



Women, war and empowerment: A case study of female ex-combatants in Colombia

Master's thesis in Peace and Conflict Transformation

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Preface

This thesis is a result of two years of study initiated in August 2008 at the University of Tromsø where I was enrolled on the interdisciplinary and English-taught master's program Peace and Conflict Transformation at the Centre for Peace Studies (CPS). For the last year of the studies I was based at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) on a master scholarship within the program of Conflict Resolution and Peace Building (CRPB).

First of all I would like to thank all the people at CPS in Tromsø, for valuable assistance throughout my master's degree. Thanks to Tone Bleie the director who started out as my supervisor before I moved to PRIO and also thanks to Percy Oware, the academic director of the peace centre, for giving me helpful assistance and valuable input through the whole process. To Walter Schønfelder for providing guidance in selecting my research topic, and to Lodve Svare who through workshops has contributed to the development of the thesis. And a special mention for the chief PG Kjersti Gausvik and my other co-students at the CPS who, in their own special ways, contributed to an unforgettable stay and study time in Tromsø!

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1 Introduction

While we have seen an increased focus in the past few decades on the role of women in armed conflict, women are still chiefly perceived and categorized as victims, civilians or being in supporting roles for male fighters (Goldstein 2001). Women's direct participation as combatants has received less attention. Existing literature is dominated by discourses on victimhood and vulnerability, with attention mainly focused on the negative experiences women have. In the Colombian context, little has been written about women's gains as combatants; the focus has rather been directed at issues such as forced recruitment, sexual exploitation, and forced abortions. The positive experiences women obtain from being part of armed groups has been less visible, often unknown outside the armed groups. This thesis represents an effort to offer a more nuanced and multifaceted perspective on women's experiences in war in Colombia. The analysis proceeds from the research question: *To what extent are women empowered by joining guerrilla groups in Colombia?*

1.1 Colombia's conflict

Colombia has experienced an ongoing civil war for more than 50 years, which has produced a high rate of violence, killings, kidnappings and displacement. Colombia's history is characterized by endemic political violence and a culture of violence. Large economic and social inequalities and a hegemonic bipartisan political system are the main causes of the conflict. Later, the production and sale of drugs became a source of financing the war, creating new conflicts and insurgent groups. During the recent years, there have been various attempts at disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) in Colombia, the first wave starting in 1989. DDR is being implemented by the Colombian state during war, which is quite unusual as it is normally attempted in post war societies after holistic peace agreements and is implemented by the UN. Women have to a large degree been a part of the conflict, not just as civilians but also as combatants, especially in the guerrilla groups where women today comprise about 40% of the armed forces.

1.2 Methodology

I have based my analysis on empirical material I gathered during fieldwork among demobilized female fighters in Colombia from May to August 2009. I applied qualitative method and interviewed ex-combatants, male and female, and people working with ex-combatants and reintegration. I conducted 29 interviews in Bogotá and Santa Marta, and

during the interviews I focused on three different points in time: before joining an insurgent group, the time in the movement, and the reintegration. I have applied the same time periods in my analysis which is divided into three sections: women's motives for joining guerrilla groups, women's roles in guerrilla groups and women in the reintegration process.

1.3 Victim discourse and empowerment

“There is a tendency - not least in the gender-focused literature - to focus on women as victims of war” (Hauge 2008:3). The fact that some women have positive and even nostalgic views on their experiences from war is not focused on much. I will, therefore, in this paper look specifically at a group of women which has not received much attention; women who perceive their participation in the war as overall positive. In order to do so I use narratives from three female ex-combatants to illuminate the positive experiences some women have from war. These three are selected for their capacity to exemplify the gains some women have by joining guerrilla groups in Colombia. They are also selected three core themes I will be looking at are gender relations, maternity and political participation and the connection between these as these were the most important and interesting topics that came up during fieldwork.

I use the concept of empowerment as an alternative way to shed light on women's experiences in war. In this paper I find it meaningful to define empowerment by using the concepts of critical consciousness, agency, collective and individual empowerment and context and time. In order to measure empowerment, I have focused on women's subjective perception of their experiences in the form of the three retrospective narratives. I do not disregard the victim discourse; it is a concept of high importance when recognizing atrocities done towards women in war and claiming women's rights. However, I argue against its dominance in the literature on women in war and show that not all women are mere victims of war.

It is important to stress that women are not a homogenous group of people and that women experience situations differently according to background, class, ethnicity, age etc. Their experiences can neither be divided into clear categories of positive and negative as most experiences are quite complex and therefore need to be nuanced. Women's roles are also diverse and not permanent as some move between the categories of victim and empowerment and some assumes the roles as both perpetrators and victims.

1.4 The structure of the paper

I have divided this thesis into eight chapters. After the introduction I explain the methodology I applied and sketch out how I conducted my fieldwork, the sampling of informants and how I gained access to them. I also discuss my role as a researcher, the strength and weaknesses of my methodology and sampling, and the selection of narratives and themes for the analysis. The third part consists of the theory where the chosen conceptualizations of empowerment are discussed and defined. In this chapter I also look at the challenges of measuring empowerment related to my methodology. Then follows the background with an introduction to the violent conflict in Colombia, the insurgent groups, the DDR process and women's position in the country. Chapter five is a brief outline and a short introduction to the three women's narratives. The analysis starts in chapter six as I discuss women's motives for joining guerrilla groups, the roles and experiences of women in the groups and the process of reintegration. In chapter seven I have a concluding discussion on the extent to which women's experiences in the guerrilla groups were empowering. Chapter eight provides a final summary and conclusion.

1.5 Description of terms and abbreviations

I found that some of the terms used by my informants were quite difficult to translate into English in a satisfactory manner within the text. The following list provides a description of the Spanish terms used, definitions of key-terms and abbreviations.

1.5.1 Translation and explanation

Guerrilla- either refers to guerrilla groups or to the war itself.

Guerrillera- female guerrilla soldier.

Guerrillero- male guerrilla soldier.

Compañera- female companion or a female guerrilla soldier when referred to by other guerrilla soldiers. Also often used as synonym to girlfriend.

Compañero- male companion or a male guerrilla soldier when referred to by other guerrilla soldiers. Also a common used synonym to boyfriend.

Machismo- an expression of male dominance.

Machista- a person, normally referred to men, who subordinate or dominate women by words or actions.

Monte- commonly referred to as the bush or the rural areas where the guerrilla groups operate.

1.5.2 Key terms

Demobilization- the process when people go from being militant to civil. Often includes that the combatants move out of the bush or military areas into civil spaces.

Reintegration- the process where ex-combatants create new lives in the civil society, often starts with reinsertion, where the people move into a civil area and the reintegration starts which includes a more long termed process where the ex-combatants become integrated and parts of a community.

Combatant and civilian/ civil society - Many Colombians grow up in militarized zones and co-exist and so co-operate with armed groups, while combatants work and interact with the civil society. This makes it is hard to draw a clear line between civilian and soldier. In this paper I have chosen to define combatants as people who are fully incorporated within an armed group and have an active full time role rather than being supporters or co-operators. Civilians and civil society are the individuals and populations that are not fully incorporated in armed groups as active combatants.

1.5.3 Abbreviations

ACR- La Alta Consejería Para la Reintegración, The High Commission of Reintegration

AD M-19- Alianza Democratica M-19 Democratic Alliance of M-19

ANAPO- The Popular National Alliance

AUC- Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia

CRS – Corriente Renovación Social One. The part of ELN that demobilized during the peace talks in the early 1990s

DDR- Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

ELN- Ejército de Liberación Nacional, The National Liberation Army

FARC- Las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

M-19- El Movimiento 19 de Abril, 19th of April Movement

OAS- Organization for American States (OEA is the Spanish abbreviation).

2 Methodology

2.1 Qualitative fieldwork in Colombia

The empirical material for this paper was gathered during fieldwork in Colombia from May to August 2009. The overall topic for the fieldwork was “*Reintegration of female ex-combatants in Colombia*” and I was focusing on women combatant’s experiences of the reintegration process. Due to the nature of my project and because I was focusing on people’s experiences, I applied qualitative method using semi-structured interviews. The main reason for choosing Colombia as the area of my research was earlier work experience as a youth delegate in Colombia for the Norwegian Red Cross in 2007-08. Over a period of nine months, I was based in Santa Marta working in a street children program run by Colombian Red Cross Youth, providing assistance to street children and to internally displaced families with children at risk of ending up on the streets. Through this work, I obtained firsthand knowledge about the victims and people highly affected by the Colombian civil war. However, I left with many unanswered questions relating to the people on “the other side” - the offenders or soldiers. Talking about the guerrilla or the paramilitary is close to being taboo as the law of silence is strongly rooted in the civil society and people are afraid of being accused as sympathisers of insurgent groups as this may have fatal consequences. When I started to study Peace and Conflict Transformation at the University of Tromsø, I became acquainted with the DDR literature and found its combination of security and development interesting. However, I soon found that women to a large degree were invisible if not absent in large parts of this literature. Female soldiers are seen by many as a contradictory phenomenon since women normally are associated with peace and care. I therefore became curious about women’s experiences in war and how they brought these experiences back to the civil society after having transgressed gender norms. Early in the fieldwork, I started to understand that some women had positive experiences and gains from being fighters, which was quite different from the image drawn of women as only victims in war. This contradiction was further enforced as the women expressed disappointment and losses when returning to civilian society. Based on these findings, I developed the research question: *To what extent are women empowered by joining guerrilla groups in Colombia?* A certain flexibility during research was necessary to be able to establish an overview, to discover the main issues and later to uncover the nuances within these. In order to retain this flexibility, I employed grounded theory as a guiding methodology, where I frequently reviewed the research plan during the research process.

Grounded theory is an iterative process in which data and theory, lived realities and perceptions about norms are constantly engaged with each other to help the researcher decide what data to collect and how to interpret it. The interaction between developing theories and methodology is constant, as preliminary assumptions direct the data collection and then the collected data, when analysed, indicates new directions and new sources of data.

(Bentzon et al. 1998:18)

The aim when using grounded theory is to engage empirical knowledge in a constant dialogue with theoretical generalization and concept building (Bentzon et al. 1998). Throughout every stage of the research process, I have tried to combine and link the empirical findings with theoretical perspectives and concepts in order to explain or amplify findings and address contradictions. I found the methodological aspects of grounded theory useful in this particular thesis as it provided me with flexibility within a strong interaction between theoretical and empirical perspectives without losing the structure or developing a too amplified focus.

2.2 Area of survey

The first part of my fieldwork was conducted in Bogotá, Colombia's capital, which has a high percentage of ex-combatants. With a population of over 8 million people it is easier for ex-combatants to "blend in" as many people live quite anonymous lives. Most of the institutions and organizations working with reintegration are based in Bogotá so the capital served as a suitable place to start gaining access to informants. Later, I went to Santa Marta, the capital of the county Magdalena situated in the northern part of Colombia. Due to my earlier work experience in Santa Marta I had a larger network of contacts, providing better opportunities to gain access to the different informants. With 300,000 inhabitants, Santa Marta is a village compared with Bogotá, but still the home of many ex-combatants as the area is heavily affected by the conflict. Due to the small size and relaxed culture, I found Santa Marta less bureaucratic and easier to obtain permissions for interviews and to gain access to people and institutions.

2.3 Sampling

I conducted a total of 29 interviews during my fieldwork and I have divided my informants into three groups. My primary group of informants consists of 10 demobilized women from the three largest guerrilla groups (FARC, ELN, M-19) and the largest paramilitary group (AUC). The women came from different regions, socio-economic backgrounds, classes, ages, ethnicities and had different rank and roles in the groups. They had reintegrated into civilian life at different times: some at the first wave of demobilization in the 1990s, while others had recently deserted. The women from FARC had demobilized individually whereas the remainder went through collective reintegration after peace negotiations in 1990. I interviewed five women from FARC, one from ELN, two from M-19, and two from AUC. During the interviews we covered three phases - motives and process of joining, their role and experiences in the group, and the process of demobilization and reintegration - in order to capture the whole process.

The second group consists of five men from the same insurgent groups but not from M-19. (I was able to locate one man from M-19 but he was not interested in being interviewed.) These were also of different ages, areas and ethnicities and all of them had reintegrated individually. In the interviews, as well as covering the same 3 phases as I did with the women – before, during and after war – we also talked about their views and experiences of women's roles and functions within the groups and in the reintegration process

The third and last group of informants are people working, directly or indirectly, with demobilized or reintegration programs. During these interviews I tried to map how the different organizations work with reintegration and their views on and experiences with gender in this work. The 14 people I talked to had various positions within The high commission for Reintegration (ACR), International Organization of Migration (IOM), Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz Colombia Organización de los Estados Americanos (MAPP-OEA), Foundation Nuevo Arco Iris, Foundation Ideas Para la Paz, The Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF), The mayors reintegration program in Bogotá, The Observatory of DDR at the National University in Bogotá, the Network for female ex-combatants, Proyecto Justicia y Vida, a politician and former mayor working with demobilization of guerrilla groups and the High Commission for Reconciliation Coexistence and Peace.

In addition I participated in a joint psycho-social workshop for female ex-combatants, internally displaced women and wives of ex-combatants.

2.4 Gaining access

It is crucial that the researcher find the person or people who can grant initial access. It is not however, always easy to figure out how to find the right person. Even in formal bureaucracies, it may not be clear who has the power to grant access.

(Feldman et al.2003:30)

Like many researchers, I experienced various difficulties during fieldwork trying to identify the correct persons to approach and the right strategies for *how* to approach them. Being a foreigner, an outsider doing research on a vulnerable population and with limited time available, presented considerable challenges when it came to gaining access. During this process I met a large number of *gatekeepers*: people in positions of giving or denying permission to researchers and others wanting to investigate or obtain information about a certain population (Feldman et al. 2003). In my case, the gatekeepers were mostly employees in organizations working with reintegration who could grant me access to employees and users of the services, the demobilized population. I applied three different methods to gain access giving various degrees of success. The first method I have called the *Top-down* strategy. “(...) *access to an organization usually requires seeking permission from people in authority (of high prestige)*” (Jorgensen 1989:45). With this in mind and knowing from former experiences that Colombia is a highly hierarchic and bureaucratic country, I started my fieldwork contacts by seeking to gain permission from gatekeepers of high ranks. I started with ACR, the governmental program for reintegration. However, after various attempts at calling, visiting and sending e-mails, I soon realised that the process of gaining access would be too slow and time consuming. The gatekeeper was responsible for all the visitors, guest researchers and others wanting to enter the institution, in addition to having advisory tasks internally. Hence it was a formal high ranked gatekeeper I was in contact with, and being a young foreign student, I was a low priority. After handing in an impressive amount of material requested, I still did not receive a “green light” to enter.

Due to limited time I applied an alternative strategy many researchers use: *the backdoor*. I started making contact with other employees working directly with the demobilized,

contacting other organizations and institutes working with the process of demobilization, some cooperating with ACR and some working independently. Some of the people I met in these organizations turned out to be very good key informants – that is, persons who introduce the researcher to others who may become informants (Shenton and Hayter 2004). This strategy was more successful as through them I made contact with employees at lower levels of ACR who assisted me in establishing contact with ex-combatants participating in the program.

After arriving in Santa Marta I applied the third strategy, the *go-low* approach, where I tried to avoid the bureaucracy at the high level of the hierarchy in ACR and instead put more effort into the lower levels of the organization. Due to the smaller setting, lower ranks of the employees and more open and friendly attitude to outsiders, it was fairly easy for me to make contact with the ACR's district office and it took me a day as opposed to the initial month in Bogotá to gain access to employees and ex-combatants. Sadly, due to lack of time, I did not manage to obtain the full value from this point of entry as I only had time to conduct a few interviews before leaving. Looking back, I believe that the *go-low* approach should have been my first strategy of approach as it gave me access in short time, was less bureaucratic and gave me access to both employees and demobilized. In fact it could also have served as a bottom up approach, where the district leader could serve as a key informant and a gate opener to higher levels of the organization.

2.5 Strengths and limitation of the method

Even though the backdoor and *go-low* strategies turned out to be more successful than the top-down, one can discuss the ethical issues of entering through the backdoor and less formal gatekeepers. Although many researchers make use of this strategy, it can appear a little slippery and seem as if you are going behind people's backs. There can be various reasons for the main gate being closed, and often it is with good intentions, such as protecting a certain population from unnecessary stress and pressure in an already difficult situation. However, in the case of my fieldwork I believe it was more the fear of attracting criticism of the program and of people from the outside discovering shortcomings in the program. Foreign researchers often have greater opportunities to spread this information internationally, something that could jeopardize the possibilities for international funding. Sweden is one of the main sponsors for ACR, and with Norway and Sweden being so close I could have been seen as a

possible threat. Since there were other international students from other places in Europe that were granted access to the organization, I think it was more an issue of bureaucracy and not having the right key person assisting me in entering, rather than protecting the demobilized population.

