

Demobilisation of female ex-combatants in Colombia

by Gunhild Schwitalla and Luisa Maria Dietrich

Among the millions of Colombian IDPs one group is particularly invisible – women and girls associated with illegal armed groups. The current demobilisation process does not adequately address the consequences of the sexual violence they have suffered before, during and after conflict.

For several decades Colombia has been fought over by legal and illegal armed actors – the Colombian armed forces, right-wing paramilitaries and left-wing guerrillas. Negotiations between the Colombian government and the right-wing Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – a federation of right-wing paramilitary groups – resulted in July 2005 in congressional approval of the Justice and Peace Law. A cornerstone of President Álvaro Uribe's policies, it offers rank-and-file combatants a comprehensive reintegration package. Leaders alleged to have committed serious crimes are expected to stand trial at special courts, with the promise of receiving drastically reduced sentences in exchange for full disclosure of their crimes.

Colombia's disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process has involved both 'collective' demobilisation – the result of official negotiations with paramilitary groups – and 'individual' demobilisation whereby men, women and children voluntarily return to civilian life. It is estimated that nearly 41,000 men, women and children have been demobilised – some 31,000 'collectively' (6% of whom are female). A further ten thousand are thought to have done so under the individual demobilisation scheme (of whom 14% are women). Girls comprise about a quarter of demobilised children.

Female invisibility

Colombian women and girls have been – and remain – invisible. In a patriarchal society their role as instigators of conflict, perpetrators of violence, victims of conflict and eligible for demobilisation and reincorporation processes has received little attention from policymakers or the media.

It is important to acknowledge the many reasons why women and girls have joined armed groups – to escape from domestic violence (including sexual abuse), to take revenge, to join a partner or because of lack of future opportunities. Some have also been recruited by force. Interviews with demobilised women have revealed that many suffered from previous sexual abuse – from fathers, brothers and other relatives – from early childhood.

Colombia's conflict is ongoing and fuelling a massive movement of rural populations to urban areas. Demobilised females are doubly disadvantaged. They have transgressed traditional gender norms and for most the prospect of return to their families is out of the question. Many also live in well-founded fear of reprisals from members of their former armed groups who regard them as traitors. Official data indicate that demobilised women were born in all but one of Colombia's 32 departments but 85% of those who individually chose to leave armed groups are now reported to live in Bogotá and Medellín, anonymous urban environments which offer them some small degree of security.

Many ex-combatant women and girls have suffered sexual violence during time spent within illegal armed groups. Rape, forced contraception, forced abortion, forced sterilisation, sexual slavery and forced prostitution have been commonplace. Colombian law designating fourteen as the age of consent was regularly violated. There have been reported cases of gang rape as a form of punishment meted out to those who disobeyed commanders. Some women preferred to submit to abuse by a commander in order to reduce the risk of attack from other male combatants.

Challenges for reintegration

It is crucial to break away from a simplistic view of perpetrators and victims, for some women have been both. Policymakers must recognise that many of the women and girls who participated actively in the conflict have also been victims of sexual violence.

Colombian public opinion is strongly in favour of peace, justice, acknowledgement of human rights abuses and reparations. Nearly 90% of those interviewed in a recent report by the International Centre for Transitional Justice¹ believe that the victims of violations have a right to receive reparations from the perpetrators and their leaders. Nearly 70% believe the government is also partially responsible for providing reparations.

Lessons learned from past reintegration exercises and their capacity to address the needs of former women combatants must be systematised and analysed from a gender perspective. Such analysis is essential for informing future reintegration efforts, bearing in mind the high number of female combatants in the two main leftist guerrilla forces.² If the Colombian DDR process is to become inclusive it will be necessary to:

- ensure a holistic gender-focused approach encompassing all forms of discrimination and violence against women – and not only sexual violence
- publicly acknowledge the scale of sexual violence against women and girls during conflict and do more to bring perpetrators to justice
- ensure that the specific sexual and reproductive needs of women and girls are acknowledged and met
- provide psychological assistance and help to rebuild self-esteem
- raise awareness within society of the needs of demobilised women and girls, currently shunned by their families and communities
- understand why so few abused women and girls denounce their

attackers: their silence should not be interpreted as evidence of absence of sexual violence

- ensure that reintegration programmes include provision for raising awareness of sexually transmitted infections, HIV testing and provision of appropriate medical care and drugs

- support women and girls who have given birth as a result of sexual violence during their time with armed groups: it must be recognised they are very likely to have ambiguous feelings towards their babies.

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1. www.ictj.org/en/news/press/release/1094.html
2. ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) and the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia).