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DEMOBILIZED WOMEN COMBATANTS: LESSONS FROM COLOMBIA

Conceptual Focus: A gender Perspective on Demobilization from Illegal Groups to Civil Society

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In Colombia, a country with one of the longest civil wars in the world, women combatants return to civil society in the midst of ongoing tension. In this transition, women suffer triple difficulties: the reaction of their home communities; hostility from armed illegal groups still engaged in conflict, and disregarding from the government itself. What accounts for these obstacles?

First, in a patriarchal society such as Colombia, demobilized women face the denigration of their community which views women's participation in armed conflict as an infringement on traditional female roles. Second, in the midst of continued conflict, demobilized women are also in danger of being re-recruited, tortured, killed or displaced from their home towns by their former peers in combat who perceive

them as traitors, or by active criminal groups who consider them as enemies. Third, public policy designed to demobilize and reintegrate combatants gives little attention to women's special needs as victims of gender violence.

Recognizing that women and their needs remain invisible, this paper proposes that formal and informal post-conflict measures in Colombia must be gender-sensitized in order to effectively reintegrate women and men into civilian life.

The Context of the Problem.

Armed conflict in Colombia is one of the longest civil wars in the world with more than fifty years of tension, and it is also one of the most difficult without any prospect of resolution in the near future. It involves different kinds of actors starting with the state armed forces which is the second largest army in South America after Brazil (García, 2010); the left wing guerrillas groups, primarily the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN); the right wing paramilitary forces that amount to 6,000 armed members (Human Rights Watch, 2011); and uncountable common criminals and drug traffickers.

These participants have engaged civilian society in the conflict causing more than 70,000 deaths in the last twenty years and thousands of disappearances; In fact, statistics show that 7 Colombians die or disappear daily due to conflict (Oxfam International, 2009); more than 17,000 people have been kidnapped in the past seven years (Bouvier, 2009); and about four hundred thousand have been displaced, making Colombia the second country after Sudan with the largest number of displaced people in the world today (Amnesty International, 2008).

Without prospects of resolution on the horizon, the Colombian government has adopted post-conflict measures in this unusual scenario of current tension. Its main objective has been to implement a

military strategy to diminish the strength of the illegal armed groups, specifically the active left-wing guerrilla groups.

Regarding this strategy, state forces continue the military fight against illegal groups, along with the government's offer of legal, monetary, and social benefits to combatants, trying to persuade them to desert from illegal armed troops. However, concerning peace fostering actions, transitional measures such as reconciliation and preparing the community to forgive and accept ex-combatants, have received little to no attention.

Conditions of Colombian Women as Combatants.

The demobilization and reintegration processes for women have been based under the premise that "war is among men therefore its solution must be among men"¹. This foundation is not surprising in the male-dominating culture of the Colombian society, where femininity is commonly associated with weakness and emphasizes females' role as housewives and mothers. Nonetheless, Women constitute 30% of combatants in illegal armed groups and the role of some of them is in fact that of perpetrators.

Especially related to this patriarchal and consequently unequal culture, the reasons for women to voluntary join illegal armies are: first to escape from violence at home, including physical and sexual abuse; second because of poverty and the lack of employment alternatives; third to leave behind their love partners or family members; and fourth to gain authority and admiration among their peers and society in general (Valencia & Daza, 2010). In sum, women who join illegal armies can be seen as victims of violence even before they become combatants. They suffer structural violence as poverty, hunger, social exclusion, and sexual harassment (Ramirez Parra, 2010).

¹ Phrase stated by Alvaro Leyva Durán, a former minister of government, senator and mediator in peace accords.

Nevertheless, the role of female combatants has two forms: forcibly recruited or voluntarily enrolled. In the first case they are likely to be forced into prostitution or otherwise raped (Oxfam International, 2009); they become infected with sexual diseases by their oppressors as a means of punishment when they try to escape or reject an order (Bedoya, 2011); and in general they are sexually and emotionally abused.

In the second case mentioned above, female combatants join subversive groups as a way of emancipation, sharing with their gender counterparts a world that is usually attributed only to males. Since Colombia has an important presence of military forces, it is unavoidable that discriminated women want to demonstrate their ability as warriors to gain access to an equalitarian position in the army (Kunz & Sjöberg, 2009).

Demobilized Women Combatants

Colombian women combatants are demobilized in the context of the Colombian governments' policy of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Process (DDR). The unusual scenario of the current Colombian armed conflict has led combatants to enroll in such DDR processes through two different and parallel ways: first in the course of *collective demobilization* that took place during the peace negotiations of the early 90's with the left-wing guerrilla groups 19th of April Movement (M19), Popular Liberation Army (EPL), Workers Revolutionary Party (PRT), Francisco Garnica Front (FFG), Socialist Renovation Current (CRS), and Quintin Lame). Also in 2003 after the official negotiations between the government and the right-wing paramilitary group AUC "Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia" also known as *the Santa Fe de Ralito Agreement*.