Another issue with the backdoor and go-low approaches is that you have less freedom to pick the informants that would be best for your particular project. The lower-level gatekeepers and employees often have less authority to offer you access to a wide variety of informants. In my case, it meant doing interviews with informants with quite different profiles in relation to age, reasons for joining, rank, time of demobilization etc. It would have been preferable to focus on one group of people getting a more narrow selection of informants with similar profiles. However, I see it as a strength having data with different perspectives, views and experiences, even though it can become less manageable and harder to make generalizations based on it. From my wide-ranging material, I am able to gain a better impression of the complexity of women's experiences from guerrilla groups and the process of reintegration. In addition, the experience other researchers have had with ACR is that they were able to enter only under strict conditions and were not allowed to ask any political questions or address issues that could put ACR in a negative light. In addition, an employee from the program had to be present throughout their interview sessions. Such conditions may significantly limit the process of data collection, and put restrictions on both the researcher and the informant. By going through less formal gatekeepers, I was freer in the actual interview situation. Most of the interviews were done in a neutral place, without employees or gatekeepers present, and it was easier to facilitate an open and informal dialog.

2.6 My role as a researcher

There are several issues connected to the role as a foreign researcher in another cultural context. In my case my foreign identity was very visible as I have different ethnicity and nationality than my informants. Even though I have former experiences in Colombia I am not an insider, and this may limit the process of gathering information. This was especially the case when contacting gatekeepers and bureaucrats as the codes of formal communication and contact with people high up in the system are stricter than in Norway. Another challenge was the risk of being misinterpreted as a spy sent to evaluate the programs and the work or participation of the people. I tried to avoid this by giving a thorough introduction to my

project, my purpose of being there and use of the material. Being introduced by gatekeepers and key informants also gave me the credibility to conduct the interviews and obtain sensible information. One of the strengths of having a foreign identity was that it provided me with a neutral status as Norway is not involved in the conflict: something that made it easier to establish an open and non-restricted dialog.

My gender was an advantage during the fieldwork. Even though the broadly believed conception of one woman being able to identify with another woman is not always necessarily the case, in the Colombian context, where strict gender roles still color many aspects of social life, being a woman made it easier to approach and talk to the women.

Language is always a big challenge in relation to fieldwork, even when done in your mother tongue. To get the nuances may be difficult as “*Language is founded in and expresses among other things culture, class, social and economic status, profession and training, age and gender*” (Bentzon et al 1998:215). I conducted the interviews in Spanish and, even though I have lived and worked in Colombia and other countries in Latin America, the language was a challenge especially at the beginning of the fieldwork. To diminish this challenge I started at an early stage to pinpoint key expressions and technical words connected to issues in armed forces and reintegration. When there were things I did not understand I asked follow-up questions and I occasionally asked open questions as to the meaning of core expressions used.

Selection of narratives

Due to the broadness of my material, there was a need to narrow down and highlight the most interesting issues without losing the nuances. First of all there was a striking difference between the experiences of the paramilitary and the guerrilla groups. Since guerrilla groups are formed and based on socialistic ideology while the paramilitary are right wing groups originated in security forces, the view on gender and policy is quite different. I found that the view of the two women within AUC was even more rigid and the machismo expressed in even more brutal ways than in the civil society. In the paramilitary, women to a higher degree fill the roles as girl friends, lovers, cooks, servants etc. Guerrilla women on the other hand have to a larger degree transgressed the stereotypes of women and were therefore more interesting to look at.

The remaining eight female informants from guerrilla groups were divided into two: one half had joined due to political and ideological conviction while the remainder had no political motives for joining. As the women with strong political aims expressed a higher degree of gains from being guerrilleras, I put the main focus on this group of four. Within this group I then selected one narrative from each of the three largest guerrilla groups in the Colombian war; FARC, ELN and M-19. These particular three were identified due to their ability to exemplify the empowerment that some women experience during war and their capacity to illuminate the three selected themes: gender relations, political participation and maternity. Even though these three women have different background and belonged to different groups, their stories have some common features: they all attained higher ranks, had a strong political role in the groups and met similar challenges in the reintegration process. Even though this sample is too narrow to make any generalizations about women's experiences as combatants in Colombia, the narratives provide good examples of how some women may gain from joining guerrilla groups.

This paper aims to contribute to an alternative way of analyzing women's experiences in war by using the concept of empowerment rather than the concept of victim. However, to reflect the broader picture of the experiences female combatants have in Colombia I compare the other women's experiences from my material with the three highlighted narratives to be able to show the nuances and the variety of experiences. The second and third category of informants, I have used as background and context making material where it is pertinent to the analysis. I have given all named persons fictitious names and tried not to reveal any traceable information in order to preserve the anonymity of the informants as much as possible.

2.7 Selection of themes

To narrow down the themes on which to focus was also important as women's experiences involve many factors including economic, political, social, cultural etc. As I was focusing on gender, some specific themes recurred from an early stage of the fieldwork. These were gender relations, political participation and maternity. Women's relation to men within guerrilla groups was a clear expression of gender roles, and manifestations of changes in these. As the women I have focused on had clear political motivations for joining and belonging to guerrilla groups, political participation was therefore naturally another theme in

this paper. Maternity came up as an issue that has received little attention but which has had a clear impact and been a strong issue for all the women both during the war and after demobilizing. It is important to note that these three factors are linked and influence each other. Gender roles are related to political participation, political participation influence maternity etc. To be able to see changes in women's experiences and to see the impact of different life periods and the transition between these I divided the interviews into three main parts; motives and process of joining, roles and experiences in the groups, and the process of reintegration. These three phases also made a solid structure to base my analysis on.

3 Theory

Due to the findings from my fieldwork on female combatants' gains and losses in the Colombian conflict I have chosen to use the term empowerment as an analytical lens to illuminate the women's experiences so as to answer the research question: *To what extent are women empowered by joining guerrilla groups in Colombia?* I find it fruitful to use the term in this particular paper as I found many of the women's manifestations from the war as expressions of empowerment. Words like *strengthening, autonomy, pride, satisfaction, intelligence, status, power, liberation* and *strong political and social role* frequently came up during my interviews and are closely linked to the term empowerment. In this section I will map out a conceptualization of empowerment that focuses on process, agency, critical consciousness and the importance of incorporating a dual perspective on an individual as well as collective empowerment. Finally, I will briefly consider the challenge of measuring empowerment in relation to the methodology applied during fieldwork.

3.1 Process

“Although scholars have debated the extent to which empowerment can be considered a process or an outcome (...) and some have declared that it is both (...) most theorists have described empowerment primarily as a process” (Carr 2003:8). C.H Kieffer states that: *“Empowerment is not a commodity to be acquired, but a transforming process constructed through action”* (Carr 2002:11). This implies that the personal transformation of the individual who is becoming empowered is at the foundation of the process (Carr 2002). In this paper, I find it meaningful to define empowerment as a process as I have looked at the personal transformation of women and their actions during three different life stages in Colombia. Professor Lorraine M. Gutierrez divides the change of processes of empowerment into the following four sub processes; self efficacy, developing a critical consciousness, developing skills of reflection and action, and becoming involved with similar others (Carr 2003). With the three women I have focused on, I have detected the same sub processes as Gutierrez outlines. However, it is important to stress that these are not to be seen as stages creating an understanding of empowerment as a linear progression, rather as a developmental model of a state of mind and a state of society (Carr 2003). Carr further states that by integrating feminist conceptualizations of consciousness, identity and agency one can envision a more nuanced model for empowerment practice, avoiding the pitfalls of a strictly

developmental approach, which brings me to the next concepts - critical consciousness and agency.

3.2 Critical consciousness

Paulo Reglus Neves Freire see critical consciousness as the key ingredient in realizing empowerment and many thinkers build on his foundational claim that “*intensive reflection of oneself in relation to society, that is, conscientization, is a necessary precursor to engage in social change*” (Carr 2003:8-9). Carr therefore claims that “*descriptions of the process of empowerment attend to the psychological, as well as the sociopolitical, dimension of change, attempting to track the soon-to-be-empowered individuals as they relate with their peers and their environment*” (Carr 2003:9). Theorists of empowerment have focused on how individuals understand the political dimension of their personal problems and act accordingly (Carr 2003). I find the aspect of critical consciousness crucial when looking at the process of empowerment of female guerrilla soldiers in Colombia. The women who have largely positive experiences by being combatants in guerrilla groups clearly have critical consciousness towards sociopolitical problems and also when it comes to traditional gender roles and women’s positions in the Colombian society and the movements they belong to. Gutierrez describes conscientization as involving three processes; group identification, the development of group consciousness and the development of individual and collective efficacy. These three processes are very relevant and applicable in relation to people joining guerrilla groups in Colombia, as they identify with a group, develop a group identity, and then engage in collective action. These processes may also follow people into the reintegration, but can take other forms.

3.3 Agency

Agency is at the heart of many conceptualizations of empowerment, and probably the term that comes closest to capturing what the majority of writers see as the essence of empowerment. “*It encompasses the ability to formulate strategic choices and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes*” (Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005:73). Individuals themselves are central in agency theory and women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change that is being described and measured. This is embodied in the idea of self-efficacy and the individual woman’s, in this

case a female combatant's, realization that she can be an agent of change in her own life (Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005). This implies that women may find themselves within environments that may improve gender equality, but that if they themselves are not active agents of change, but rather merely beneficiaries, one would not consider it empowerment. However, this does not mean that improvements in gender equality or women's positions must be brought about through action of women alone, or that it is the responsibility of every individual woman to empower herself. Institutions such as guerrilla movements may provide environments and new circumstances where the position of women may be improved compared to the civil society, but they are by themselves not sufficient. *"Without women's individual or collective ability to recognize and utilize resources in their own interest, resources cannot bring about empowerment"* (Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005:73). Hence female combatants themselves must be in the center of change, which again is closely interconnected with critical consciousness as the women themselves must become aware of their relation to the society and the movement before getting the agency to engage in actions for change.

3.4 Collective empowerment

People are not empowered or disempowered in a vacuum. Rather, they are empowered or disempowered relative to other people or groups who lives intersect with theirs and whose interest differ from theirs, at least in part.

(Mason in Narayan 2005:90)

Relations and collective aspects are crucial to include when looking at empowerment. This is highly relevant when looking at people's participation in insurgent groups like gangs, clandestine groups and guerrilla movements. Guerrilla groups in Colombia grew out of a strong opposition to the elites and the government, and by becoming a collective group of people fighting together they become a stronger and more powerful actor in the war. This is strongly connected to consciousness-raising (CR) as it is not only a personal process of cognitive restructuring but also a *"politicization process and a liberation process which create a demand for socio-political restructuring"* (Brenton in Carr 2003:17). Petesch et al. point out how participation in formal or informal organizations can enlarge people's access to ideas, information and camaraderie, strengthen their capacities for planning, decision making,

problem solving, collective action and conflict negotiation in addition to expanding their ties to other networks and resources (Petesch in Narayan 2005). This also applies to women and women's relation to men within guerrilla groups as one can apply the same principles of collective awareness and mobilization. As pointed out earlier, every woman is not necessarily responsible for her own empowerment, collectively women also have the ability to bring about empowerment. *"As women join together in the process of CR, the range of knowledge necessarily expands as they share their experiences, feelings and ways of naming"* (Carr 2003:16). Empowerment of women may therefore be a result of a process where individuals collectively define and activate strategies to gain access to knowledge and power (Carr 2003). A normal outcome of this is a mobilization of women, where meetings for, with and by women, are arranged and women's position is discussed or the establishment of organized women's groups which actively promote women's positions and roles in, for example, guerrilla groups. This is also applicable to mobilization of other subordinated groups within a movement such as soldiers of lower rank, status, class etc.

3.5 Context and time

Deepa Narayan points out that even though empowerment is a universal phenomenon, the cultural context must be taken into account as it consists of a relational system of norms, values and beliefs (Narayan 2005:16). In Colombia, the division of gender and gender roles are strongly rooted in the culture in many areas. Even though the gender roles are changing with economic growth and immigration to urban areas, Colombia is still a highly patriarchal country where *machismo* is largely seen. A large transformation of cultural and social norms must come into place combined with a long period of time that is often required in order to change deep-rooted norms in a society. However, such deep rooted norms can be changed radically in short periods of time in specific context as for example in guerrilla groups. *"Depending on the dimension of empowerment, the context, and the type of social, economic, or policy catalyst, women may become empowered in some aspects of their lives in a relative short period of time (say one to three years), while other changes may evolve over decades"* (Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005:80). In the case of female combatants, their experiences depend on the context in the specific guerrilla group or unit, their socio-economic background and the length of their stay in the group. Malhotra and Schular state that the time issue and the aspects expected to change are particularly important. *"For policy and programmatic action, defining success or failure depends on specifying the aspect of women's*

empowerment that are expected to change, as well as the time period required for change to occur at a level that can be measured” (Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005:80). The time required for change is in this paper limited to time the women spent in the groups, and the aspects of women’s empowerment are gender relations, maternity and political roles.

3.6 Measuring empowerment

One of the biggest challenges in measuring empowerment is that empowerment is a latent phenomenon. Its presence can only be deduced through its action or its result. Hence, most observed behaviors are proxies for the underlying phenomenon.

(Narayan 2005:15).

Finally, a critical note on the challenges when measuring empowerment. *“The process of empowerment is essentially qualitative in nature”* (Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005:80) and it is therefore natural to measure empowerment in a qualitative manner. *“Qualitative studies of empowerment make an effort to capture the process through in-depth interviews and case studies that follow life changes for specific women (and men) through retrospective narratives”* (Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005:80). This method I applied during fieldwork and I therefore found it natural to measure empowerment in a qualitative manner and focus on retrospective narratives as Malhotra and Schuler suggest. Marc A. Zimmerman proposes a methodological consideration when measuring empowerment saying that when looking at empowerment as a process the researcher should consider it a continuous variable (Carr 2003). Staples elaborates on this and says that empowerment is inherently processual, it cannot be adequately assessed at any particular point in time (Carr 2003). This means that it is hard to measure empowerment in specific moments and it is impossible to have adequate data to capture a whole process and all the factors and the relevant components during the process. However, Malhotra and Schueler state that the most operative approach is to use two points in time to be able to see a possible change or development. *“Ideally, the best hope of capturing a process is to follow it across at least two points in time”* (Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005:80). During my fieldwork and in this paper I look at three points of time: before joining, the time in the guerrilla organization and the reintegration into civilian life in order to detect the changes in the women’s process of developing empowerment.

3.6.1 Subjectivity

As empowerment is a controversial term it is not obvious which indicators to include when trying to measure it. *“Even indicators such as women’s participation in the political system or other power structures are often inadequate as means to capture the process; without a qualitative sense of what participation is like or what it means, we cannot tell whether empowerment is occurring”* (Oxaal and Baden 1997 in Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005:80). Hence, it is not enough to just look at the level of female participation in politics but one must also consider what type of participation and how the women experience it.

Professor Naila Kabeer expresses this view and suggest that the assessment of the process is not only qualitative but also subjective (Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005:80).

“According to Kabeer (1997, 1998) the subjectivity of the process should extend to measuring empowerment in terms of women’s own interpretations. This means that program evaluators, rather than relying on their own judgments as to what is of value, should judge the process of empowerment as having occurred if it is self-assessed and validated by the women themselves” (Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005:80) Women themselves must therefore be included as the most important actors in measuring empowerment. As Malhotra and Schuler suggested, I have conducted in-depth interviews and selected three cases I particularly wanted to study through retrospective narratives. The focus in these narratives is the subjective perceptions of their experiences through the three periods, and particularly the manifestations of empowerment or disempowerment. What is important to have in mind when looking at these manifestations is that the three women have come a long way in the reintegration phase and have therefore had time to adjust and reflect on their past in the guerrilla groups. Hence, their narratives are a result of a subjective reconstruction of actions and experiences made in a retrospective based on memories. This does not mean that their manifestations are incorrect; it rather illuminates how the women in later time have analyzed their experiences which also bring about valuable and important insides.

4 Background

4.1 *The History of the violent conflict in Colombia*

The civil conflict in Colombia which has lasted for more than five decades, making it the longest in the Americas, is characterized with an endemic political violence and culture of violence. The roots of the conflict go back to Simon Bolivar and the independence from Spain in 1819, which led to an unstable political environment and a power struggle by the elite. For more than 150 years the politics was dominated by two parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, who have strongly influenced most aspects of political life, nation building and the formation of the Colombian society itself “(...) *Colombia is characterized by extreme levels of political motivated violence. This violence is a direct result of both the closed nature of the Colombian political system and the economic inequalities in society at large*” (Tuft in Skjelsbæk and Smith 2001:141). Between 1946 and 1966, Colombia had its most violent period, also referred to as “La Violencia” (The Violence), a de facto war between the Liberals and the Conservatives which left 200 000 people dead and 2 million internally displaced people (IDPs). The assassination of the presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Bogotá in 1948 was seen as a trigger for the large violent outbreak in this period that marks a shift in the political conflict from inter-party competition to a broader conflict dynamic including the opposition groups in the broader society that challenged the bipartisan hegemony. At that time in Colombia, as in many other Latin American countries, *silent revolutions* were emerging, focusing on profound economic, demographic, social and cultural changes where the historical issue of land reform was critical (Tuft in Skjelsbæk and Smith 2001). Out of this, independent guerrilla groups started to emerge. As a response and as a way of securing power, the Liberal and Conservative parties formed a coalition government, the National Front, in 1958 and it's the 16 years of power sharing did not address the structural changes in society but rather “*established the context for the contemporary crisis of political violence and human rights violations*” (Tuft in Skjelsbæk and Smith 2001:146).

