Lopez, "Truth-Telling and Internal Displacement in Colombia," in *Case Studies on Transitional Justice and Displacement*, Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement (London: International Center for Transitional Justice, Brookings Institute, and London School of Economics, 2012).
- 76 Carillo, "Truth, Justice, and Reparations in Colombia," 148.
- 77 As of May 2017, and through Decree 897, all reintegration efforts are implemented and supported by the ARN. Based on the points laid out in the peace agreement, the reincorporation process will be designed by the National Reincorporation Council (CRN for its Spanish acronym) that was established through Decree 2027 (2016), and will consist of two representatives from the government and the FARC. The current process is divided into two phases: the so-called Early Reincorporation and long-term reincorporation. The reason for the capital letters is that Early Reincorporation is described on the ARN's website as a sort of program that was established by the CRN "to facilitate the process of integral reincorporation." The encampment of the FARC combatants in the ZVTNs was one of these early reincorporation measures. Currently, the ZVTNs are also undergoing a transformation, as evident in their change of name: Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación (ETCR: Territorial Training and Reincorporation Spaces). In these areas, the FARC will not only receive their own training, but the surrounding communities are meant to be included as well. For more detailed information on the development of the reintegration framework for the FARC as stipulated in the peace agreement.
- 78 Adriaan Alsema, "Colombia Creates Historic Truth Commission," *Colombia Reports*, April 4, 2017.
- 79 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "Context: Origin and Characteristics of the Internal Armed Conflict in Colombia, Para 60." Mariner (ed.), "Smoke and Mirrors."
- 81 Laura Pico, "Colombia, the Resilient Survivor: DDR, Elusive Peace, and the Politics of Post-Conflict," *Pomona Senior Theses*, Paper 163 (Claremont: Claremont Colleges, 2016), 5.
- 82 Democratic Progress Institute, *DDR and Former Female Combatants* (London: Democratic Progress Institute, 2015), 53.
- 83 UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (IAWG), *Blame It on the War? The Gender Dimensions of Violence in Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration* (New York: IAWG, 2012), 47; IAWG, *How-to Guide*.
- 84 Seema Shekhawat and Bishnu Pathak, "Female Combatants, Peace Processes and the Exclusion," in *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace*, ed. Seema Shekhawat (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 56.
- 85 Seema Shekhawat, "Introduction: Women in Conflict and Peace-Making," in *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 14.
- 86 IAWG, *How-to Guide*.
- 87 Carol Cohn, "Women and Wars: Toward a Conceptual Framework," in *Women and Wars* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 22.
- 88 IAWG, *Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*. An earlier version of the IDDRS from 2006 laid out in more detail how gender mainstreaming in DDR processes needs to account for the experiences of men and boys, especially highlighting the different ways in which violent masculinities need to be addressed as part of gender-sensitive planning and execution of DDR processes. The 2014 edition, however, also recognizes the need to identify and pay attention to male victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

- 89 UNDP and IAWG, *Blame It on the War?*
- 90 IAWG, *How-to Guide*.
- 91 UNDP and IAWG, *Blame It on the War?*
- 92 Cohn, *Women and Wars*.
- 93 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 94 R.W. Connell. *Masculinities*, 2nd edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 258.
- 95 Kaplan and Nussio, "Explaining Recidivism of Ex-combatants in Colombia."
- 96 R.W. Connell. *Masculinities*, 2nd edition, 260.
- 97 Angela Raven-Roberts, "Women and the Political Economy of War," in *Women and Wars*, ed. Carol Cohn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 52.
- 98 Shekhawat, "Introduction: Women in Conflict and Peace-Making," 15.
- 99 Cohn, *Women and Wars*, 4.
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