Second, through informal *individual demobilizations* where combatants from active left-wing guerrilla groups (FARC and ELN) with which the government has not made any formal agreements, former

combatants are encouraged to voluntarily give up their weapons to go back into civilian life. This *individual demobilization* is specifically part of the current military strategy that was mentioned earlier.

The number of women collectively demobilized is open to interpretation, depending on one's source of information. Unofficial data illustrates that from November 2003 to August 2006, out of the 31,664 combatants collectively demobilized, 6 % (1,911) were women (ODDR, 2011); meanwhile, official sources increase this number to 9.2% or 2,930 women who collectively demobilized (Policía Nacional de Colombia, 2008).

Considering women who individually demobilized, from August 2002 to March 2011, from among 23,402 combatants individually demobilized, 18.5% (4,333) were women (ODDR, 2011). This data is doubtful after comparing it to the number of women active and mistreated in armed groups, situation that for some analysts² can only be explained by the assertion that women are not properly counted in the DDR process.

The situation of women who collectively demobilize differs from that of those who complete the process individually. From the testimonies of women in the first group, many of them described the complications of adapting to civilian life, feeling nostalgic about the camaraderie and community life experienced during their time in arms, and the respect gained by the community after carrying weapons (Londoño & Nieto, 2007). For example in testimony of one ex-combatant, “*when one is used to be armed, walking without weapons is like posing nude*” (Molano, 2009).

Conversely, those who individually demobilize are most of the time running away from loneliness and violence. From January to May of 2011, out of the 112 demobilized women combatants, 57 decided to do so because they wanted to search for their children born during captivity in the mountains, and about 80% reported they did so because they had suffered aggression; most of them testified that they were also

² Compared with Virginia Bouvier (2011) at the United States Institute of Peace Panel about “Female Soldiers and DDR: Sierra Leone, Nepal, and Colombia”. Compared with Londoño, Luz Marina & Nieto, Yoana Fernanda (2007) Mujeres no Contadas.

subjected to forced abortions (Bedoya, 2011). However, some others assured they WERE simply tired of the armed life and the living conditions in the mountains (Molano, 2009).

The Difficulties of the Process

Demobilized women in general, when returning to the civil life, suffer social barriers imposed by the receptor community, and a great fear induced by active criminal groups. However, the designated processes of DDR do not address properly any of these conditions.

One of the greatest barriers ex-combatants face in reintegration to their communities and families stems from having assumed non-traditional roles and behavior by participating in armed conflict. The traditional association of women with homemaking and their important family role of raising children and supporting their husbands, makes Colombians stigmatize and be afraid of female ex-combatants. With a past surrounded by weapons and death, to civilians, demobilized women have apparently lost their femininity and the established patterns of their behavior in society; then, people perceive them as a double danger not only for the uncertainty they bring into society, but also because of the threat they represent to social order in important aspects like family care, children's education, sexuality and reproduction.

Gunhild Schwitalla and Luisa Maria Dietrich in their article "*Demobilization of Females ex-combatants in Colombia*" (2011) state that females "transgressed traditional gender norms and for most the prospect of return to their families is out of the question" (Schwitalla & Dietrich, 2011). In fact, comparing testimonies, most men indicate their families welcome them with respect, while women say that their families condemn and reject them for engaging in activities that belong to a male world (Londoño & Nieto, 2007).

To make matters worse, because the conflict continues, demobilized women are also prone to be threatened, tortured or killed by a number of people and groups that consider them enemies, including:

active and demobilized combatants of former enemy groups, an increasing number of emerging criminal bands –BACRIM- founded in a large portion by former fighters of the right-wing paramilitary group AUC (Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación , 2007), and victims of the armed conflict who have not been considered in a proper peace-building process. Given these circumstances, women prefer to demobilize in large cities like Bogotá and Medellín (ODDR, 2011), precisely because it is in populous urban areas where the conflict is least intense.

Moreover, women who demobilize individually are seen as traitors by the armed group they left behind. They are considered deserters and as such are in constant risk of being recaptured, tortured, and killed, or at best, forced to leave their land and live somewhere else.

Even though the conditions of women returning to civil life are unique, both men and women participate in DDR processes that do not specify reintegration policies for women who in fact, due to the peculiarity of their role in the Colombian society, experienced the conflict differently. Accordingly, the route to demobilization has been homogenized under a unique model that takes for granted the needs and knowledge of women combatants.

Nevertheless, the DDR process in Colombian should give more attention to women's special needs and their specific situation as victims of gender violence. Perhaps females are more sensitive to their own issues in the Colombian armed conflict, or at least more women should participate in drafting, promoting and implementing such processes, and they should definitely be involved in peace agreements. Along with including women in formal proceedings, the Colombian government must gender-sensitize informal peace-building measures, such as preparing the receptor community to forgive and accept women ex-combatants which is a key to equally reintegrate women and men into civilian life.

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