The consequences of the conflict have been severe for the civilian population. Thousands of people have disappeared, and Colombia has one of the world's largest populations of IDPs, estimated to be between 3 and 4 million. However, during the presidency of Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010), violence in Colombia has decreased significantly, homicide rates have almost

halved, incidences of kidnappings have decreased and the guerrilla groups have lost control in many areas they had previously dominated (BBC 2010). Even though Colombia has been highly affected by war, it has a steady economic development and is rated to be the 4th largest economy in Latin America. However, widespread poverty, high crime rates, domestic violence and a highly segregated society still characterize the country today (BBC 2009).

4.2 *Insurgent groups*

Between 1960 and 1980, seven left wing guerrilla organizations were formed and became active actors in the conflict (Guáqueta 2007). The three largest and best well known are FARC, ELN and M-19, but in the 1980s, paramilitary forces emerged as a new actor in the conflict. I will now briefly sketch the history of the groups my informants came from. These, in addition to the state's military, have been the most dominant groups in the conflict.

4.2.1 FARC

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC¹), the largest and most dominant guerrilla group in Colombia, originates in a peasant agitation under the direction of the Communist Party and started out as a self-defense organization with a struggle for land (Safford 2001). It builds on Marxism ideology and during the Cold War it was influenced by the Sino-Soviet split. FARC was formally established in 1964 as a response to attacks by the state, and then developed from a self-defense group to a more offensive guerrilla organization. The Communist Party viewed FARC as their armed wing, but in the beginning of the 1980s it evolved into an independent guerrilla organization with its own political and military doctrine (Safford 2001). FARC operates in roughly one-third of the country, mostly in the jungles of the south. In recent decades, it has become increasingly involved in narco-trafficking, and both alliances and disagreements between FARC and the drug lords are regular occurrences.. Another source of income has been kidnappings, demanding ransoms and taxation of peasants. FARC continues to hold hostage a handful of foreigners and 3000 Colombians (Gonzalez-Perez 2008). (Hanson 2009) But in the main, its actions are aimed at disturbing the government's economy by using bombs, mines, and other means of attacking the infrastructure. FARC has also been responsible for massacres and other severe atrocities against the civilian population (Spagat and Restrepo 2005). In 1985, during the presidency of

¹ FARC- Las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

Belisario Betancurt and his "National Rehabilitation Plan", former members and sympathizers of FARC formed the political party Unión Patriótica (Porch and Rasmussen 2009). They were rewarded with a demilitarized zone south in Bogotá and a voice in the political process, but a large number of members were assassinated by the military, creating an unsecure environment for later demobilization and peace negotiations. After several years of fruitless negotiations, peace talks ended in February 2002, and President Uribe launched an aggressive security campaign against FARC and ELN, bolstered by U.S. funding from Plan Colombia, a multibillion dollar counternarcotics aid package (Hanson 2009). In 2007, members of FARC's leadership were killed and the following year, the chief spokesman in the FARC's secretariat, Raul Reyes, was killed during a Colombian incursion into Ecuador. FARC is losing its support in the local population, as many turn against the group due to its violent methods. Internal problems and hard conditions for the combatants are signals of a weakened FARC, and recent deserters have confirmed lack of food, violent treatment and general harsh conditions.

4.2.2 ELN

The National Liberation Army, ELN², is a Marxist-Leninist movement that was formed in 1963 by students, Catholic radicals and left-wing intellectuals hoping to emulate Fidel Castro's Communist revolution in Cuba. Che Guevara's revolutionary doctrines were a guide that emphasized the need to create an urban front and then establish a revolutionary camp in rural areas (Safford 2001). Like FARC, ELN claims to represent the rural poor against Colombia's wealthy classes and to oppose U.S. influence in Colombia, the privatization of natural resources, multinational corporations, and rightist violence (Hanson 2009). ELN operates mainly in northeastern Colombia, and is estimated to have between 2,200 and 3,000 members, which marks a significant reduction in military capability since the late 1990s (Hanson 2009). ELN's primary sources of income are drug trafficking and kidnapping wealthy Colombians for ransom. Bombing campaigns and extortion against multinational and domestic oil companies are some of ELN's actions that have resulted in civilian deaths (Hanson 2009). In 1990, ELN divided into two parts, and after peace negotiations with the government the arm called the "Corriente Renovación Socialista" (CRS³) demobilized with

² Ejército de Liberación Nacional, The National Liberation Army

M-19 and other guerrilla groups. The Colombian government engaged in peace talks with the remaining part of ELN with eight rounds of talks between 2004 and 2007 failing to produce any results as the two parties disagreed on the terms of a cease-fire (Hanson 2009). ELN is still active, however like FARC they have experienced challenges with the militarized strategy of Uribe's government and in 2008 they sought cooperation with FARC, which may be seen as a sign of weakness.

4.2.3 M-19

The M-19 was formed in 1974 as a reaction to the presidential elections in 1970. They claimed that the elections were a fraud and that it was Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, the candidate from the The Popular National Alliance (ANAPO), who had won the election and not the Conservative Party's candidate Misael Pastrana (Guáqueta 2007). An armed wing was created out of ANAPO, consisting mainly of mostly urban middle class activists, intellectuals, communist youths and disgruntled members from ANAPO (Guáqueta 2007). M-19 ideals were grounded in orthodox communist values and were inspired by, among others, Castro's regime in Cuba and the peasant uprising in China. They wanted political and economic reforms to open up the elite-controlled bipartisan system, but were far less radical than the FARC and ELN and not as violent. Many of their militant actions were symbolic with political targets (Guáqueta 2007). Their most famous actions were the takeover of the Palace of Justice, stealing the sword of Simon Bolivar, the stealing of the national military's weapon storage and the takeover of the Embassy of the Dominican Republic. It was mainly an urban group, but expanded to rural areas, especially when they started kidnapping (Vasquez 2005). It is claimed that M-19 was the first rebel group to introduce kidnapping as a source of income and to experiment with drug trafficking, however this was not systematic (Guáqueta 2007) In the early 1990s, 791 M-19 combatants demobilized following peace negotiations with the government of Virgilio Barco in 1989-1990, and a political party, the Democratic Alliance M-19 (AD M-19⁴), was created. M-19's demobilization was quite extraordinary as although not defeated, there were still willing to lay down their arms. The reason was the desire of profound restructuring of Colombia's institutions to change the bipartisan political system "*The outcome was a national Constituent Assembly convened in February 1991 to write a new constitution*" (Porch and Rasmussen 2008:524). AD M-19 survived through the

⁴ Alianza Democrática M-19/ Democratic Alliance of M-19

1990s with high support on local level, but gradually declined because the party did not manage to build an electoral base and organize for elections (Porch Rasmussen 2008).

4.2.4 AUC

Paramilitary groups emerged in Colombia during the 1980s, and in 1997 they were "unified" under the umbrella organization United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)⁵. This was an organization that had a loose federate structure financed by drug money, extortion payments and voluntary contributions by, for example, drug lords seeking protection from guerrilla movements (Guáqueta 2007). AUC has been responsible for perpetrating brutal massacres, and also for major violations of human rights. AUC has been blamed by United Nations human rights officials for 80 percent of the atrocities committed in Colombia's five-decade civil war. U.N. officials, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the U.S. State Department, and prominent international rights watchdogs such as HRW and Amnesty International have documented that AUC also worked in close cooperation with the military (Viera 2010). In comparison to the guerrillas, the combatants in the paramilitary receive monthly payments. The Colombian government has reported that 32,000 members of paramilitary groups lay down their arms between 2003 and 2006, after the demobilization and the peace negotiations with former President Alvaro Uribe; however, the numbers are disputed as there are indications of so-called "ghost soldiers" – that is, people not belonging to any armed group who enter the demobilization program for the economic benefits (Porch and Rasmussen 2008). Today, Colombia is experiencing the problem of ex-combatants mainly from the AUC reorganizing themselves and the Organization of American States (OAS) has identified 22 new armed groups and claims that 4000 demobilized paramilitary have returned to drug trafficking and are controlling territories for exporting cocaine and contraband arms (ECP 2008).

4.3 DDR in Colombia

DDR initiatives worldwide are normally implemented by the UN, but in Colombia it is the national government that is monitoring the process. DDR in Colombia is also unique because it is being implemented during war and not in a clear post-conflict situation. The DDR program in Colombia has a minimalist approach as it has been highly focused on security,

⁵ AUC- Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia

rather than transformation of a society through developmental approaches. ACR claims that the aim in the recent years has been to shift the focus from reinsertion – that is, placing individuals into local societies without really reintegrating them fully into the communities – to a broader community-based approach of reintegration. There have been several policies of implementing the DDR and the question of amnesty and impunity of ex-combatants has been one of the main critiques against the Colombian models of DDR (Amnesty International 2009, Porch and Rasmussen 2008).

Colombia has had two main waves of demobilization of former combatants. The first involved the demobilization of several guerrilla groups during the late 1980s and the 1990s and the latter started in 2003, under Uribe's government, and involved the demobilization of numerous blocks of AUC. The ongoing DDR in Colombia includes both collective and individual demobilization. Collective demobilization is a result of peace negotiation, as with the current agreement between AUC and the government. Individual demobilization occurs when no such negotiation has taken place and individuals or small groups of individuals choose to desert. During the first wave of demobilization, between 1989 and 1994, 5000 combatants from five guerrilla groups⁶ demobilized following peace negotiations, with M-19 being the largest of these (Guáqueta 2007). According to ACR, since 2002 a total of 50 611 people have demobilized and 63% of these as a result of peace negotiations (ACR 2009). Between January 2003 and April 2009, 31 819 persons demobilized collectively, of which 31 671 were from AUC, 110 from FARC and 38 from ERG. There was a total of 18 781 individual demobilizations between August 2002 and April 2009, of which 12 075 came from FARC, 2551 from ELN, 3682 from AUC and 473 dissidents. Currently, according to ACR an average of 10 people demobilize individually every day (ACR 2009).

4.3.1 Disarmament and demobilization

In Colombia today, the first two phases of the DDR, disarmament and demobilization, last about 3 months and are different for collective and individual demobilizations. The most recent collective disarmament of AUC occurs in so-called areas of concentration where arms are collected, the combatant's criminal record is verified, and the ones wanted by the law for

⁶ These were the Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19), the Moviminetto armado Quitín Lame (MAQL) the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL) the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT) and the Corriente de Renovación Socialista (CSR) (Guáqueta 2007)

atrocities await trial. Meanwhile, the remaining combatants select a place for their social reinsertion and preferred training and work programs. During this period an official demobilization ceremony is held where the combatants surrender their arms, which today is monitored by MAPP-OEA⁷. When the process of reintegration is initiated, assistance centers located in the different regions provide legal, humanitarian and employment assistance, and identity suitable training and work programs.

The process of individual disarmament and demobilization starts when the person present him or herself to one of the appropriate authorities – this can be the mayor’s office, the district attorney, the “Defensoría del pueblo” a governmental institution working with human rights, the military or the police. They are then sent to a military camp where they stay 15 days for interviews. Afterwards they enter the program of reintegration which is managed by the ACR and they follow the same program as the people from the collective demobilizations. There are also a considerable number of combatants who demobilize and reintegrate independently of the governmental services. There are many reasons for this, but one concern is that the ex-guerrilleros are held in military camps when for many the military has been seen as the enemy. Information from deserted ex-combatants is the main source of information on which the military base their counter actions (Porch and Rasmussen 2008) but giving such information can jeopardize the security of the informants. Furthermore, the military largely consists of men, which makes many women demobilize individually due to the risk and fear of sexual violence.

4.3.2 Reintegration

The reintegration process is the same for both individual and collective demobilization and is managed by the Ministry of Justice and implemented by the ACR. It covers a period a 18 months providing economic assistance of \$155 a month plus an allowance of \$44 to allow former soldiers to return to their original communities where they are offered health care, psychosocial and legal aid in addition to receiving academic and technical training (EPC 2008). For the first three months, the demobilized are required to take part in 80% of the programmed activities in order to receive the monthly payment. Additionally, they receive \$75 for participation in social psychology sessions (EPC 2008). The level of assistance, including financial support, varies after the initial three months and is determined by the effort

⁷ Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz Colombia Organización de los Estados Americanos

and commitment of the individual (ECP 2008). According to ECP, 37 287 combatants from both collective and individual DDR have been identified to qualify for reintegration and out of these 19 860 (53%) are working (ECP 2008). Ex-combatants on the other hand say that most of them are unemployed and that the job offers they were promised have never materialized. The Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF) started a special program for children in 2001. The program is carried out in three phases, according to the age and origin of the children. Vocational training, access to education and sanitary services are the most demanded services (ECP 2008). About half of the children were from FARC (ECP 2008). The policies of implementing the Colombian DDR has changed over time and in the latest wave of demobilization international participants, such as IOM and OAS, are contributing.

4.4 Women's position in Colombia

Even though the Colombian Constitution upholds the principle of equality between men and women in both public and private sphere, Colombia still has a long way to go to reach full gender equality. In the public sphere, women are affected by unemployment to a greater extent than men and receive lower wages. By law, women share the same legal benefits of ownership as men; however this does not always work in practice especially in rural areas (OECD 2009). Piedad Esneda Córdoba Ruiz, - the lawyer, politician and Noble Peace Prize nominee in 2009 - claims that in Colombia, to a greater extent than other Latin-America countries, , culture norms deny women the opportunity to share the exercise of power (Córdoba 2002).

Historically, women have been excluded from the exercise of political power. This is reflected in the low number of women at the top-level decision-making positions in government, despite the social and cultural transformations that have taken place in recent decades, which have been favorable to women's legal position and education.

(Córdoba 2002:2)

Even though women are highly active and constitute a large part of grassroots activists, they are still under- represented in the political parties. This is not due to lack of higher education as women are well represented and actually outdo men in terms of professional education,

constituting more than 50% of University graduates (Córdoba 2002). Colombia has a long tradition of women's movements at all levels of society and today many of them have an important role in the peace building in the country (Rojas in Bouvier 2009).

The rate of domestic violence is high in Colombia and one-third of the cases involve married couples and 23% involve other family members (OECD 2009). Rape, sexual harassment and abuse are particularly big problems in Colombia. During the colonial time, Colombia adopted a culture where men occupied a dominant role within the household as breadwinner, and today machismo is still widespread.

Gender roles have changed with the migration from rural to urban areas, but family and household organization is still marked by sexual segregation and a difference between male and female goals and aspirations. However, this varies according to socio-economic status, because in the modern economy female role diverge. In upper class and some middle class families, women avoid working outside the home in order to preserve family status, honor, and virtue while women from lower class and lower-middle class families often hold jobs outside the home or work in the fields to contribute to the family's subsistence, giving them a greater degree of equality. Male familial roles are still relatively consistent across economic groups and it is not common, even in the lower socioeconomic levels that men help with the housework and the raising of the children. *"The Latin American gender roles of marianismo and machismo are based on the traditions of a submissive female caring for the household while the dominant male holds a more public position"* (Gonzalez- Perez 2008:21).

The violent conflict has influenced the gender roles in Colombia and it is estimated that approximately 75 per cent of displaced persons are women and children (OECD development center 2009). In such situations female roles are masculinized as women become the breadwinners and head of the family. Women have also stepped in to assume leadership in the communities and their new roles include conducting informal humanitarian negotiations with armed groups (Rojas in Bouvier 2009). However, the displacement of women also puts women in vulnerable positions as there is a strong link between displacement and sexual violence (Amnesty International US 2009).

5 Outline of three narratives

In this chapter I will give a short outline of the narratives from the three women I have focused on, Leidy, Maria and Luisa, in order to briefly introduce and present the women's histories to the reader.

5.1 Leidy from FARC

Leidy comes from north Cauca, a conflict zone in the center of Colombia. She grew up in an indigenous reserve and was from an early age involved in social work within her community. When she was 17 she joined FARC, carrying out social and political work in the troops and in the local communities. Leidy stayed within FARC for five years and after two years she became pregnant and gave birth to a girl. Her desertion was not planned; she was caught by the military while recovering from bronchitis, but was released after 30 hours. However, she was still under investigation by the military and the paramilitary, and FARC was suspicious when she returned, and denied her access. Leidy then decided to demobilize and went to Bogotá where she later gave birth to her second daughter. Today she studies in Bogotá in addition to working in a demobilization program.

5.2 Maria from ELN

Maria grew up in an urban area in one of the suburbs in Santander, a county situated in central Colombia. From an early age she was active in social mobilization and movements. When she was 15 and in 10th grade she was forced to flee after being arrested during a strike and later survived an attempt of abduction. Through social activism in other parts of the country she became acquainted with ELN, which she then joined. She did political and social work in rural areas and met her boyfriend Andres who was a commander in her unit. When she was 21, Maria became pregnant, but she miscarried just after Andres was assassinated while accompanying her to a pregnancy check up. Afterwards Maria was given the task of providing security for the central leadership of ELN, looking out for the leaders. Before the peace negotiations and demobilization of the CRS of ELN in 1990, Maria established a relationship with another compañero from the group, and during demobilization found she was pregnant by him. Today Maria lives with her daughter in Bogotá and works for a humanitarian organization.

5.3 Luisa from M-19

Luisa grew up in Santander and politics caught her interest at an early stage. Her grandmother was a member of the Popular National Alliance, and Luisa started her activism within the political party when she was 12. At the age of 16, Luisa left secondary school, moved to another city and when the National Alliance divided into a political and a military arm, Luisa became involved in the armed forces of M-19. She was initially engaged in both the political and military structure of the organization, but as she gained more responsibility in the military structure she quit her job to dedicate fully to the movement. During her stay in M-19, Luisa met a *compañero* from another movement and became pregnant. Four months after giving birth to a girl, her *compañero* was killed. After some time she found a new partner, a medical doctor and a collaborator of M-19, with whom she later had a son. After demobilizing following the peace talks in 1990, Luisa stayed political active and is now involved in the politics in Bogotá.

6 Analysis

In this analysis I will discuss the findings from my fieldwork by mainly focusing on the narratives from Leidy, Maria and Luisa. Integrated in the discussion are others parts of my field material and relevant research done in other areas. The analysis is built around three sections; women's motives for joining guerrilla groups, women's roles in guerrilla groups and women in the reintegration process. To illuminate the extent of empowerment women may experience in guerrilla groups, I focus on gender relations, maternity and political participation.

6.1 *Women's motives for joining guerrilla groups*

People's experiences in armed groups are highly dependent on the motives for joining and the circumstances around the entering, and in this section I will look at women's reasons for joining guerrilla groups. Historically, fighters in wars throughout the world have primarily been men; however exceptions to this rule are numerous and guerrilla groups often constitute these exceptions (Goldstein 2001). In war between different nations, 97% of the forces are males (Goldstein 2001); however, within guerrilla groups a higher percentage of female fighters are more common as in the revolutionary forces in Nicaragua, Eritrea and Sri Lanka where more than 30% of the armed forces were women (Barth 2002). Women's reasons for joining guerrilla groups in Colombia depend on many factors such as socio-economic background, family relations and so on. In the case of Leidy, Maria and Luisa political conviction and ideology was the main motive for all three of them. Leidy was from an early age active in socio-political matters in the local community, which is common for people growing up in indigenous societies. *"Life is different there; you are always in the life of resistance, the indigenous resistance. Fighting for your rights, not letting yourself be dominated. You also see all types of injustice, inequality and try to search for equality"*. This strife for equal rights and justice was an important part of her childhood and Leidy always knew that she wanted to join the guerrillas.

Since I can remember I have wanted to be a guerrillera. I come from a rural zone and the guerrillas were penetrating the territory all the time. The military as well, but the difference between them was large. The military arrived and were abusers, in comparison to the guerrilla who had always been there, respected, fighting when others didn't.

Due to this perception Leidy tried to join a guerrilla group from an early age, and as the indigenous guerrilla movement, Quintin Lame, had already demobilized, she contacted FARC.

I was 11 years old when I asked to join, but they rejected me and said I was too young. When I was 15 I tried again and then they accepted me, but the moment they came to pick me up I was not in the area. (...) The third time I did not have to ask to join, it just happened

At that time Leidy was 17 and her motive for joining was clear. *“I am one of the many women who joined due to ideals. Revolutionary, socialist and communist ideals and principles”*.

Even though FARC has a high percentage of women in its forces today, this has not always been the case. Looking at FARC’s history, there were few women in the earlier years, and in 1974 only a handful of the 900 members were women (Gonzales-Perez 2008). However, in the 1990s FARC started to recruit women actively and by 2002 women comprised as many as 40-45% of the 18 000 combatants (Gonzales-Peres 2008).

Maria also joined the guerrilla due to revolutionary ideals but had a slightly different process of entering ELN. While growing up in Santander she was a member of a socialistic movement where she was actively participating in class struggle working for the Sandista revolution. *“In that time I did not know so much about the guerrillas but I occasionally worked with ELN and M-19 in the highly populated suburbs”*. During this period there were quite a number of strikes and riots which Maria assisted in organizing. During one of these riots, Maria and some boys were caught by the police and almost beaten to death. *“I don’t know why they took me, I was just a little girl without a central role”*, she says. In this period there were many assassinations and disappearances, and shortly after being released a black car entered her suburb and stopped outside her house. Maria’s mother reacted instantly and ordered her daughter to flee out via the back stairs and run to her uncle who was a policeman. Her uncle made some investigations and came back telling her that she was on the list of people to be abducted and that she should leave. At that time Maria was 15 and she was forced to go to Bogotá leaving everything behind. *“I had not even graduated from secondary school. I was forced to leave my mum, something that was very hard as she needed me to stay at home to watch my sister when she was at work”*. This was the first rupture in Maria’s life. In the

period that followed she moved around a lot working for different socialistic movements. Through these she became acquainted with people from ELN, and she started to admire the women as they reminded her of the women from movies about the Nicaraguan guerrilla movement. She soon began to work with ELN arranging social and political activities in communities in rural areas. Even though Maria was, in many ways, forced to join the guerrilla, as she had to flee her home at an early age, she states that she would nevertheless have joined the guerrilla. *“I would first have finished secondary, then university and later gone to the monte”*, she says.

In their book *“Mujeres no contadas”* the two Colombian academics Londoño and Nieto point out that, historically, ELN has not been very open for female participation. During the first years, women were prohibited from joining the ranks of ELN (Londoño and Nieto 2007). Despite this, some women had access, but as partners of the commanders. After some years ELN opened up for formal entry of women in the movement, but with a restricted mandate, they were for example not allowed to be in combat. During the demobilization process of several guerrilla movements in the 1990s, CRS⁸ had the lowest percentage of women with only 17.5% (Londoño and Nieto 2007). However, the participation of women in the ELN has increased during recent years, and the percentage today is estimated to be as high as 40-50% in some fronts in the south-east region of the country (Londoño and Nieto 2007).

Luisa from M-19 also became political active at an early age. *“I was a part of the Popular National Alliance since I was 12 because my grandmother was an ANAPISTA [a member of ANAPO]”*. Luisa was first a part of the youth group and at the age of 16 she became a full member of the Alliance. *“I handed out flyers, made street paintings, learned how to make graffiti, and started to capacitate myself”*. When the movement divided Luisa joined the military arm, M-19. She was at that time studying in secondary school but left school and her job as she became more involved.

(...) the dynamic of being clandestine does not permit people to do a lot of things. I was a part of the political and military structure. When I was managing the political part I was able to work, (...) but when it came to the military part there was a greater responsibility which was difficult. You had to stay dedicated full time to your organization until the demobilization.

⁸ Corriente Renovación Social

Luisa's family did not know that she joined M-19 as she left home at an early age. *"It was a secret to my family. I left home when I was around 16. I supposedly rebelled"*, she says.

M-19 has been considered the most "women friendly" of the armed groups in Colombia. When they demobilized in the 1990s, M-19 consisted of around 31.5 % women which was a higher percentage than the other guerrilla groups demobilizing at that time (Londoño and Nieto 2007). The women in M-19 generally had a higher education than the women in FARC and ELN, mostly came from urban areas and joined due to political conviction.

6.1.1 Double revolution

Like many women in Colombia, Luisa, Maria and Leidy had clearly identified with the ideas of guerrilla movements. For many, it was the only way to be able to fight for their political ideals and principles as there were few possibilities for the opposition to fight legally within the public sphere. Elise Fredrikke Barth, points out in her study *Peace as a disappointment. The Reintegration of Female Soldiers in Post-Conflict Societies. A Comparative Study from Africa* that the ideology of guerrilla groups can attract certain groups, and when the ideology challenges existing gender roles it can be particularly attractive for women to join. *"Women are often found in Marxist-Leninist revolutionary movements, and therefore it seems likely that this ideology plays an important role in the recruitment of women"* (Barth 2002:12). The subordination position of women in the society can contribute to recruiting women more easily (Urdang in Barth 2002). Professor of political science, Margaret Gonzales-Perez, confirms in her book *Women and Terrorism. Female activity in domestic and international terror groups* that this is often the case in Latin America, but that it leads to women only joining domestic groups, as international terrorist organizations have no effect upon domestic policy issues, such as women's roles (Gonzales-Perez 2008). Many women in Colombia experience a "double" discrimination, being subordinate in a class-divided society as well as being subordinate to men in a patriarchal society. For many women, joining guerrilla groups can be seen as an opportunity to fight this double discrimination. *"Women may see an opportunity to fight two struggles at the same time. One against an occupying force, another against traditional structures keeping women down"* (Barth 2002:13). One of my informants from FARC says she was impressed and decided to join when she saw the female guerrilla soldiers recruiting. *"I saw the women with them (the male soldiers) in the cars, with money... I became motivated and enthusiastic."* Another factor in the involvement of women in guerrilla

groups is that guerrilla forces need as many soldiers as possible to outnumber the enemy. If the number of new male recruits is low or the death rates within the group high, women are often welcomed out of necessity and rules for admitting women might change (Barth 2002). This may be one of the reasons why the number of women has increased to such a degree the last decades particularly within FARC and ELN.

6.1.2 Alternative reasons for joining guerrilla groups

The reasons for joining armed groups vary from culture to culture and person to person. Not all join due to political conviction as Leidy, Maria and Luisa did. The information that I acquired from all categories of informants during my fieldwork was that poverty, lack of opportunities, poor access to education and high rate of domestic mistreatment and abuse were also common reasons for women to join. For many it is a way of seeking protection and new opportunities and some also join with a male partner. False hopes given during recruitment and a dream of a better or different life also make many people join without really knowing what they are going into. An indigenous woman who had just deserted explains this in the following way:

Why did I join the guerrilla? Well I was not treated badly by my family or anything like that. I lived well. I had no mother so I was raised by my father, but I never suffered with my dad. What I asked for he gave me. But I lacked knowledge and I left. (...) You go there without really knowing how things are going to be. You see the group, like that, armed, in uniforms, it looks good. You only see this and think that things will be better! But when you are there you discover that this is not the case. But then what? When you discover it is too late...

Many also grew up with the guerrillas or the paramilitary present in their everyday life, especially in the rural areas where the state is largely absent. Cooperating and interacting with the groups becomes a natural part of adolescence and over time results in joining full time. Kidnapping and forced recruitment also occur in both paramilitary and guerrilla groups. Three of my informants, two women and one man, had been either kidnapped or recruited by force. Different ways of joining obviously affects the experience, opportunities and expectations people have in guerrilla groups. Leidy, Maria and Luisa had large political expectations when joining the groups, while others rather saw it as an opportunity to escape from poverty or to seek protection, or entered with a misconception of what life in a guerrilla group would be like. These are quite different departure points when it comes to the possibilities of having

positive experiences and being empowered in guerrilla groups. The women's level of education and class also determine the expectations the women have when joining.

6.1.3 Summary

A combination of several factors contributes to the recruitment of women to guerrilla groups in Colombia and the reasons for joining are individual and depend on the person's socio-economic background and situation in the local community and family. Many join due to poverty, abuse or lack of opportunities, or to gain protection from violence in some form. However, many also join wanting to change the unequal power balance based on revolutionary ideas. All of these reasons can also be applied to men; however, women may also see it as a possibility to be liberated from the traditional gender roles that limit women's role in many spheres of life and subordinate them in a masculine hegemony. Their ability to be empowered is highly dependent on the reasons and way of joining, whether it was politically motivated, due to poverty or if they were forcefully recruited and also their socio-economic background.

6.2 Women's roles in guerrilla groups

Even though women make up a large percentage of the insurgent groups in the Colombian conflict, little has been written about women's roles within these groups (Nieto...22). In this section I will discuss women's roles in war and their participation and experiences in guerrilla groups. Traditionally, the image of women in war has been limited to their roles as mothers, wives, daughters, victims and supporters, with little attention has been paid to women as combatants. However, it is important to point out that women also play various roles as combatants and many continue in traditional women's roles in auxiliary and supporting positions being nurses, cooks, suppliers of groceries and such. However, in guerrilla movements where ideology is predominant, a less gendered labor division is often seen. Linda Grant De Pauws sketches out four categorizations of women's roles in war: *“(1) The classical roles of victims and of instigator; (2) combat support roles; (3) “virago” roles that perform masculine functions without changing feminine appearance (such as warrior queens, women members of home militias, or all-female combat units); and (4) warriors roles in which women become like men, often changing clothing and other gender markers”* (De Pauws in Goldstein 2001:60). All the combatants from guerrilla movements that I interviewed

stated that there was an equal division of labor between men and women. *“Women and men do the same. Communism and equality. A man is put on guard duty, women the same, [you] carry the same quantity of kilos. Just because you are a woman does not mean that you should carry less than a man, walk less than a man.”* (Leidy FARC). Maria says the same: *“The division of work in the group was the same independent of gender. Both men and women cooked and everyone was doing their own laundry. It was equal in that sense”*. It was the same within M-19. *It is a guerrillero it is a guerrillera, either way you have to do the same, absolutely the same tasks”* (Luisa M-19). Hence guerrilla soldiers from FARC, ELN and M-19 fit into De Pauws’ fourth category, where women and men do equal work.

6.2.1 Equal task= equal rights and opportunities?

A non-gendered labor division is seen by many women as a liberation from the traditional woman’s roles, where most of the housework is exclusively the responsibility of the woman. This becomes even more visible for people coming from indigenous communities. An indigenous woman from FARC explains it in the following way.

When you are in the guerrilla it is very different from home. When you are home you don’t work, because in the indigenous life a woman has to weave, wash the husband’s clothes, do the housework while the husband works. In the guerrilla no! There it is different because women and men are equal. Carry weight, work, the women do the same as the men with the same things.

However, this equality may not be seen as liberation at all times. One girl from FARC expresses mixed feelings.

You have to walk a lot as there is no discrimination for women or men. There everything is equal, everybody carry heavy, light, whatever. Life is on one hand cool. An experience you otherwise would not have in your life. On the other hand it is a bit hard. As a woman it is quite complicated because a woman is a bit delicate in some ways. Some parts I did great and some were too hard

The training and the physical constraints were particularly challenging for some women. Even though women and men have the same tasks in guerrilla groups it does not mean that they have the same roles or positions. Therefore even though many guerrilla groups are, in theory, aiming for full gender equality where women and men have the same rights, duties and

opportunities, it is not always so in practice. One of the theories of why a higher level of gender equality is hard to achieve is the nature of the ideology itself.

Marxist theory looks at class as the basic unit for analysis. Rather than being discussed as a group of particular needs, women have been subsumed under the class analysis, and feminists argue that class-based capitalist oppression is not synonymous with the oppression of women. (...) Eliminating the power of the dominant class would not solve the problems of the oppression of women

(Barth 2002:12-13)

Barth makes a valid point, as the focus on class struggle overshadows the gender issues. An interesting finding from my fieldwork is that it is not just gender that determines the opportunities and work in the groups. Different treatment based on positions and ranks also occurs, which is something that clearly opposes movements based on socialistic ideologies claiming that they want to revolutionize class-based hegemony.

Three days after joining they sent me to start the training. It was then I saw that things were different. That the women that were with them [the male soldiers] were the commanders' wives. (...) The commanders' women did not have to work so hard. They sent them to do things that were not so heavy in relation to us who had to do what the men had to do.

(Woman from FARC)

Another woman from FARC states that there was also a difference of labor division between women when it came to rank.

If a woman has a rank, she seldom goes and works (...) They were almost never put on guard duty. Yes, it is very rare and different from the work of the other women.

These are interesting examples of existing power hegemony also among women suggesting that status, position and who you are influence the equality and tasks performed among soldiers rather than just gender.

6.2.2 Sameness versus difference

De Pauws explains her fourth categorization of women's roles in war as women that become like men and change clothes and other gender markers. This grows out of the large focus on "sameness" in guerrilla groups. *"The perspective on revolution is that women ought to live and act similarly to men. In contrast to civil society, sameness instead of difference between men and women are encouraged"* (Barth 2002:15). Sameness can be an expression of all people having the same value; however, when this sameness is based on a model of men and masculinities there is reason for questioning to what degree gender equality really is achieved. *"Women's dedication to a cause, and their wish to prove that they are as beneficial to the guerrilla as men, led in general to female soldiers working very hard"* (Barth 2002:18). Maria confirms this. *"Even though there was supposedly gender equality in the group it cost the women a lot of work to participate. One thinks that the men are more capable, that they know more. The women continue the protagonist roles of the men"*.

In the guerrilla movements, women have to "become" men, and to do so they need to prove that they have the same abilities and capabilities as them. Hence the model of a good combatant evolves from a masculine image where feminine values are not integrated. In this new context, women are therefore still subordinated in a patriarchal culture where they have to show double effort and become "superwomen" to earn their positions and to be equal to men. These are clear parallels to the civil society where there is also a tendency for women needing to work harder and prove themselves worthy of higher positions. Some women benefit when they have the opportunity to be liberated from the set gender roles. However, at the same time they also "masculinize", adopting the new masculine values that prevail in the army, rather than "feminizing" the army (Barth 2002). The leader of the network of female ex-combatants supports this theory by explaining that the women's point of departure was that they wanted to do the same as the men, be just as brave, and be equal to them. *"Some women were even better than the men"*, she points out. However, she continues by saying that the female combatants were always measured from the starting point of how much the men were able to do and give. The focus was on strength, audacity and other physical measures closely linked to masculinity. *"These characterizations were not made by women"*, she points out and further claims that *"being in guerrilla groups is not just about running and carrying, it is*

a lot more complicated than that". The more feminine side of the guerrilla and female combatants drowns within the male discourse of war.

The focus on sameness is also closely connected with people replacing their individual identity for a collective identity within guerrilla groups where the common goal for all is social and political reformation. Gender becomes less important in this collective and militant society. *"A distinct 'we-group', a cohesive group with a common identity, must be created. Equality must be emphasized at the expense of individuality. It is not important whether one is woman or a man, whether one belongs to this or that ethnic or religious group"* (Barth 2002:18). This can be seen as an expression for all types of equality and liberation from discrimination by the perception 'we are all the same, fighting side by side for the same cause'. Some, however, would see this ideology as an example of being brainwashed by nationalistic or, in this case, a pure socialistic discourse rather than gender equality (Barth 2002).

6.2.3 Ranks

The ranks and position achieved by women are also indicators of empowerment in guerrilla groups. Leidy claims that within FRAC, rank was something you had to earn and was not dependent on gender. *"Rank you had to earn. I did not feel any difference in this"*. She explains that there were three levels of rank: *squads, guerrilla and company*. *"Squad had 12 unit, guerrilla had 24 and company had 48"*. During her five years in FARC she became a commander of a squad and was responsible for 12 units.

It was because of good discipline. That does not mean that your discipline as a woman is better than a man's, or that the man will climb [to higher ranks] just because he is a man, no. (...) If they were machistas they would not have recommended women to join. That would be bad

(Leidy FARC)

Even though both men and women equally had to earn their rank in FARC, there were few women that achieved higher ranks. *"In my unit we were only three women that reached a higher rank. One in the guerrilla who is still there, one in squads that died in combat and I who was in squad"* Leidy says. The other women from FARC confirmed that there were few

women in higher ranks also in their units. Gonzalez-Peres points out that even though FARC claims to offer freedom and equality from the Colombian culture of machismo, women are underrepresented in the highest levels of command (Gonzalez-Perez 2008). However it is also argued that this is *“due to the fact that female membership has surged in the last few years, creating a large pool of junior members who have not served long enough to be promoted”* (Cala in Gonzalez-Perez 2008:42). After being transferred to another unit, Maria was also given increased responsibility in ELN and she became a commander in a regional front in a strategic zone where she was responsible for the tactic and politics. Andres, Maria’s commander and boyfriend, made her work hard and explained that he did not want others to say that he was being lenient with her. Maria today thinks this was because he was preparing her for higher ranks, which was not so common for women. Maria was the only woman in the leadership in this zone and before she demobilized she worked close with the leaders of ELN. However, she did not manage to get to the national directive as there were very masculine structures she says. *“However, I was very protected by them”*, she points out. Londoño and Nieto confirm that there were few women in higher ranks in ELN and say that there were only two women who made had medium command, that there were a few in the regional fronts, and none in the Central Command of ELN (Londoño and Nieto 2007).

Compared to the other groups, M-19 was more open to female leadership. Vera Grabe and Nelly Vivas Rebolledo for example managed to get into the national directive (Lodoño and Nieto 2007) as 2 of 13 members. Vera Grabe was the only woman who managed to get into the highest organ, the Superior Command, with 39 men. However, Luisa points out that it was still difficult for women to achieve good positions and power within the group. She says that this was because the structures in M-19 were highly patriarchal and the women considered less civilized. That they were fewer women than men also made it harder for women to reach higher ranks.

Wenche Hauge had similar findings in her study of female ex-fighters in Guatemala. *“(…)the gender difference became visible in the ability to reach higher ranks. Although there were many women that participated as combatants in battles, there were only a few women that reached higher levels of commandment in the guerrilla movement”* (Hauge 2008:306). There are several ways to explain this. Being in a patriarchal environment does not facilitate the development of women’s leadership. Another reason might be that many women do not actually want rank. One woman from FARC said that she did not want to have a more central

role as it meant increasing the risk and putting herself in a larger danger. Women not volunteering to higher positions can also be a result of lack self-confidence, not believing that they have what it takes. The lack of female role models is also a contributing factor: one of the reasons why the women in M-19 were more visible may be that for almost 20 years ANAPO was directed by a woman, María Eugenia Rojas Correa. Luisa believes that this contributed to the political role she assumes today. *“For me it was easier because the movement was led by a woman. It was a woman that was the captain (...) so it was easier to find the strength”*, she says.

6.2.4 Political role

The three women I have chosen to focus on had a strong political and social role in their groups. Leidy worked with political and social issues in the troops and also in the communities they operated.

What I did more or less was to engage myself in the political and social aspects of the troop and in the communities in which we were based. In the troop, for example, I organized workshops on how to make speeches, the politics of the statutes, analyzing the news, what was happening in our country, and political and strategic themes from the government. On the community level, I was in charge of the meetings, bring the politics with the community, the principles and ideals of our organization, the organization of councils and reorganizing them when they were not functioning and solving conflicts in the communities.

Maria also worked with social and political issues and dealt with tactics and politics in the north, mostly working with communities in rural areas. After the death of Andres (the commander of her unit and her boyfriend), a friend in ELN who was about to go away to participate in negotiations asked Maria to fill in for him in providing security for the leaders of ELN. However, while participating in the peace talks he was killed by the military and Maria had to take over his security role permanently until the demobilization. During her stay in ELN, Maria managed to attain a central political and social role and had close relations with the leadership, which at that time was not very common. As ELN was reluctant to allow the participation of women in the beginning, their roles also tended to be downgraded when they were allowed entry. They were for example not allowed to take part in combat, since they were considered to in capable of fighting.. Instead they were given traditional roles like being messengers (Londoño and Nieto 2007). Over the years this changed and by the 1980s it

was normal for women to participate in battles. Maria says that she was not much in combat, only when they were attacked and needed to protect the communities, but stresses that the combat training she received was crucial.

At that time the guerrilla was more defensive. (...) But we were trained by the Special Forces. If it was not for this I would have been dead today. (...) Actually a lot of people think I am dead, I have been very lucky. Someone has watched over me and the national directive has been very protective of me

In the case of Luisa, she started out in the political and military wing of ANAPO and later devoted her time to the armed movement M-19 but still having a strong political role. Her involvement in M-19 has to a large degree contributed to the political role she possesses today. In comparison to FARC and ELN, women were incorporated and integrated within M-19 since the beginning. Many of them were quite visible in the movement's history, such as Vera Grabe who was one of the first women to join, and María Eugenia Vásequez and Nelly Vivas Rebolled who were well known and had central roles in the group. The second woman I interviewed from M-19 also had a very strong political role in the group, developing strategies and planning actions. She was also a commander within M-19 and after the demobilization she assumed a strong political role. It was easier for women to have a stronger political role in M-19, as it was a more urban group and the members had higher education, with many studying or working at the Universities. Maria from ELN confirms this and says that the women in M-19 looked at themselves as stronger than women in the other movements, and this was because M-19 had a stronger political formation and they had higher education. The three women I have focused on have, in the context of the guerrilla movement, managed to achieve strong political roles. This, though, is not the case for all women. The remaining women I talked to from FARC were either radio operators or nurses, which seem to be positions mostly filled by women.

6.2.5 Relationships in the group

Women's relations with men within guerrilla groups is a clear indication of gender roles both in and outside the groups, and reflects changes within the gender roles. It also highlights the different views on the rights for women and men within the various movements, despite their shared ideology of gender equality and women's agency. Maria says that even though there was a non-gendered labor division in ELN there were not equal rights. *"Many men had relationships with many women. The guerrilleros liked women campesinas [women from*

rural farm areas]. *The men had several relationships. (...) A guerrilla leader had many women, around 20. He was very machista but people still liked him*". This was not the case for the women, even though there were no written rules restricting women's relationships in the beginning.

FARC has quite strict rules about relationships.

In the beginning there was a rule that guerrilleras could not have relationships with civilian men, but this was not the case for men and civilian women. Some said it was because there were fewer women than men. That was the explanation. But I have a feeling that it equalized a bit now there is almost as many women as men. Now the rule is that you can only have relationships with combatants not civilians. If you fall in love with someone who is far away and civilian, you are at risk of wanting to leave.

(Leidy FARC)

Leidy further explains that in the beginning it was normal for men to have relationships outside of the group, but it did not mean that they had two girl friends. *"This was highly controlled. A control of faithfulness. The relationships had to be done with reports, permission etc. One had to ask to be able to sleep together."* FARC is known to regulate intimate relationships, and one has to seek the commander's approval. Another girl from FARC confirms this, and says that in her unit this approval had to be asked for in public which was quite embarrassing. Both Leidy and Luisa say that relationships were often formalized in the groups. *"Sometimes you had to legalize your relationship in the guerrilla. You legalized it and this gave you a status as compeñera, compañero"*. Maria says that there were not rules about relationships in ELN in the beginning; however one episode where Andres was unfaithful to her started a discussion and resulted in the development of rules for relationships within ELN. Creating such rules may be seen as another machistic way of regulating women's relationships and sexuality due to a patriarchal environment. However, most women express the relationships in quite positive ways. Naturally, due to the special circumstances, the nature of the relationships in the groups was quite different from civilian relationships. Leidy describes it in the following way: *You have no responsibility, it is just combatants. Anyone can die in combat, or be transferred. You cannot say it is for the rest of the life."* Luisa had the same experience from M-19.

When it came to love in the group, you could almost never dream, you never dare to see a future. There it was the present, the immediate. Something vital that gave us strength, without protection, without anything. And here, outside, you are almost obligated to plan. You cannot maintain in the present.

Despite having different rights for men and women in relationships, at least in the beginning, and having to submit to quite strict rules with the commanders overseeing relationships, the women saw this regulation as something positive.

The relations there are very straight forward and sincere. If one wants to help each other out in the work that is the decision of every individual. You can also break up with a *compañero* and there is no problem. (...) The relationships are very nice because you know who is who and who did what.

(Leidy FARC)

Due to the strong machismo and the high level of domestic violence in Colombia, regulation of relationships can be positive and help strengthen women in intimate relationships. A woman from FARC explained that while there were men within the guerrilla outfits who hit their girl friends, there were strict rules prohibiting such practices and there were severe punishments for violating these rules. *“There, nobody was allowed to hit anyone, nor to demand anything either”*. As abuse and violence against women is a big problem in Colombia, being under the strict rules in FARC could for many be perceived as a protective alternative, with the change of dynamics offering them a larger control and liberty within relationships.

For many women, the FARC's oversight of relationships may be a welcome change from civilian society. In his research on women in FARC, Alape notes that the treatment of relationships allows women a certain level of agency in their relationships that could not be found in the civilian society

(Stanksi in Forest 2003:146)

However, this does not mean that violence, sexual harassment and rape do not occur within the groups. Women are particularly exposed when it comes to men in higher positions in the group. Maria experienced this when a commander of higher rank attempted several times to rape her. He legitimized his behavior by claiming that due to his high position he was entitled to behave as he did. In order to escape from this violence Maria had to be transferred to

another department. This represents a clear example of the combination of the hegemony of ranks and gender, where Maria was subordinate in both.

6.2.6 Gender awareness

As mentioned in the theory, critical consciousness is a vital factor when it comes to empowerment. Being aware of the subordination of individuals or groups is a crucial step to being able to take action to change uneven power balances. As shown above, despite getting agency, the women experienced differences in relation to rules of relationships, rank etc, and gender awareness became more visible among the women within the groups. At one point, the women within ELN started to question the machismo in the group and they formed their own internal organization of women and started to read about feminism and to work with and organize women in communities (Londoño and Nieto 2007). Maria was heavily involved in this work as she had both personal and working experience of men's abuse against women. Also coming from an urban area, she was shocked by the widespread practice of wife battering in the rural areas. She first organized workshops to help prevent this abuse from continuing areas where they were working. Later she created a women's commission within ELN itself. Even though the men in ELN opposed and disliked this, the women carried on with the group. Maria describes a special bond between guerrilleras, and says that the relationship between the women was very strong. Conflicts and jealousy did not exist, or at least she did not experience this, and she stresses the sisterhood and comradeship the women had. An interesting finding is that these strong bonds between women went beyond the groups and Maria explains that the relationships between women in ELN and FARC were very strong despite the differences between the organizations. *"We arranged meetings where we discussed the situation of women, themes of affection, the participation of women in courses etc."* One of Maria's closest friends, both during her time in ELN and also after demobilizing, was a female commander in FARC. She was a strong facilitator of the development of women and inspired the women to fight their way to higher positions and to get into the leadership. Maria points out that many thought it was weird that the two of them were so close coming from different groups but , *"it was not a question of politics, it was a question of women"*, she says.

Being in such a clandestine environment not only provides women with opportunities to organize themselves but also introduces restrictions. Hauge found that in guerrilla movements in Guatemala, the demobilized women wished that they had been more gender aware during

war but that gender issues were put aside as other things became more important. *“In hindsight, some of the interviewed women wished they had been more gender conscious during the war. However, they emphasized that because the persecution, massacres and counter- insurgency warfare were so intense, there was no room for thinking or acting like men or women”* (Hauge 2008:306). Even though Maria was very gender aware while being in the group, she today sees the gender issues in the group differently. She says that if she had seen the issues the way she does today she would have left ELN.

The 8th national conference of M-19 in 1982 is seen as a successful example of discussions of women’s rights in armed groups in Colombia. Issues like abortion, violence against women and machismo were discussed and as a result specific measures were adopted in women’s favor (Londoño and Nieto 2007). Some women formed the group “Mujeres de Abril”⁹ that focused on the role of the women in the revolutionary force and their central role in peacemaking (Londoño and Nieto 2007). Their slogan was *“Woman, without you peace is not possible”*. Luisa confirms that in M-19 they also had women’s groups. However, she has a different view on this: *“I am a totally against this! (...) In all the political parties the women’s group is for organizing bazaars, to raise funds”*. She further states that when a woman achieves influential political power it is not through the women’s group. Luisa here makes a valid point. However, I believe that the organization of women in the group was an important contribution to collective mobilization where the women create a forum in which to exchange ideas, information and camaraderie, in addition to addressing issues that are important to them. This may contribute to the empowerment of women as a group and is not restricted to individuals. *“As women join together in the process of CR (Conscious Raising) , the range of knowledge necessarily expands as they share their experiences, feelings and ways of naming”* (Carr 2003:16). This may lead to concrete action, positive changes and a broader awareness as shown by the example of the M-19 conference in 1982.

6.2.7 Maternity

Even though it is a central issue for many women both during and after war, there has been little focus among scholars on maternity and female combatants as mothers. The more common image of motherhood in wartime is that the women produce soldiers who can fight. An example of this is found in the Sandista guerrilla movement in Nicaragua.

⁹ Mujeres de Abril- Women of April

Women were mobilized around the image of mothers protecting their children as part of a divine order. One Sandista official said in 1980, "Give every woman a gun with which to defend her children." In fact good mothers were expected to be "Patriotic wombs" that would provide soldiers for the revolution and happily send them off to die for the cause.

(Goldstein 2001:81)

The view on maternity in the guerrilla groups in Colombia is quite the opposite. FARC is particularly known for having a strict policy against pregnancy, promoting the use of birth control and practicing abortion. These practices are very harmful and some women end up bleeding to death. One of my informants had seen this many times during her stay in FARC.

There are women that get pregnant because they want to have children and don't protect themselves. So they become pregnant but hide it. However, it is always discovered and then they start the curettages and the women bleed to death. There were women that were 4 months pregnant and the baby was forming. Either way they did it to them.

Forced abortion late in a pregnancy was experienced by one of my informants. She became pregnant while being in FARC but did not discover it until she was in her third month. However, since there was no access to medical personnel that could perform the abortion she had to wait until she was five months and two weeks pregnant. "*They forced me to abort when it was big. It was big and had started to form. It was very hard and it hurt me a lot, but what can you do?*". Another informant from FARC confirms these abortions. As a nurse she was herself forced to perform abortions on women. Nowadays many women choose to desert from FARC if they become pregnant as they are afraid of being forced to undergo abortion. If caught, many of them are killed.

Leidy confirms that pregnancies were to be avoided in FARC and finds it logical. "*There is a norm saying that one could not become pregnant. It's logical. Why have children if you cannot be with them?*" However, the rules of maternity seem to depend on the unit and how strictly these rules were implemented. "*I have heard of cases of abortion, but where I was many women became pregnant [and gave birth] (...) However, it should be the same rules for everybody, the same statute for everybody*", she states. In spite of the rules prohibiting pregnancy, Leidy gave birth to her first daughter while she was in FARC. Like many other

guerrilleras, she left the baby with her family. *“I used to ask for permission to go and visit her. I could not go every time due to circumstances, but left many times to see her. They always gave me resources to go and see her. I had no problem with this”*. This shows that the rules are implemented differently dependent on units. It might also depend on time, as Leidy demobilized some years ago as opposed to the informants above who had just recently deserted.

The rules of pregnancy was not so strict in M-19. Luisa also had a daughter while she was in M-19 and like Leidy she left the baby in the care of others to continue the revolutionary struggle. Even though she was able to visit her daughter occasionally, she was to a large degree absent when her daughter was growing up.

I left the stories and my explications [on a cassette. I went to see her, but I did not control the days. I did not give her feeding bottle; I was a visitor in her life. But I went every time I could, sometimes every week, sometimes every month, sometimes every 15 days. But I lost the important moments in her life. I tried to go to her baptism and first communion, but I arrived too late.

Maria became pregnant with Andres' child while she was within ELN, but had a miscarriage after he was assassinated. At that time the rules of pregnancy were not so strict in ELN compared with FARC, and ELN was still in the learning phase Maria says. It was mainly Andres who wanted them to have a baby together as they were working in the same region and he was afraid that they might move her to another zone. Having a baby together would therefore unite them more.

Intervening in women's reproductive rights can hardly be seen as empowering for women. *“This control, (...), comes at the expense of women's autonomy over their bodies. Although as combatants women place their bodies and lives at risk, the FARC lay a greater claim on women's autonomy over their bodies”*. (Stanski in Forest 2003:148). This control is also highly gendered as it is the women who have to take the consequences. *“Forcefully preventing wanted or unwanted births does not create equality within the movement. This practice is a control exercised exclusively over women, while the consequences for men are only incidental (Stanski in Forest 2003:148)”*. A woman from FARC confirms this. *“When women became pregnant it was deemed to be their own fault. Because they did not protect themselves.”* Another girl from FARC says that that there was not much focus on the men

who made the women pregnant. *“What could happen to them? Well if the women end up pregnant they sanction them (the men), their punishment was to make 50 trips gathering wood for not following the rules, and violating the norms”*. However, these sanctions are symbolic in relation to the women who are subjected to the physical and mental damage when forced to abort. Paternity also seems to be an absent theme in this. Enloe raises this question when discussing the image of guerrillas as patriotic wombs; *“Where is the picture of the male guerrillera holding the rifle and the baby?”* (Goldstein 2001:81).

For the women who had children it was common to leave them with relatives or others, as Luisa and Leidy did. In that way, their biological capacity to give birth is not impeded, however their ability of performing the role of mothers is denied to them. For many it would be impossible to keep a baby with them in the forces, especially for those staying in the camps in the rural areas and moving around a lot. For some women in the urban forces of M-19 this was possible to a greater degree. One of my informants had a baby while she was in M-19 and kept it with her, despite her family’s protest, as they hoped she would demobilize after having her baby. In the rural units having a baby was seen as having an extra burden to carry as the units were quite mobile. *“You always had to be watch out for the enemy who could come any moment and you cannot be there with you baby as you always have to carry it and feed it”* a women from FARC explains.

The conflicting issues of being a guerrillera and a mother can be connected to the group’s ideology. *“Feminists criticize Marxist theories for ignoring women in their reproductive and domestic roles”* (Barth 2002:12-13). Class struggle and revolution is the overall aim in Colombian guerrilla groups, and giving birth may be seen as a hindrance in the struggle to reach this goal. The collective identity and focus on sameness also ignores the differences in men and women when it comes to reproduction, with women becoming equal to men and gender markers changed to that extent that they “lose” their identity as women and mothers. The ideology seems to ignore or refuse to take into consideration that it is biologically determined for women to bear children. It can also be seen as a maintenance of the patriarchal culture controlling women’s sexuality and reproductive rights so that women lose the agency over their body and their decisions of becoming mothers or not.

6.2.8 Summary

A non-gendered labor division is seen in the guerrilla groups, something that is strikingly different from civil society in Colombia. Women and men perform the same tasks, which creates a sense of gender equality in the groups. However, this does not automatically lead to women and men having the same rights and positions in the movements. Due to the focus on sameness rather than difference, women have to prove themselves worthy of being included in a patriarchal environment where men set the standards of how combatants should be. Few women have higher ranks, although the three women I have focused on did become commanders of their unit. They also had strong political roles in their groups. Relationships were to various degrees regulated in the movements, which served as a way of regulating and controlling the combatant's lives. By having to seek permission to have relationships, people lose their autonomy and agency: however, for women it could give them a larger autonomy as the regulations strengthened the women's role in the relationships, protected and gave them a larger control and liberty in the relationships than is the norm in civil society where violence against women is a big problem. During their time in the guerrilla movements, the women became aware of their subordination and mobilized themselves in order to change the patriarchal dynamics. The organization of women's groups and meetings between guerrilla groups is also a clear sign of collective empowerment. The strict rules preventing pregnancies and interfering with the women's reproductive rights cannot be seen to facilitate women's empowerment. The women who gave birth while they were in the groups normally had to place their children with friends or relatives as it were hard to combine the role of a mother and guerrillera.

6.3 Women in the reintegration process

6.3.1 Reconfiguration of gender roles

As shown in the previous section, by participating in war, women transgress the traditional, well-established gender roles, challenging the predominant stereotypes of women as innately peaceful and men as inevitably warlike. This has implications when it comes to demobilizing and reintegrating. *“The challenge of reintegration is even larger for female than for male combatants, as the women have taken on untraditional tasks and roles during the war, whereas the men rather have reinforced their masculine roles”* (Hauge 2008:311). Since gender roles color most ways of how life is organized, it has proven to be difficult to pay attention to the various roles of women in war in the process of demobilization. For men, on

the other hand, militarism and certain images of masculinity are associated and therefore the development of new ideals of masculine behavior has come under scrutiny (Farr 2002).

6.3.1.1 Ending relationships

I could see clear expressions of the reconfiguration of gender roles when the women talked about their problems in keeping and establishing new relationships with men after demobilizing. Luisa, Leidy and Maria all separated from the *compañeros* they had in the groups, something that is quite common.

Almost all the relationships end up broken, all the serious couples that were formed inside our movement. A year after leaving very few were still together. One time we did an investigation of the women to whom this had happened after the demobilization, and surprisingly few had maintained a relationship with the person they were within the guerrilla movement.

(Luisa M-19)

There are several reasons for this. One is that the women's *compañeros* were already married and had a "civil wife" from before. *"Many men had girlfriends in the group, but had wives in the towns. Many did not know about that"* Maria says, speaking from own experience.

"During the demobilization, I was the girlfriend of "Camilo", who was the father of my daughter. At the end of the process Juliana, his wife, shows up with three children. I was left alone as the mistress. (...) He was 22 years older than me. We were together for 8 years!"

Naturally this was a troubling experience and afterwards she started to question women's roles in the group. *"We gave our life for these men! We did not live our own life projects!"*.

However, she argues against the feminists criticizing the ideology, as she disconnects the fight for revolution and the men's behavior. *"This is a discourse of men not revolutionaries"*, she states.

Luisa confirms that it was normal also in M-19 for *compañeros* to have girlfriends or wives in the civil life. *"A lot of people had a compromise in the civil world. Whichever compañero we talk of, they all had a wife and kids that he had to respond to"*. However,

Luisa views this differently compared to other women. *"It is a double life that many women criticize. I always justify this in the guerrillero. I don't see it as unfortunate, no! (...) I know that many women outside understood that their men had somebody inside. Many managed to understand this. It's simply logical, no!"* She explains that many who entered the M-19 did not know that they would go to the monte.

When they started the kidnappings they began to move into the jungle to get the power over regions. So the compañeros end up in interior, and who knows when they will be able to communicate through telephones, call their family? (...) you don't know how much left you have of your life, a minute, two or three. So love is a mental power that exists in the interior, to be with someone gives you the possibility of dreaming which is vital. I have discussed this with a lot of women that have judged it. But you feel it, you have lived it and you know it is vital because you can die tomorrow. But outside there is also another compromise. A woman who takes care of his children, who knows that the husband is giving his life for a cause. This also generates care and a great affection.

(Luisa M-19)

Another common reason for separation is the different challenges that women and men face when it comes to the traditional gender role system. *“Now we are not capable and we separate. Now we are not capable of fulfilling the role of a traditional woman. Many of us do not adapt. In one way or another, it is a feeling of strength, of liberation that we have become accustomed to”*. Men also face the challenges and expectations of fulfilling the role of a man in civilian life. Barth found in her study of reintegration of female combatants in Africa, mainly focusing on Eritrea, that male ex-combatants met the traditional expectations of how a man should be. A female ex-combatant from Eritrea explains that in spite of having experienced gender equality in the group many men went back to the traditional view of gender.

At first, they did not want to admit it, but after a short while, they preferred girls who had not been fighters. I'm sorry to say but this tendency is international. Men like to be in charge. After the war, the fighters (male) had very high status. The last thing men wanted was a demanding wife. In their homes, the parents told them that they must find a kind and suitable wife, a wife to fit in with the rest of the family. They were pressured to live according to traditional society, even though they should have known better. It is very sad.

(Barth 2002:24)

Luisa explains the same phenomena and say that the men

Being back a civil life, adapting to the pre-established norms, the man wants to return to the traditional male role in a relationship, of the man being the one who is in command, the man being the one who is

in the driving seat. With us [the guerrilleras] we could not do that. Living and sharing for us is something that has to be on equal terms. So we end up meeting compañeros who are looking for a woman in civil society who will permit him to have the traditional male role. The role of him dominating, he is the provider who control the relation. The men are very comfortable in their new relations.

The same phenomenon was seen after the war in Guatemala. “(...) *the women that had reintegrated individually felt that their husbands were slipping back to the gender traditions and attitudes of the Guatemalan society in general*” (Hauge 2008:309-310). The women’s refusal to return to traditional female roles while men have a tendency to slip back into the traditional way of thinking results in the breaking up of relationships. The fact that women often do not receive the support of the comrades who had been taught the same ideals of gender roles and equality was also something that they were not prepared for “*Even the comrades wanted us to go back [to traditional gender roles]*” (female ex-combatant from Eritrea in Barth 2002:30).

6.3.1.2 Establishing new relationships

After demobilizing and separating from the compañeros in the groups, many women try to establish new relationships in the civil society. Problems with traditional gender roles generally seem to be the issue. Luisa states that it is the women’s experiences with a non-gendered labor division within the groups that create a conflict after demobilizing and they face the traditional expectations of a woman.

This is probably why we women after leaving are so reluctant to be enslaved. What should I make you for lunch? What clothes do you want to put on? I would never do that! I did not do it with my compañero, I am not capable. We have never had love relations with the service. It has cost us a lot knowing that to serve is to attend, that loving is attending, that loving is serving.

Hence the dynamics that was created in relationships in the groups is something that Luisa is not willing to change. For many women the change of gender roles they have experienced in the conflict is now deeply rooted in their identity; something that has not happened in the society in general. Sørensen states the same thing in her book *Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*. “*But it is not possible to return to pre-war mores; gender roles and social values have been deeply affected by the experience of war. Thus reconfiguration of gender*

roles and positions is an integral part of the challenge of rebuilding war-torn societies”
(Sørensen 1998:iii).

Sometime after demobilizing from FARC, Leidy tried to establish new relationships with men. However, like many other women, Leidy has had problems making relationships work within the civilian context. *“I think I am kind of complicated in this way. The man that decide and the women that comply Well, this has nothing to do with me. I prefer to stay alone, rather than being under the machismo. I think I am very radical in this sense”*. Compared to the views in the general society in Colombia this may be seen by many as quite radical. Colombian men and women have quite separate and conservative gender roles, especially in the rural areas. Among ex-guerrilleras, however, this seems to be a quite normal attitude. Maria has tried several times to create new relationships after demobilizing, but it has not worked out as she wanted. She is now in the process of accepting that she will probably end up alone.

I was in a relationship with somebody, but last week he decided to end it. You do not manage to find a partner and make equal conditions. Men are afraid of relations with strong women. You need to accept to live a life in solitude. (...) They get bored and they end up in traditional relationships, with important women, academically but not politically. I have a more social and political role than him. It`s a world you can`t control.

The result is that many women end up alone. *“La María Eugeina Vásquez is alone, Vera, and I am alone. All the women who participated strongly end up alone.* (Maria ELN). Luisa states that many women have accepted that they will end up alone. *“The intelligent women tell me that we have the destiny of staying alone. When you have a public role in your life and a partner comes along it makes the things very difficult. At least that is what we have been thinking, so we stay passive and are bound to be alone”*. Like Maria, Luisa believes that that one of the reasons why they end up alone is that men are scared of strong women.

I have always said that men fear intelligent women. We are of this type of women who love that we are intelligent, that people look at us and say, wow – how intelligent! That we can take over and lead a meeting. However, when this is transferred into the intimate, the everyday life, it makes men feel like losers. It makes them feel that they do not have power. So instead they end up with traditional girlfriends

Hence, many women do not manage to reconstruct well-functioning relationships and end up being single mothers with the full care of the children. Many also end up having children with different fathers (Farr 2002). Even though it is quite normal for women to be single parents in Colombia, it still puts restraints on their potential to develop economically, politically and socially as most of their time, money and energy is dedicated to providing for the children and themselves.

Despite the fear of ending up alone, many women demobilizing are not willing to give up their political and social role for a relationship. *“I asked myself: are you ready to give up your role for a relationship? And I said no. No, no, NO! It has cost me a lot getting this role.”* (Maria ELN) This feeling of autonomy is not necessarily exclusively connected with women who held higher ranks within the group. One of my informants from FARC who did not join due to political conviction and who was a radio operator without rank, expresses the same view.

I am not one of them who stay in the house cleaning, ironing, and cooking. What do you gain from that, from that you are very enslaved. I think that the men also want a woman that advances, that does not stay in the house ironing, cleaning, cooking but rather see that she becomes someone. So I identify with this. (...) For me it would not be a life, once in a while yes, but staying in the house every day, no!

Even though these women have settled for a life in solitude it does not mean that they are not capable of loving or having other types of relationships. After facing the fact that she will be alone Maria told herself: *“You will go back to having passing relationships so don't worry”*. Luisa supports this. *“Loving of course, not being bitter. No, loving with all our strength when we meet someone!”* She rather gives love another dimension and significance. *“Love does not necessarily end up in living together. Love does not start and end with matrimony. Separated we are able to love. Separated we are able to be a family. Separated we can have interest in common”*. The nature of the relationships outside the group is quite similar to the ones in the group. *“The relationships you live with intensity, but they are not long, they are short”* (Luisa M-19).

An employee of the ongoing research project on women and demobilization at the DDR observatory at the National University in Bogotá confirms that many women have problems

reconstructing relationships outside the groups and end up alone. The employee, however, moves some of the responsibility on the women themselves.

Many women have had many boyfriends but only temporarily: having more serious and long-term relations seems to be more difficult. However, in many cases it is not because of the men but because of the women themselves. They feel uncomfortable with the men and end the relations due to awkwardness on their own behalf. Hence, it does not necessarily have anything to do with the fear that men may have, but of course it can be this as well. Many women do not want to tell from their past and this also complicates things.

Maria admits that the women themselves do not manage to move on and she associates this with the loss of partners who died in the war.

Another compañera in ELN also lost her compañero in the war. She became a widow and never got a new man. Why? Because she still had “Emilio” in her head. She did not move on. Whether it is due to political strength or because we did not do the necessary grieving, I don’t know. However, the picture of them stays present. All our new boyfriends look like our compañeros. The father of my daughter told me: This ends because you have not gotten over the feelings for Andres and you compare everything with that relationship!

6.3.1.2.1 Men and women search for different things

As men and women had different experiences in the group and also meet different expectations in civilian life, men and women look for different things in a partner after demobilizing.

Many women who have had new relationships look for a partner who has a similar history. Very few have found somebody who has had nothing to do with the guerrilla movement. The majority get together with a compañero that they already knew, who is now separated from another compañera, and they end up together. It is difficult for women to have a partner who has nothing to do with guerrillas.

(Luisa M-19)

If it is not a guerrillero, it is a person with a similar background, who has had a political position and who is familiar with a political way of thinking.

In the investigation we did of us demobilized women , we found a large tendency for the women to live with men who have a political role which they may not necessarily have gotten from the war. However, they were conscious of the political thinking (...) A man they know that they can identify with and talk with about the same things.

The observatory of DDR found the same tendency in their research on demobilized women.

There are many women that look for partners who also have demobilized. However, they don't necessarily have to be from the same group. You can, for example, see couples from FARC and AUC being together. The partner does not even have to be from an armed group but can be from the military or the police. There is something that unites them or they understand each other between themselves. We have asked why, if it is because of the sex, ways of being etc, but it is difficult to explain. It could be for many reasons, using the same language, having a similar past etc.

Barth found the same tendency of men marrying civil women, while female ex-combatants tended to marry other ex-combatants and seldom civil men.

In Eritrea, female ex-fighters are largely married to ex-fighters. But most male fighters are married to civilian women, while female ex-fighters are hardly ever married to civilian men. Only 3.2% of the women fighters are married to a civilian, compared to 96.4% of the men.

(GDI and Mehrehab in Barth 2002:31).

6.3.2 Political reintegration, guerrilleras without arms

As shown in the two previous chapters, when looking at women's motives for joining guerrilla groups and their experiences within these, some see their participation as a political self-realization and a way of fighting for their political beliefs. This does not automatically change as people demobilize. Leidy was very clear about her ideological conviction. Even though she has modified her view on socialism she still keeps her ideals strong. *"I have left my arms but not my ideals"*, she says. A long time after mobilizing, Maria joined an ELN camp and enjoyed it so much that a compañero told her that in reality she had never really left the ELN. Leidy, who in contrast to Luisa and Maria was forced to desert and demobilized individually, had problems after demobilizing and not being able to be politically active.

You feel bad. For deserting your organization and compañeros and what you believe in. First of all for the psychological and emotional pressure. To clash with your own principles and ideals. Your own fight

that you always have had with you. (...) You arrive at the shelter where a number of people live and you start to break down this dynamic. A very active dynamic, an energy that is always there, what moves there, housework, studies, you are always listening to news, discussing the day's news, what happens at the national and international level. And you arrive here and convert into any other idiot...

(Leidy FARC)

6.3.2.1 Silent voices

The women's strong political activism and wish to maintain their political role becomes an issue as the Colombian state does not incorporate political reintegration in their reintegration program. *"For ACR it is only economical and social. To us it is also political! This is very important to us. It is very frustrating, especially for those of us on the left side* (Leidy, FARC). She points out that there is no room in politics for ex-combatants to be active nor in the government. I found the same perception with the male ex-combatants I interviewed. They also felt that they were excluded from politics and lost their positions after demobilizing. However, it is particularly demanding for women to get into politics. As a politician Luisa has long experience with this.

I'll tell you it is double work, double fight. There are very few women who have gained political spaces" (...) In the political and public life we have to be double guerreras [female fighters] to be able to enjoy the spaces that are designated for the former compañeros. So we remain in the lower levels of the politics.

Due to the machisitic structures in the politics and other challenges women face in the reintegration, many women disappear into the private sphere, whereas the men become the public actors, the politicians. *"The ones who assume the public roles are them [the men]. They are the ones becoming candidates. Us women we end up carrying the bricks, organizing everything including telling them; you have to do like this, speak like this!"* (Luisa M-19).

She further points out that this does not mean that men are better equipped to assume these roles than women.

Some [men] did not even have the capacity, but we women directed them and made sure they won. I believe in everyone of us [the women]. Outside of the movement, there were many very competent women in the political camp. In the military camp, we ended up lifting up compañeros many a time until we ourselves got into the mud

Luisa thinks the gender issues in the politics need to be addressed in another manner.

I think, as a politician, that in the political parties we have to start to manage the politics better when it comes to gender and training the women. We have to be conscious about the low participation of women, and start moving the women into the power spaces that exist.

That women do not enter the political sphere does not mean that they do not have the will to reach for higher political positions or to be politically active. *“With the majority of us [ex-guerrilleras] you can see an interest in not losing the possibility. In one form or another you meet compañeras who have demobilized and who show a strong political activism and who did not stay there being only housewives”*, says Luisa. The leader of the network of female ex-combatants says that after demobilization women continue to do political and social work in the communities. Even though this is important work, it is not prioritized and there is no money allocated for this. Hence the women end up doing much-needed social work for free in order to gain experience and to increase their chances of obtaining work later on.

Vanessa Farr argues that *“Women’s participation in war related work can be overlooked because stereotypical notions of gender-appropriate labor are often re-mobilized after war when a society strives to return to ‘normal’”* (Farr 2002:7). It seems to be common in war-torn societies that many female combatants experience some sort of frustration that, having served their country throughout years of warfare, they are suddenly excluded from the public arena and again confined to the domestic sphere. A study done by Julia Maria in Guatemala confirms this: *“The socio-political circumstances that influenced the integration... changed with the peace accords and have brought women back to the pre-war roles and status, particularly in family structure, division of labor and other opportunities”* (Sørensen 1998:52). The importance of women’s contributions in the war are later neglected or underestimated. In Zimbabwe popular images of the liberation war reinforced the belief that women had made their greatest contribution as wives and mothers (Farr 2002). The leader of the network for female ex-combatants in Colombia says that after 20 years of demobilization the women’s contribution in the war is still not recognized. To highlight the roles, work and contribution of women in the war is therefore one of the main goals of the network. *“We have not managed to highlight our contribution, only how we felt in the group”*, she says and makes a clear distinction between the feeling of equality and recognizing women’s work in

the groups. *“That we felt equality is not the same as recognizing what the women did in the group”*.

For the women who are demobilizing and reintegrating individually, it is even harder to gain access to the political system and public sphere than it is for those going through collective reintegration. This is because they did not go through any peace accords and hence were not able to influence the negotiations. In addition they left behind their network in the group, and it is much harder for an individual to attain a position of power without the support of others. They may also experience security problems: because they deserted the group and will undoubtedly have left with valuable information, their former colleagues may be searching for them. . Many are therefore forced to live anonymous lives that make it impossible to become a public figure..

6.3.3 Negotiations

“War is between men and the solutions of war have to be between men”

Álvaro Leyva Durán, ex senator in Colombia who participated in the peace negotiations with the insurgent groups (Londoño and Nieto 2007:58).

One way of getting women into political roles and the public sphere after demobilization is to integrate them into the peace negotiations. However, the inclusion of women on negotiating teams seems low in post-conflict and peace negotiations worldwide. Sørensen points out in her study of women and post-conflict resolution that women tend to fade into the background when peace negotiations begin (Sørensen 1998). This is also the case in Colombia. *“In Colombia, despite the fact that as many as 30 percent of the fighters of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are women, FARC included only one woman, Mariana Paez, among its representatives to the official negotiations with the government”* (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002:79).

M-19 was the group that most actively used women as negotiators with the government and others during their time as a guerrilla group. M-19 female negotiators include Carmenza Londoño after the take-over of the Dominican Embassy and Vera Grabe in the final peace agreements. Vera Grabe is also the most successful example of a woman going direct from

negotiations and into governmental politics. She was put on the list of candidates from Bogotá and the elections took place only two days after M-19 laid down their arms in 1990. The result was overwhelming and she was the only representative from M-19 in the House of Representatives (Londoño and Nieto 2007). Even though Vera Grabe made it into the political structures, political conditions did not favor their participation and in general women from M-19 did not participate in the signing of treaties.

Maria reports that there was only one woman participating in CRS's negotiations with the government. "*There was one woman among the negotiators, Silvia, who they [the military] also killed*". Carmen Elisa Pereira, aka "Silvia", was as Maria pointed out one of the peace negotiators and even though she was the most protected woman in the CRS she was assassinated in 1992. Norma Lucía Bermúdez replaced Silvia and was elected into "Voceros Nacionales" – the group of leaders in charge of the negotiations with the government (Londoño and Nieto 2007). As CRS was the last group to enter the peace negotiations in 1994, they in theory had an increased chance of ensuring that women's interests were included. Certainly, Bermúdez received assistance from other demobilized women, particularly from Mujeres de Abril, who had already gone through the same process. However, this was not sufficient to prevail over the masculinization of the structures of the peace process. Bermúdez later stated that even her own compañeros made sure that she was isolated and was not included in the central negotiations, which was a huge disappointment for her (Londoño and Nieto 2007).

The machismo structure of the negotiations is one of the reasons why the percentage of women participating in peace negotiations is so low in Colombia. Another reason is that the women themselves do not want to participate. Lack of self-confidence could be one reason, another is that the women may not wish to end the struggle and demobilize. Maria for example was asked to join the negotiations but declined. "*I was never a part of the negotiation because this was a process that I did not want*", she says. Naturally, not everyone agreed with the leaders' decision to demobilize or the content of the treaties that were signed. This was the case for both male and female combatants in M-19, with many disappointed by the conditions established in the treaties and feeling that their negotiators did not achieve or demand enough in the peace process (Vaquéz 2005).

Another important point to mention is that women participating in peace negotiations does not automatically lead to the inclusion of women's perspective in the negotiations. The perspective of sameness that existed in the groups followed many women into demobilization also the women in the negotiations. Bermúdez points out that she did not have a sufficient feminist appreciation to be able to argue the case from a woman's perspective in the peace negotiations (Londoño and Nieto 2007).

The lack of inclusion of women's perspectives in the peace negotiations in Colombia resulted in an exclusion of women in power structures, reducing their opportunities to assume public political roles. In addition it has contributed to the failure to recognize the importance of women's roles and contributions in the guerrilla movements and the civil war in Colombia.

6.3.4 Network of female ex-combatants

The bond between guerrilleras was, as previously shown, strong within the groups. This has continued after the demobilization although the dynamics of the socialization have changed as people spread and start to live more individual lives. In order to challenge the disempowerment many women experienced after demobilizing and to make women's contributions in the war more visible, a network of female combatants was established. The aim of the network was to create a space for women to have a voice and to contribute their own stories and experiences in general.

The network was established ten years after the first wave of demobilization, and began as a group of women who started to raise questions about the roles of women in the war and after demobilization. They saw that women were not in the political structures and that their participation and experiences from war was absent in the public sphere. Many women were also ashamed of and wanted to hide their identity as ex-guerrilleras. To change this invisibility, a conference was held in 2000 with 130 women from all the demobilized organizations present. This was the first national meeting of women after demobilizing, and the first step towards making the women's stories better known and working their way into the public spaces. Today, one of the main focuses of the network is to recognize the skills the women obtained as guerrilleras. Within the guerrilla groups, the women acquired useful skills through social work in communities, political formation, nursing, handling explosives etc. However, as these were obtained within the insurgent groups, they are not valued or

recognized in civil life. This, in combination with social stigma, produces many challenges when the women try to search for work.

Even though many women feel they have lost their agency, autonomy and political power after demobilizing, the network of female ex-combatants is one example of how some women are able to use their ability to mobilize themselves and take collective actions in the process of reintegration. This can be seen as a type of collective empowerment transferred, developed and adjusted into the civilian context. In addition it is an example of a further development of critical consciousness and a greater awareness of gender roles, in particular women's roles, in the movements and the civil society.

6.3.5 Motherhood

As shown earlier, being a guerrilla soldier conflicts with being a mother. This also has consequences for both women and their children in the reintegration process. In retrospective, Maria sees the positive aspect of not having a child within ELN.

It was craziness thinking about having a baby in the middle of a war! (...) Many children grow up without even knowing who their real parents are. Just look at Vera Grabe and la María Eugenia Vásquez Perdomo. Now they are alone and have lost their children. I would not be capable of doing that. My child would have been placed at Andre's parents. That would have been another type of rupture!

(Maria ELN)

While demobilizing, however, Maria became pregnant and had a daughter, and this worked out fine for her. *"I have a good relationship with my daughter. I did not have to put her away; she was born after the demobilization"*.

Luisa was one of the women leaving her children with other people and she faced large challenges when re-establishing contact with them. When she demobilized her daughter was quite old.

The re-encounter with children has been the most difficult part for women demobilizing. How do I explain to my daughter who only heard my voice and explanations through a cassette. How to tell her that the process that the country was going through had a greater importance than perhaps she had. That she saw me very little. How to tell her that in reality I loved her?.

Little by little, Luisa managed to win her daughter's respect and love. The process has been hard and demanded a lot of work from both of them.

My daughter says that in her sensory memory she always remembered the discourse. Little by little I am gaining her affection, her respect, her love. It has cost us women a lot of work! We who wanted to stay with them, wanted to live with them, we have suffered a lot. It is a long process and some have not made it.

Female ex-combatants do not come out of war unaffected, and taking on the mother role does not necessarily come naturally. Luisa has faced many challenges in the transition from being a combatant to being a mother. This was particularly the case with her youngest son. *"We are not even capable with our own children. I am incapable of asking my son if he has eaten or not. It is his problem if he ate or not. There [in the guerrilla] we prepared for everyone, I cook and we eat or you cook and we eat"*. Barth gives an example of the challenges in the transition between the war life and civil from women in the Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLF).

These women have been socialized out of civil society. Most have spent years as fighters. Living as fighters for years in a closed system like the EPLF did not provide the female fighters with adequate tools to cope with the demands of everyday life in a civil society. They have not learned how to cope with basic problems of being civilian women. The knowledge they now need, such as how to function as a mother and wife *and* as an ex-fighter in a civil society, was not taught to them during war.

(Barth 2002:23)

6.3.5.1 Reproductive rights after war

For the women that had their reproductive rights violated and who had to undergo abortion the sense of loss in the reintegration process can be even larger. The woman from FARC who was forced to undergo abortion late in her pregnancy expressed sorrow in relation to this. *"If I had been able to have the baby I would have a seven year old son by now...."* Enloe points

out that it is common worldwide for women with histories as guerrilleras to end up childless. (Enloe 2000). There could be many reasons for this: extreme life situation over longer periods of time, diseases, lack of health services, lack of proper nutrition etc. (Enloe 2000). As the Colombian state has in recent years implemented a military strategy of eliminating the FARC forces, the conditions for the combatants have become much harsher. One of my informants deserted due to bad conditions and hunger.

I left because they [FARC] started the maltreatment and everything became stricter. (...) The military never stopped looking for us, so we had to work harder to grow food, but sometimes the military came to the places where our crops were growing and they destroyed everything, they burned it. Therefore no one had the right to have anything.(...) It was horrible, you could not live together, could not sleep, there was only one meal a day, sometimes you did not eat, sometimes you only ate plain corn, without anything else”.

Another girl from FARC told me that the physical strain was large and it was normal that she did not have her period. Hence, such harsh conditions can affect women’s reproductive abilities. In Vietnam many women who survived as combatants in the war against the U.S were unable to have children afterwards (Turner in Barth 2000). Age is another aspect of this: there was either no possibility of having children during the war or the women felt their futures were too uncertain to have children, and then when the war was over they were already in their menopause. In addition to the physical effects on a health, war may also affect women socially and culturally. *“Society’s expectations of a woman are different from those placed on a man. In order to be a ‘complete’ woman, one is dependent on fulfilling certain criteria. One’s appearance and age is crucial”* (Barth 2002:34). In Colombia there is a tendency to focus on women’s beauty, stressing women’s feminine side and physical looks. Age is also important, with many older women facing discrimination when, for example, they apply for jobs. This is closely linked to the machismo culture in Colombia. Female combatants may also experience being less favored as *“War makes an ‘imprint’ on a woman’s body, both physically and in the mind of others”* (Barth 2002:34). To a greater degree than a man, a woman is measured according to whether or not she lives up to certain standards (Barth 2002), and women who are not able to have children, are too old, have been marked heavily physically or mentally, have lost their compañero in war or have problems in reconstructing new relationships do therefore have greater problems in creating a family and having a ‘normal’ life according to the cultural and social customs in Colombia. In many

cultures such as Colombia a woman is expected to have children and to become a mother, something that it is impossible for some women.

In a society where a woman's worth is to a large degree measured by her ability to raise a family, a barren ex-fighter woman is not a woman like any other woman in the eyes of most people. The great importance of having children is not a personal matter, but also a ticket to acceptance by society as a successful woman

(Barth 2002:35)

Another crucial factor is that in a country like Colombia where the government is not able to provide welfare services to all sections of society, most women are largely dependent on their husbands or, as they grow older and are unable to work, on the wages of their children. Single mothers without a formal education need to work hard to be able to cover the needs of the children and themselves, and women who have neither husband nor children may have problems in finding other sources of income when they are no longer able to work. In Colombia, a woman's economy is highly dependent on her family situation. The leader of the network of female ex-combatants says that during their first meeting they found that 98% of the women had returned to living in the house of their parents. "*Due to economic problems they had not gained their autonomy*", she says. Hence, the agency and autonomy established in the guerrilla groups are lost in the reintegration. Women's political role may also be affected by maternity issues as the challenges in being a single mother automatically results in women going back to the domestic sphere and not have the time or opportunities of becoming active participants in the public life.

6.3.6 Summary

During war, gender relations are reconstructed – something that becomes particularly visible during demobilization and reintegration. The women have to a large degree transgressed their traditional role and refuse to go back to the pre-established norms. A result of this is relationships come to an end as the men slip back into the traditional gender roles. After separating from their compañeros in the group, the women have a hard time establishing new relationships, as they are not willing to compromise their achieved autonomy, agency, liberty and empowerment gained in the groups. Even though the women lay down their arms and demobilize it does not mean that they move away from their political beliefs and activism.

Therefore it is quite frustrating for many that political reintegration is such a challenge: not only do many lose their agency and autonomy but many, as single parents, face economic challenges, all of which conspire to prevent them from becoming strong public actors. Moreover, this process starts during the peace negotiations as many women are underrepresented and excluded from these. However, a network of female ex-combatants has been formed who are working to make female ex-combatants more visible in the civil life and to make their roles and contribution in the war more widely known. This is a way of collectively restructuring the ability of women to mobilize and fight against their disempowerment in the reintegration process. Maternity is also an issue after demobilizing as many women were denied the right to become mothers in the war, which is something that they struggle with in various ways when reintegrating. Those who did become mothers in the guerrilla groups faced challenges in re-establishing contact with their children, while those who were denied their reproductive rights face problems meeting society's expectations of women as mothers and also grieving over any babies they were forced to abort.

7 Empowered women?

“While for some it was a positive experience, a learning process and a factor of personal development, for others it was fundamentally negative, an error and a mistake”

(Londoño and Nieto 2007:56)

As shown in the last chapter, women’s experiences as combatants are complex and dependant on many factors. I will in this chapter offer some conclusions and answer the research question: *To what extent are women empowered by joining guerrilla groups in Colombia?*

7.1 Manifestations of empowerment

Despite hard times and negative experiences, Leidy, Maria and Luisa express an overall positive overall view of their time in FARC, ELN and M-19. For Leidy it was an opportunity for personal and political development.

For me it went good I think. The social aspect strengthened a lot of the things that I was thinking. When it came to my ideals I could achieve them. It was very satisfactory for me. Was emotionally [satisfying] because it was what I wanted to do, what I had prepared myself to do, and always thought.

Leidy had some clear expectations when joining, expectations which were fulfilled within FARC. She also expresses a large degree of pride of the work they did.

I also joined in making constructions in the municipalities, schools etc. At that time I felt very proud to be in their real ranks, I thought it was my mission to do this. I grew to know many areas that I never thought existed. (...) I could not possible imagine that people could live in such conditions. This made me feel even more proud, it was for these people we were fighting, it was for them!

Maria also looks back on the time in a nostalgic way and she has deep rooted feelings about her time in ELN. *“It was very nice...A lot of nostalgia... After all ELN was a project of love. (...) I have not regretted”*. Leidy also shows little signs of remorse of what *of what* has been a crucial experience in her life *“I do not regret having been in the guerrilla. That experience has made me who I am today”*.

These are all clear statements of satisfaction and personal development for female combatants and can be interpreted as expressions of empowerment. But in what areas and to what extent did they become empowered?

7.2 Empowering factors

As stated in the theory chapter, the concept of empowerment in this paper is identified and defined as a process where agency, critical consciousness, collective action, context and time aspect are crucial factors. Let me start with critical consciousness. First, all the women I have focused on clearly already had a critical consciousness before joining the groups and were active in social movements. However, within the context of the guerrilla movements, they were able to develop this consciousness and were given the opportunity to act for change, something that was previously denied to them in civil society. When joining guerrilla groups they identified with the group's ideology and, with others, developed a collective identity and engaged in individual and collective efficacy. One can, however, argue that they did not develop the same critical perspectives on their own groups: there was probably not room for it as the culture is that you are either in or you are out. Even though they still defend their group and actions to a large degree after demobilizing, they have developed some critical perspective of their own movements. Maria for example largely defends the actions of ELN but admits that there were some mistakes. *"I don't see it as willingness or say that we were wrong all the time. I do not speak bad about ELN, but some practices yes. I think they failed in confusing the legal spaces and the armed spaces"*. Leidy has a similar perspective on her time in FARC. *"What I did there was not wrong. I got to do what I wanted to do. But I do accept that there were things wrongly done"*. However, she says that she would not go back as during reintegration she met people from paramilitary groups and saw that they also had the similar social reasons to engage in war as her. She expressed this once to her neighbor who was an ex-paramilitary.

I would not do it again, knowing you today. I have realized that you are the same poor man that had the same needs as I did. The only thing it has cost us is killing and increasing this conflict. I would not do it because of this.

During the interviews I did not get to know if these women were heavily involved in violent acts or if they had killed many people. However, it is striking that they do not mention the

victims of the war, the civilians who were killed, kidnapped or displaced due to the actions of their organizations. Even though they may not have been directly involved in killings, they were still part of groups that carried out large atrocities towards other, often innocent people. This could be a dark aspect that many women do not wish to speak of or focus on, but might also be the result of some sort of brainwashing policy in the group, making combatants believe that the aim/goal justifies the means. However, this is also connected to the time aspect as the circumstances in Colombia have improved and the politics developed during recent years. Luisa states that the war was important in its time, but today Colombia's conflict must be solved by peaceful means. *"It is when we demobilize that we understand that you cannot bring about change through war. (...) I am convinced that peace is the way but that war evoked lot of issues"*, she says.

Leidy also believes in political activism without arms and stresses the importance of dialogue with the government and others.

Maybe the arms were important; it had its importance in some moments – for example, with M-19, and the new constitution. War did achieve something here, but now it does not have the same importance. The war of Bolivar had its importance. But now it is not like that. Guerrilla warfare was important due to the circumstances, now there are other circumstances.

The three women also developed a critical consciousness of the traditional gender relations in the groups. This is particularly apparent in the narratives of Luisa and Maria. However, Maria says that she wished she had been more gender aware in the group, and that her awareness developed largely in the reintegration process.

The women to a large degree also gained agency in the groups. These three particular women gained agency as political and militant actors, and they all made the transition into the higher ranks. They were able to live out and act on their political ideals and principles and also had a personal transformation and development for realizing their political life projects. This type of agency was found only in the narratives of women joining due to political conviction. What did apply to most women was gaining autonomy and agency while transgressing the traditional gender norms. As there was no gendered labor division, women were liberated from their traditional roles as housewives and caretakers and were able to assume roles that are normally restricted to men. However, as I have shown in the analysis, this did not

necessarily mean that there was full gender equality in the group and that women had the same rights as men. It was harder for women to gain higher positions, many were in roles that were neither political nor influential, such as nurses or radio operators, and there were different rules for women as to whom they could be in intimate relationships with. Sexual harassment and gender based violence also occurred. However, most of the women I interviewed found the intimate relationships very positive even though they were highly regulated because it gave women larger agency and opportunities to regulate their sexual relationships in comparison to the civil society where domestic abuse and sexual violence is a big problem. The focus on sameness could also have a large downside as the women permanently had to compete with the men and neglect aspects of their own identity as women. The issue of maternity is an example of that, as pregnancies highlight women's biological sex and their ability to give birth. As this is not compatible with being a combatant, rules forbidding pregnancies were developed. Submitted to such rules, women lost the agency and autonomy over their own bodies and were denied the chance to become mothers and to act the mother role if they had children.

Being in a guerrilla group may produce empowerment to the participants independently of gender, as it is an environment where people together mobilize against inequalities in injustice and a suppressing power. Even though the individual is in the center of agency and critical consciousness related to empowerment it does not mean that he or she will become empowered individually. Groups of people such as women may be aware of their subordination and collectively make actions to equalize the power balance. Carr claims that empowerment is a highly interpersonal process in which individuals collectively define and activate strategies to gain access to knowledge and power (Carr 2003:18). As shown in the analysis, an increasing gender awareness grew up in the groups and resulted in women creating organizations exclusively for women both within and outside the groups, holding intergroup women's meetings while M-19 convened a national conference where participants discussed women's roles, positions and rights within the movement. These are results of critical consciousness, agency and collective ability and of actions towards change. This collective awareness and mobilization was also maintained after demobilization as female ex-combatants retained their strong sense of comradeship and sisterhood. This was also formalized through the network of female ex-combatants which has become established and illuminates the women's contributions as combatants in the war. However, many women wished they had been more gender aware while in the groups, and taken greater advantage of

the situation in the groups, as they had a hard time fighting for their inclusion after demobilizing and were subjected to a male-dominated perspective in for example peace negotiations.

The context and time aspects also influence the degree of empowerment. In this paper I have focused on two different contexts – the civilian and the guerrilla – and the transition between them through three phases – before joining, while in the group, and reintegrating. The three women I have focused on describe the context in the guerrilla group as facilitating their empowerment. Many of their expectations were fulfilled, they were able to fight for their beliefs and goals, and reached higher ranks. In this paper the differences between women's position and role in the civil society and in the guerrilla group is vital. Even though Colombia has a strong tradition of women's movements, and there has been a development towards greater equality between the genders, the women experienced a higher degree of equality in the groups. This becomes particularly visible when they demobilize and reintegrate and experience losses and disappointments with their status.. Due to the experiences of gender equality in the groups they refuse to go back to the pre-guerrilla gender norms, and end up separating from their compañeros and having problems in establishing new relationships. Many women end up as single parents, which in addition presents economic challenges that constrain their ability to be socially and politically active. It is important to note that being able to act as an agent does not necessarily mean that the person achieves the desired results (Petesch in Nayaran 2005). Many former combatants have the agency to be strong actors of change in the Colombian society today, however the structure of civil society does not facilitate their participation. Even at the negotiation stage, the women lose their positions as they are vastly under-represented in the peace talks. Based on the narratives of the three women, one can say that some women were temporarily empowered during the time in the groups, but that the empowerment the women experienced in the group is not recognized or valued in civil society.

7.3 Not empowering for all

Not all perceive situations and experiences in the same ways, various events affect people differently according to their abilities, background and expectations. As stated in the introduction, it is important to keep in mind while discussing women and empowerment that *“women are not just one group among various disempowered subjects of society (the poor,*

ethnic minorities, and so on); they are a cross-cutting category of individuals that overlaps with all these other groups” (Malhotra and Schuler in Narayan 2005:71). This also applies to women in guerrilla groups as they have different backgrounds when it comes to class, ethnicity, level of education and area of origin and they enter the group with different abilities and expectations and end up having different roles and experiences. Not all women perceived their experiences from the guerrilla group as empowering as Leidy, Luisa and Maria. A 28 year old indigenous woman who had just deserted from FARC expressed disappointment about her time in FARC. *“I lost a lot while being there. I could not study and today I think it would be better if I had gone to study instead. I did not gain anything by being there! I was there for ten years not gaining anything!”* This is anything but an expression of empowerment, it is rather feelings of loss, disappointment and regret. This woman had experienced particularly cruel things while in FARC. Her uncle had been assassinated by her own unit, which the commander deliberately kept hidden from her, and she was also forced to undergo a late abortion. Her background as an indigenous woman from a remote area, child of a single parent and the hope for better opportunities as the motives for joining are all factors that may have made it more difficult for her to gain position or power within in the group. The environment and experiences in the group did not encourage any feeling of empowerment for her, in fact, it was the opposite. It was the same for the people who were kidnapped or joined on false premises.

Hence people’s experiences are highly dependent on why they joined, the expectations they had when they joined, what role and status they had in the group and, most importantly, the environment and administration of the particular unit. Diener and Biswas-Diener point out that not all environments stimulate a feeling of empowerment for all. *“Every environment will be empowering for certain goals, and frequently only for individuals who possess specific resources and fill particular roles”* (Diener and Biswas-Diener in Narayan 2005:134). In Colombia there seems to be a tendency for women who joined due to political conviction, had higher education or came from a middle-class background to feel a higher degree of empowerment than those who joined to escape poverty and lack of opportunities. These were also the women who were more likely to feel disappointment during reintegration and to express feelings of disempowerment after demobilizing. Hence, the environments in guerrilla groups, as Diener and Biswas-Diener say, is empowering for certain goals, such as political and ideological struggle, and for people who possess specific resources, in this case higher education class or earlier political activism, and who fill particular roles, here being political

roles or having higher ranks. Londoño and Nieto point out there was a difference between women coming from rural areas and those coming from urban areas. The women that came from urban areas generally reached higher ranks in the armed groups due to their ideological and educational background. After demobilization, these women are also more likely to find networks of assistance, which in turn provide them with more opportunities to access to places and positions that favor their empowerment. Women from rural areas on the other hand are normally at the lower strata of the hierarchy in the groups and after demobilizing they return to more conservative communities that do not approve transgression of women's roles. Their return to the civil life represents disempowerment and they have to give up the liberty and agency they obtained during their time in the guerrilla groups, "*going from arms to the kitchen*" (Londoño and Nieto 2007:131). However, what all the female ex-combatants have in common is that they have transgressed and reconfigured the traditional gender roles and meet many of the same expectations when they reintegrate into civil society. This is also what mainly separates female from male combatants as the men have rather enforced their masculinities rather than transgressing gender norms.

8 Conclusion

There is no doubt, far from being only victims, some women are empowered from the state of emergency in war. But normally this is temporary; the ones who obviously were empowered are the women who chose to be guerrilleras.

(Victoria Brittain in Londoño and Nieto 2007:192).

The aim of this paper was to provide an alternative way of looking at women's experiences in war by using the concept of empowerment rather than the dominating discourse of victims. This paper does not disregard the victim and vulnerability discourse in scholarship, the victim discourse is of high importance when it comes to recognizing and naming the universal subordination of women and recognize the atrocities done towards women in war such as discrimination, abuse, sexual violence etc. However, this paper argues against the "victimization trap" where all women are labeled as victims, which is not always the case. Not all female ex-combatants would define themselves as victims, and the risk of doing so may limit their role as social actors who can contribute positively to the development of policies for sustainable peace and development.

In this paper I have chosen to use the term empowerment as an analytical lens to illuminate women's experiences as combatants and I have used the concepts of critical consciousness, agency, collective and individual empowerment and context to define empowerment. To be able to measure the empowerment I have chosen three different points in time, before joining, the time in the guerrilla group, and the reintegration. I have looked at women's subjective perception of their experiences in forms of retrospective narratives and discussed three core themes: gender relations, maternity and political participation. The three narratives were identified and selected for their capacity to exemplify the empowerment that some women feel during war and they also illuminate the three themes discussed.

So to what extent do women become empowered by joining guerrilla groups in Colombia? As shown in the analysis, not all women fit into the vulnerability discourse as mere victims of war because some women quite clearly experience gains while participating in war. These can be getting autonomy and agency, developing critical consciousness of society in general and established gender norms, the ability to act, attaining higher ranks and strong political roles

etc. The context in the guerrilla groups also facilitates a larger gender equality where women are liberated from their traditional roles and become equal to men. In these aspects, the three women I have focused on have experienced a large extent of empowerment. This becomes particularly visible in the reintegration process as they feel disappointment, loss and disempowerment when returning to civil society. However, there are nuances to this experience of empowerment because despite the greater degree of gender equality and empowerment, the women's agency is restricted under strict rules of maternity, the structures in the groups are highly patriarchal and hierarchical, and there is a focus on sameness that masculinizes combatants and compromises guerrillera's identity as women, and rather makes them fight for recognition as combatants equal to men.

As shown in the analysis, women's experiences as combatants are complex and cannot be defined as either good or bad, but rather as a mix of negative and positive experiences, that for some amounts to being overall positive and for some the opposite. This is likely to be connected with the women's socio-economic background and reasons for joining. Women who join due to poverty, lack of opportunities or who come from rural areas and joined on false promises or to search for a better life seems is more likely to be disappointed when they join guerrilla groups as their expectations are rarely fulfilled in the groups. The three women I have focused on joined due to political conviction, had higher education, came from urban areas and were from middle-class backgrounds, seemed to know what they were entering and managed to make use of the resources found in the groups in order to develop themselves personally as political or military actors for change. They look at their time in the groups as vital for their personal development and the context in the groups facilitated their empowerment to a larger degree than the civil society.

Who would I have become if I did not have this type of life? I would have finished studying, got married and got children. How boring! I could not bear to have ended up taking care of children, waiting at home for the husband and not having a strong social and political role!

(Maria ELN)

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